Saturday's Child

Kathleen Norris

Table of Contents

Saturday's Child

Kathleen Norris

Produced by Charles Franks and the
Online Distributed Proofreading Team

"Friday's child is loving and giving;
But Saturday's child must work for her living."

To C. G. N.

How shall I give you this, who long have known
Your gift of all the best of life to me?
No living word of mine could ever be
Without the stirring echo of your own.
Under your hand, as mine, this book has grown,
And you, whose faith sets all my musing free,

You, whose true vision helps my eyes to see,
Know that these pages are not mine alone.
  Not mine to give, not yours, the happy days,
The happy talks, the hoping and the fears
That made this story of a happy life.
But, in dear memory of your words of praise,
And grateful memory of four busy years,
Accept her portion of it, from your wife.

PART ONE. Poverty

CHAPTER I

Not the place in which to look for the Great Adventure, the dingy, narrow office on the mezzanine floor of Hunter, Baxter Hunter's great wholesale drug establishment, in San Francisco city, at the beginning of the present century. Nothing could have seemed more monotonous, more grimy, less interesting, to the outsider's eye at least, than life as it presented itself to the twelve women who were employed in bookkeeping there. Yet, being young, as they all were, each of these girls was an adventuress, in a quiet way, and each one dreamed bright dreams in the dreary place, and waited, as youth must wait, for fortune, or fame, or position, love or power, to evolve itself somehow from the dulness of her days, and give her the key that should open—and shut—the doors of Hunter, Baxter Hunter's offices to her forever.

And, while they waited, working over the unvaried, stupid columns of the company's books, they talked, confided, became friends, and exchanged shy hints of ambition. The ill−ventilated, neglected room was a little world, and rarely, in a larger world, do women come to know each other as intimately as these women did.

Therefore, on a certain sober September morning, the fact that Miss Thornton, familiarly known as "Thorny," was out of temper, speedily became known to all the little force. Miss Thornton was not only the oldest clerk there, but she was the highest paid, and the longest in the company's employ; also she was by nature a leader, and generally managed to impress her associates with her own mood, whatever it might be. Various uneasy looks were sent to−day in her direction, and by eleven o'clock even the giggling Kirk sisters, who were newcomers, were imbued with a sense of something wrong.

Nobody quite liked to allude to the subject, or ask a direct question. Not that any one of them was particularly considerate or reserved by nature, but because Miss Thornton was known to be extremely unpleasant when she had any grievance against one of the younger clerks. She could maintain an ugly silence until goaded into speech, but, once launched, few of her juniors escaped humiliation. Ordinarily, however, Miss Thornton was an extremely agreeable woman, shrewd, kindly, sympathetic, and very droll in her passing comments on men and events. She was in her early thirties, handsome, and a not quite natural blonde, her mouth sophisticated, her eyes set in circles of a leaden pallor. An assertive, masterful little woman, born and reared in decent poverty, still Thorny claimed descent from one of the first families of Maryland, and talked a good deal of her birth. Her leading characteristic was a determination never, even in the slightest particular, to allow herself to be imposed upon, and she gloried in stories of her own success in imposing upon other people.

Miss Thornton's desk stood at the inner end of the long room, nearest the door that led out to the "deck," as the girls called the mezzanine floor beyond, and so nearest the little private office of Mr. George Brauer, the arrogant young German who was the superintendent of the Front Office, and heartily detested by every girl therein.

When Miss Thornton wanted to be particularly annoying to her associates she would remark casually that "she and Mr. Brauer" thought this or that, or that "she suggested, and Mr. Brauer quite agreed" as to something else. As a matter of fact, she disliked him as much as they did, although she, and any and every girl there, would really have been immensely pleased and flattered by his admiration, had he cared to bestow it. But George Brauer's sea−blue eyes never rested for a second upon any Front Office girl with anything but annoyed responsibility. He kept his friendships severely remote from the walls of Hunter, Baxter Hunter, and was suspected of social ambitions, and of distinguished, even noble connections in the Fatherland.

This morning Miss Thornton and Mr. Brauer had had a conference, as the lady called it, immediately after his arrival at nine o'clock, and Miss Murray, who sat next to Miss Thornton, suspected that it had had something to do with her neighbor's ill−temper. But Miss Thornton, delicately approached, had proved so ungracious and so uncommunicative, that Miss Murray had retired into herself, and attacked her work with unusual briskness.

Next to friendly, insignificant little Miss Murray was Miss Cottle, a large, dark, morose girl, with untidy hair, and untidy clothes, and a bad complexion. Miss Cottle was unapproachable and insolent in her manner, from a sense of superiority. She was connected, she stated frequently, with one of the wealthy families of the city, whose old clothes, the girls suspected, she frequently wore. On Saturday, a half−day, upon which all the girls wore their best clothes to the office, if they had matinee or shopping plans for the afternoon, Miss Cottle often appeared with her frowsy hair bunched under a tawdry velvet hat, covered with once exquisite velvet roses, and her muscular

form clad in a gown that had cost its original owner more than this humble relative could earn in a year. Miss Cottle's gloves were always expensive, and always dirty, and her elaborate silk petticoats were of soiled pale pinks and blues.

Miss Cottle's neighbor was Miss Sherman, a freckled, red−headed, pale little girl, always shabby and pinched−looking, eager, silent, and hard−working. Miss Sherman gave the impression—or would have given it to anyone who cared to study her—of having been intimidated and underfed from birth. She had a keen sense of humor, and, when Susan Brown "got started," as Susan Brown occasionally did, Miss Sherman would laugh so violently, and with such agonized attempts at suppression, that she would almost strangle herself. Nobody guessed that she adored the brilliant Susan, unless Miss Brown herself guessed it. The girls only knew of Miss Sherman that she was the oldest of eight brothers and sisters, and that she gave her mother all her money every Saturday night.

Miss Elsie Kirk came next, in the line of girls that faced the room, and Miss Violet Kirk was next to her sister. The Kirks were pretty, light−headed girls, frivolous, common and noisy. They had a comfortable home, and worked only because they rather liked the excitement of the office, and liked an excuse to come downtown every day. Elsie, the prettier and younger, was often "mean" to her sister, but Violet was always good−natured, and used to smile as she told the girls how Elsie captured her—Violet's—admirers. The Kirks' conversation was all of "cases," "the crowd," "the times of their lives," and "new crushes"; they never pinned on their audacious hats to go home at night without speculating as to possible romantic adventures on the car, on the street, everywhere. They were not quite approved by the rest of the Front Office staff; their color was not all natural, their clothes were "fussy." Both wore enormous dry "rats," that showed through the thin covering of outer hair, their stockings were quite transparent, and bows of pink and lavender ribbon were visible under their thin shirt−waists. It was known that Elsie had been "spoken to" by old Mr. Baxter, on the subject of a long, loose curl, which had appeared one morning, dangling over her powdered neck. The Kirks, it was felt, never gave an impression of freshness, of soapiness, of starched apparel, and Front Office had a high standard of personal cleanliness. Miss Sherman's ears glowed coldly all morning long, from early ablutions, and her fingertips were always icy, and Miss Thornton and Susan Brown liked to allude casually to their "cold plunges" as a daily occurrence—although neither one ever really took a cold bath, except, perhaps, for a few days in mid−summer. But all of cleanliness is neither embraced nor denied by the taking of cold baths, and the Front Office girls, hours and obligations considered, had nothing on this score of which to be ashamed. Manicuring went on in every quiet moment, and many of the girls spent twenty minutes daily, or twice daily, in the careful adjustment of large sheets of paper as cuffs, to protect their sleeves. Two elastic bands held these cuffs in place, and only long practice made their arrangement possible. This was before the day of elbow sleeves, although Susan Brown always included elbow sleeves in a description of a model garment for office wear, with which she sometimes amused her associates.

"No wet skirts to freeze you to death," Susan would grumble, "no high collar to scratch you! It's time that the office women of America were recognized as a class with a class dress! Short sleeves, loose, baggy trousers—"

A shriek would interrupt her.

"Yes, I SEE you wearing that in the street, Susan!"

"Well, I WOULD. Overshoes," the inventor would pursue, "fleece−lined leggings, coming well up on your—may I allude to limbs, Miss Wrenn?"

"I don't care what you allude to!" Miss Wrenn, the office prude, a little angry at being caught listening to this nonsense, would answer snappily.

"Limbs, then," Susan would proceed graciously, "or, as Miss Sherman says, legs—−"

"Oh, Miss Brown! I DIDN'T! I never use that word!" the little woman would protest.

"You don't! Why, you said last night that you were trying to get into the chorus at the Tivoli! You said you had such handsome—"

"Oh, aren't you awful!" Miss Sherman would put her cold red fingers over her ears, and the others, easily amused, would giggle at intervals for the next half hour.

Susan Brown's desk was at the front end of the room, facing down the double line. At her back was a round window, never opened, and never washed, and so obscured by the great cement scrolls that decorated the facade of the building that it gave only a dull blur of light, ordinarily, and no air at all. Sometimes, on a bright summer's morning, the invading sunlight did manage to work its way in through the dust−coated ornamental masonry, and

to fall, for a few moments, in a bright slant, wheeling with motes, across the office floor. But usually the girls depended for light upon the suspended green−hooded electric lights, one over each desk.

Susan though that she had the most desirable seat in the room, and the other girls carefully concealed from her the fact that they thought so, too. Two years before, a newcomer, she had been given this same desk, but it faced directly against the wall then, and was in the shadow of a dirty, overcrowded letter press. Susan had turned it about, straightened it, pushed the press down the room, against the coat−closet, and now, like all the other girls, she faced the room, could see more than any of them, indeed, and keep an eye on Mr. Brauer, and on the main floor below, visible through the glass inner wall of the office. Miss Brown was neither orderly nor industrious, but she had an eye for proportion, and a fine imagination. She loved small, fussy tasks, docketed and ruled the contents of her desk scrupulously, and lettered trim labels for boxes and drawers, but she was a lazy young creature when regular work was to be done, much given to idle and discontented dreams.

At this time she was not quite twenty−one, and felt herself to be distressingly advanced in years. Like all except a few very fortunate girls of her age, Susan was brimming with perverted energy—she could have done a thousand things well and joyously, could have used to the utmost the exceptional powers of her body and soul, but, handicapped by the ideals of her sex, and lacking the rare guidance that might have saved her, she was drifting, busy with work she detested, or equally unsatisfied in idleness, sometimes lazily diverted and soothed by the passing hour, and sometimes stung to her very soul by longings and ambitions.

"She is no older than I am—she works no harder than I do!" Susan would reflect, studying the life of some writer or actress with bitter envy. But how to get out of this groove, and into another, how to work and fight and climb, she did not know, and nobody ever helped her to discover.

There was no future for her, or for any girl here, that she knew. Miss Thornton, after twelve years of work, was being paid forty−five dollars, Miss Wrenn, after eight years, forty, and Susan only thirty dollars a month. Brooding over these things, Susan would let her work accumulate, and endure, in heavy silence, the kindly, curious speculations and comments of her associates.

But perhaps a hot lunch or a friendly word would send her spirits suddenly up again, Susan would forget her vague ambitions, and reflect cheerfully that it was already four o'clock, that she was going with Cousin Mary Lou and Billy Oliver to the Orpheum to−night, that her best white shirtwaist ought by this time to have come back from the laundry.

Or somehow, if depression continued, she would shut her desk, in mid−afternoon, and leave Front Office, cross the long deck—which was a sort of sample room for rubber goods, and was lined with long cases of them—descend a flight of stairs to the main floor, cross it and remount the stairs on the other side of the building, and enter the mail−order department. This was an immense room, where fifty men and a few girls were busy at long desks, the air was filled with the hum of typewriters and the murmur of low voices. Beyond it was a door that gave upon more stairs, and at the top of them a small bare room known as the lunch−room. Here was a great locker, still marked with the labels that had shown where senna leaves and tansy and hepatica had been kept in some earlier stage of Hunter, Baxter Hunter's existence, and now filled with the girls' lunch−boxes, and rubber overshoes, and hair−brushes. There was a small gas−stove in this room, and a long table with benches built about it. A door gave upon a high strip of flat roof, and beyond a pebbled stretch of tar were the dressings−rooms, where there were wash−stands, and soap, and limp towels on rollers.

Here Susan would wash her hands and face, and comb her bright thick hair, and straighten belt and collar. There were always girls here: a late−comer eating her luncheon, two chatter−boxes sharing a bit of powdered chamois−skin at a mirror, a girl who felt ill drinking something hot at the stove. Here was always company, and gossip, Susan might stop for a half−cup of scalding hot tea, or a chocolate from a striped paper bag. Returning, refreshed and cheered, to the office, she would lay a warm, damp hand over Miss Thornton's, and give her the news.

"Miss Polk and Miss French are just going it up there, Thorny, mad as hops!" or "Miss O'Brien is going to be in Mr. Joe Hunter's office after this."

"'S'at so?" Miss Thornton would interestedly return, wrinkling her nose under the glasses she used while she was working. And perhaps after a few moments she would slip away herself for a visit to the lunch−room. Mr. Brauer, watching Front Office through his glass doors, attempted in vain to discourage these excursions. The bolder spirits enjoyed defying him, and the more timid never dared to leave their places in any case. Miss

Sherman, haunted by the horror of "losing her job," eyed the independent Miss Brown and Miss Thornton with open awe and admiration, without ever attempting to emulate them.

Next to Susan sat severe, handsome, reserved little Miss Wrenn, who coldly repelled any attempts at friendship, and bitterly hated the office. Except for an occasional satiric comment, or a half−amused correction of someone's grammar, Miss Wrenn rarely spoke.

Miss Cashell was her neighbor, a mysterious, pretty girl, with wicked eyes and a hard face, and a manner so artless, effusive and virtuous as to awaken the basest suspicions among her associates. Miss Cashell dressed very charmingly, and never expressed an opinion that would not well have become a cloistered nun, but the girls read her colorless face, sensuous mouth, and sly dark eyes aright, and nobody in Front Office "went" with Miss Cashell. Next her was Mrs. Valencia, a harmless little fool of a woman, who held her position merely because her husband had been long in the employ of the Hunter family, and who made more mistakes than all the rest of the staff put together. Susan disliked Mrs. Valencia because of the jokes she told, jokes that the girl did not in all honesty always understand, and because the little widow was suspected of "reporting" various girls now and then to Mr. Hunter.

Finishing the two rows of desks, down opposite Miss Thornton again were Miss Kelly and Miss Garvey, fresh−faced, intelligent Irish girls, simple, merry, and devoted to each other. These two took small part in what did not immediately concern them, but went off to Confession together every Saturday, spent their Sundays together, and laughed and whispered together over their ledgers. Everything about them was artless and pure. Susan, motherless herself, never tired of their talk of home, their mothers, their married sisters, their cousins in convents, their Church picnics and concerts and fairs, and "joshes"—"joshes" were as the breath of life to this innocent pair. "Joshes on Ma," "joshes on Joe and Dan," "joshes on Cecilia and Loretta" filled their conversations.

"And Ma yells up, 'What are you two layin' awake about?'" Miss Garvey would recount, with tears of enjoyment in her eyes. "But we never said nothing, did we, Gert? Well, about twelve o'clock we heard Leo come in, and he come upstairs, and he let out a yell—'My God!' he says—"

But at the recollection of Leo's discovery of the sheeted form, or the pail of water, or whatever had awaited him at the top of the stairs, Miss Garvey's voice would fail entirely, and Miss Kelly would also lay her head down on her desk, and sob with mirth. It was infectious, everyone else laughed, too.

To−day Susan, perceiving something amiss with Miss Thornton, sauntered the length of the office, and leaned over the older woman's desk. Miss Thornton was scribbling a little list of edibles, her errand boy waiting beside her. Tea and canned tomatoes were bought by the girls every day, to help out the dry lunches they brought from home, and almost every day the collection of dimes and nickels permitted a "wreath−cake" also, a spongy, glazed confection filled with chopped nuts and raisins. The tomatoes, bubbling hot and highly seasoned, were quite as much in demand as was the tea, and sometimes two or three girls made their entire lunch up by enlarging this list with cheese, sausages and fruit.

"Mad about something," asked Susan, when the list for to−day was finished.

Miss Thornton, under "2 wreath" wrote hastily, "Boiling! Tell you later," and turned it about for Susan to read, before she erased it.

"Shall I get that?" she asked, for the benefit of the attentive office.

"Yes, I would," answered her fellow−conspirator, as she turned away.

The hour droned by. Boys came with bills, and went away again. Sudden sharp pangs began to assert themselves in Susan's stomach. An odor of burning rubber drifted up from below, as it always drifted up at about this time. Susan announced that she was starving.

"It's not more than half−past eleven," said Miss Cottle, screwing her body about, so that she could look down through the glass walls of the office to the clock, on the main floor below. "Why, my heavens! It's twelve o'clock!" she announced amazedly, throwing down her pen, and stretching in her chair.

And, in instant confirmation of the fact, a whistle sounded shrilly outside, followed by a dozen more whistles, high and low, constant and intermittent, sharp on the silent noon air. The girls all jumped up, except Miss Wrenn, who liked to assume that the noon hour meant nothing to her, and who often finished a bill or two after the hour struck.

But among the others, ledgers were slammed shut, desk drawers jerked open, lights snapped out. Miss Thornton had disappeared ten minutes before in the direction of the lunch−room; now all the others followed,

yawning, cramped, talkative.

They settled noisily about the table, and opened their lunches. A joyous confusion of talk rose above the clinking of spoons and plates, as the heavy cups of steaming tea were passed and the sugar− bowl went the rounds; there was no milk, and no girl at Hunter, Baxter Hunter's thought lemon in tea anything but a wretched affectation. Girls who had been too pale before gained a sudden burning color, they had been sitting still and were hungry, now they ate too fast. Without exception the Front Office girls suffered from agonies of indigestion, and most of them grew used to a dull headache that came on every afternoon. They kept flat bottles of soda−mint tablets in their desks, and exchanged them hourly. No youthful constitution was proof against the speed with which they disposed of these fresh soft sandwiches at noon−time, and gulped down their tea.

In ten minutes some of them were ready to hurry off into sunny Front Street, there to saunter past warehouses, and warehouses, and warehouses, with lounging men eyeing them from open doorways.

The Kirks disappeared quickly to−day, and some of the others went out, too. When Miss Thornton, Miss Sherman, Miss Cottle and Miss Brown were left, Miss Thornton said suddenly:

"Say, listen, Susan. Listen here—"

Susan, who had been wiping the table carefully, artistically, with a damp rag, was arrested by the tone.

"I think this is the rottenest thing I ever heard, Susan," Miss Thornton began, sitting down at the table. The others all sat down, too, and put their elbows on the table. Susan, flushing uncomfortably, eyed Miss Thornton steadily.

"Brauer called me in this morning," said Miss Thornton, in a low voice, marking the table with the handle of a fork, in parallel lines, "and he asked me if I thought—no, that ain't the way he began. Here's what he said first: he says, 'Miss Thornton,' he says, 'did you know that Miss Wrenn is leaving us?'"

"What!" said all the others together, and Susan added, joyfully, "Gee, that means forty for me, and the crediting."

"Well, now listen," Miss Thornton resumed. "I says, 'Mr. Brauer, Miss Wrenn didn't put herself out to inform me of her plans, but never mind. Although,' I says, 'I taught that girl everything she ever knew of office work, and the day she was here three weeks Mr. Philip Hunter himself came to me and said, "Miss Thornton, can you make anything of her?" So that if it hadn't been for me—'"

"But, Thorny, what's she leaving for?" broke in Susan, with the excited interest that the smallest change invariably brought.

"Her uncle in Milwaukee is going to pay her expenses while she takes a library course, I believe," Miss Thornton said, indifferently. "Anyway, then Brauer asked—now, listen, Susan—he asked if I thought Violet Kirk could do the crediting—"

"Violet Kirk!" echoed Susan, in incredulous disappointment. This blow to long−cherished hopes gave her a sensation of actual sickness.

"Violet Kirk!" the others broke out, indignant and astonished. "Why, she can't do it! Is he crazy? Why, Joe Hunter himself told Susan to work up on that! Why, Susan's done all the substituting on that! What does she know about it, anyway? Well, wouldn't that honestly jar you!"

Susan alone did not speak. She had in turn begun to mark the table, in fine, precise lines, with a hairpin. She had grown rather pale.

"It's a rotten shame, Susan," said Rose Murray, sympathetically. Miss Sherman eyed Susan with scared and sorrowful eyes. "Don't you care—don't you care, Susan!" said the soothing voices.

"I don't care," said Susan presently, in a hard, level voice. She raised her somber eyes. "I don't care because I simply won't stand it, that's all," said she. "I'll go straight to Mr. Baxter. Yes, I WILL, Thorny. Brauer'll see if he can run everything this way! Is she going to get forty?"

"What do you care if she does?" Miss Thornton said, hardily.

"All right," Susan answered. "Very well. But I'll get forty next month or I'll leave this place! And I'm not one bit afraid to go straight to old 'J. G.' and tell him so, too! I'll—"

"Listen, Susan, now listen," urged Miss Thornton. "Don't you get mad, Susan. She can't do it. It'll be just one mistake after another. Brauer will have to give it to you, inside of two months. She'll find," said Miss Thornton, with a grim tightening of the lips, "that precious few mistakes get by ME! I'll make that girl's life a burden, you trust me! And meantime you work up on that line, Sue, and be ready for it!"

Susan did not answer. She was staring at the table again, cleaning the cracks in its worn old surface with her hairpin.

"Thorny," she said huskily, "you know me. Do you think that this is fair?"

"Aw—aw, now, Susan, don't!" Miss Thornton jumped up, and put her arm about Susan's shoulders, and Susan, completely unnerved by the sympathy in the other's tone, dropped her head upon her arm, and began to cry.

A distressed murmur of concern and pity rose all about her, everyone patted her shoulder, and bitter denunciations of Mr. Brauer and Miss Kirk broke forth. Even Hunter, Baxter Hunter were not spared, being freely characterized as "the rottenest people in the city to work for!" "It would serve them right," said more than one indignant voice, "if the whole crowd of us walked out on them!"

Presently Susan indicated, by a few gulps, and by straightening suddenly, that the worst of the storm was over, and could even laugh shakily when Miss Thornton gave her a small, fringed lunch napkin upon which to wipe her eyes.

"I'm a fool to cry this way," said Susan, sniffing.

"Fool!" Miss Cottle echoed tenderly, "It's enough to make a cow cry!"

"Not calling Susan a cow, or anything like that," said Miss Thornton humorously, as she softly smoothed Susan's hair. At which Susan began to laugh violently, and the others became almost hysterical in their delight at seeing her equilibrium restored.

"But you know what I do with my money, Thorny," began Susan, her eyes filling again.

"She gives every cent to her aunt," said Miss Thornton sternly, as if she accused the firm, Mr. Brauer and Miss Kirk by the statement.

"And I've—worked—so hard!" Susan's lips were beginning to tremble again. But with an effort she controlled herself, fumbled for a handkerchief, and faced the group, disfigured as to complexion, tumbled as to hair, but calm.

"Well, there's no help for it, I suppose!" said she hardily, in a tone somewhat hoarsened by tears. "You're all darlings, and I'm a fool. But I certainly intend to get even with Mr. Brauer!"

"DON'T give up your job," Miss Sherman pleaded.

"I will the minute I get another," said Susan, morosely, adding anxiously, "Do I look a perfect fright, Thorny? Do my eyes show?"

"Not much—" Miss Cottle wavered.

"Wash them with cold water, and powder your nose," advised Miss Thornton briskly.

"And my hair—!" Susan put her hand to the disordered mass, and laughed helplessly.

"It's all right!" Thorny patted it affectionately. "Isn't it gorgeous, girls? Don't you care, Susan, you're worth ten of the Kirks!"

"Here they come now!" Miss Murray whispered, at the head of the stairs. "Beat it, Susan, don't let 'em see you!"

Susan duly fled to the wash−room, where, concealed a moment later by a towel, and the hanging veil of her hair, she could meet the Kirks' glances innocently enough. Later, fresh and tidy, she took her place at her desk, rather refreshed by her outburst, and curiously peaceful in spirit. The joys of martyrdom were Susan's, she was particularly busy and cheerful. Fate had dealt her cruel blows before this one, she inherited from some persecuted Irish ancestor a grim pleasure in accepting them.

Afternoons, from one o'clock until half−past five, seemed endless in Front Office. Mornings, beside being exactly one hour shorter by the clock, could be still more abbreviated by the few moments gained by the disposal of hats and wraps, the dusting of desks, sharpening of pencils, and filling of ink−wells. The girls used a great many blocks of yellow paper called scratch−pads, and scratch−pads must be gotten down almost daily from the closet, dusted and distributed, there were paper cuffs to adjust, and there was sometimes a ten or fifteen−minute delay before the bills for the day began to come up. But the afternoons knew no such delays, the girls were tired, the air in the office stale. Every girl, consciously or not, sighed as she took her seat at one o'clock.

The work in Front Office was entirely with bills. These bills were of the sales made in the house itself the day before, and those sent by mail from the traveling salesmen, and were accompanied by duplicate bills, on thin yellow sheets. It was Mrs. Valencia's work, the easiest in the office, to compare originals and duplicates, and

supply to the latter any item that was missing. Hundreds of the bills were made out for only one or two items, many were but one page in length, and there were several scores of longer ones every day, raging from two to twenty pages.

The original bills went downstairs again immediately, and Miss Thornton, taking the duplicates one by one from Mrs. Valencia, marked the cost price of every article in the margin beyond the selling price. Thorny, after twelve years' experience, could jot down costs, percentages and discounts at an incredible speed. Drugs, patent medicines, surgical goods and toilet articles she could price as fast as she could read them, and, even while her right hand scribbled busily, her left hand turned the pages of her cost catalog automatically, when her trained eye discovered, half−way down the page, some item of which she was not quite sure. Susan never tired of admiring the swiftness with which hand, eye and brain worked together. Thorny would stop in her mad flight, ponder an item with absent eyes fixed on space, suddenly recall the price, affix the discounts, and be ready for the next item. Susan had the natural admiration of an imaginative mind for power, and the fact that Miss Thornton was by far the cleverest woman in the office was one reason why Susan loved her best.

Miss Thornton whisked her finished duplicates, in a growing pile, to the left−hand side of Miss Munay's desk. Her neighbor also did "costing," but in a simpler form. Miss Murray merely marked, sometimes at cost, sometimes at an advance, those articles that were "B. O." or "bought out," not carried in Hunter, Baxter Hunter's regular stock. Candy, postal−cards, cameras, sporting−goods, stamps, cigars, stationery, fruit−sirups, all the things in fact, that the firm's customers, all over the state, carried in their little country stores, were "B. O." Miss Murray had invoices for them all, and checked them off as fast as she could find their places on the duplicates.

Then Miss Cottle and Susan Brown got the duplicates and "extended" them. So many cases of cold cream at so much per case, so many ounces of this or that at so much the pound, so many pounds at so much per ounce, and forty and ten and ten off. Two−thirds of a dozen, one hundredweight, one eighth of a gross, twelve per cent, off, and twenty−three per cent. on for freight charges; the "extenders" had to keep their wits about them.

After that the duplicates went to Miss Sherman, who set down the difference between cost and selling price. So that eventually every article was marked five times, its original selling price, extended by the salesman, its cost price, separately extended, and the difference between the two.

From Miss Sherman the bills went to the Misses Kirk, who gave every item a red number that marked it in its proper department, drugs or rubber goods or soaps and creams and colognes. The entire stock was divided into ten of these departments, and there were ten great ledgers in which to make entries for each one.

And for every one of a hundred salesmen a separate great sheet was kept for the record of sales, all marked with the rubber stamp "B. O.," or the number of a department in red ink. This was called "crediting," and was done by Miss Wrenn. Finally, Miss Garvey and Miss Kelly took the now limp bills, and extracted from them bewildering figures called "the percentages," into the mysteries of which Susan never dared to penetrate.

This whole involved and intricate system had originated, years before, in the brain of one of the younger members of the firm, whose theory was that it would enable everyone concerned to tell "at a glance" just where the firm stood, just where profits and losses lay. Theoretically, the idea was sound, and, in the hands of a few practiced accountants, it might have been practically sound as well. But the uninterested, untrained girls in Front Office never brought their work anywhere near a conclusion. Several duplicates on Miss Thornton's desk were eternally waiting for special prices, several more, delayed by the non−appearance of invoices, kept Miss Murray always in arrears, and Susan Brown had a little habit of tucking away in a desk drawer any duplicate whose extension promised to be unusually tedious or difficult. Girls were continually going into innocent gales of mirth because long−lost bills were discovered, shut in some old ledger, or rushing awe−struck to Miss Thornton with accounts of others that had been carried away in waste−baskets and burned.

"Sh−sh! Don't make such a fuss," Miss Thornton would say warningly, with a glance toward Mr. Brauer's office. "Perhaps he'll never ask for them!"

And perhaps he never did. If he did, the office presented him a blank and innocent face. "Miss Brown, did you see this bill Mr. Brauer speaks of?" "Beg pardon? Oh, no, Miss Thornton." "Miss Cashell, did you? " "Just−one−moment−Miss−Thornton−until−I−foot−up− this−column. Thank you! No. No, I haven't seen it, Miss Thornton. Did you trace it to my desk, Mr. Brauer?"

Baffled, Mr. Brauer would retire to his office. Ten silent, busy minutes would elapse before Miss Cottle would say, in a low tone, "Bet it was that bill that you were going to take home and work on, Miss Murray!"

"Oh, sure!" Miss Murray would agree, with a startled smile. "Sure. Mamma stuck it behind the clock—I remember now. I'll bring it down to−morrow."

"Don't you forget it, now," Miss Thornton would perhaps command, with a sudden touch of authority, "old Baxter'd jump out of his skin if he knew we ever took 'em home!"

"Well, YOU do!" Miss Murray would retort, reddening resentfully.

"Ah, well," Susan Brown would answer pompously, for Miss Thornton, "you forget that I'm almost a member of the firm! Me and the Baxters can do pretty much what we like! I'll fire Brauer to−morrow if he—"

"You shut up, Susan!" Miss Thornton, her rising resentment pricked like a bubble, would laugh amiably, and the subject of the bill would be dismissed with a general chuckle.

On this particular afternoon Miss Thornton delayed Susan Brown, with a significant glance, when the whistle blew at half−past five, and the girls crowded about the little closet for their wraps.

"S'listen, Susan," said she, with a look full of import. Susan leaned over Miss Thornton's flat−topped desk so that their heads were close together. "Listen," said Miss Thornton, in a low tone, "I met George Banks on the deck this afternoon, see? And I happened to tell him that Miss Wrenn was going." Miss Thornton glanced cautiously about her, her voice sank to a low murmur. "Well. And then he says, 'Yes, I knew that,' he says, 'but do you know who's going to take her place?' 'Miss Kirk is,' I says, 'and I think it's a dirty shame!'"

"Good for you!" said Susan, grateful for this loyalty.

"Well, I did, Susan. And it is, too! But listen. 'That may be,' he says, 'but what do you know about young Coleman coming down to work in Front Office!'"

"Peter Coleman!" Susan gasped. This was the most astonishing, the most exciting news that could possibly have been circulated. Peter Coleman, nephew and heir of old "J. G." himself, handsome, college− bred, popular from the most exclusive dowager in society to the humblest errand boy in his uncle's employ, actually coming down to Front Office daily, to share the joys and sorrows of the Brauer dynasty—it was unbelievable, it was glorious! Every girl in the place knew all about Peter Coleman, his golf record, his blooded terriers, his appearances in the social columns of the Sunday newspapers! Thorny remembered, although she did not boast of it, the days when, a little lad of twelve or fourteen, he had come to his uncle's office with a tutor, or even with an old, and very proud, nurse, for the occasional visits which always terminated with the delighted acceptance by Peter of a gold piece from Uncle Josiah. But Susan only knew him as a man, twenty−five now, a wonderful and fascinating person to watch, even, in happy moments, to dream about.

"You know I met him, Thorny," she said now, eager and smiling.

"'S'at so?" Miss Thornton said, politely uninterested.

"Yes, old Baxter introduced me, on a car. But, Thorny, he can't be coming right down here into this rotten place!" protested Susan.

"He'll have a desk in Brauer's office," Miss Thornton explained. "He is to learn this branch, and be manager some day. George says that Brauer is going to buy into the firm."

"Well, for Heaven's sake!" Susan's thoughts flew. "But, Thorny," she presently submitted, "isn't Peter Coleman in college?"

Miss Thornton looked mysterious, looked regretful.

"I understand old J. G.'s real upset about that," she said discreetly, "but just what the trouble was, I'm not at liberty to mention. You know what young men are."

"Sure," said Susan, thoughtfully.

"I don't mean that there was any scandal," Miss Thornton amended hastily, "but he's more of an athlete than a student, I guess—"

"Sure," Susan agreed again. "And a lot he knows about office work, NOT," she mused. "I'll bet he gets a good salary?"

"Three hundred and fifty," supplied Miss Thornton.

"Oh, well, that's not so much, considering. He must get that much allowance, too. What a snap! Thorny, what do you bet the girls all go crazy about him!"

"All except one. I wouldn't thank you for him."

"All except TWO!" Susan went smiling back to her desk, a little more excited than she cared to show. She snapped off her light, and swept pens and blotters into a drawer, pulling open another drawer to get her purse and

gloves. By this time the office was deserted, and Susan could take her time at the little mirror nailed inside the closet door.

A little cramped, a little chilly, she presently went out into the gusty September twilight of Front Street. In an hour the wind would die away. Now it was sweeping great swirls of dust and chaff into the eyes of home−going men and women. Susan, like all San Franciscans, was used to it. She bent her head, sank her hands in her coat−pockets, and walked fast.

Sometimes she could walk home, but not to−night, in the teeth of this wind. She got a seat on the "dummy" of a cable−car. A man stood on the step, holding on to the perpendicular rod just before her, but under his arm she could see the darkened shops they passed, girls and men streaming out of doors marked "Employees Only," men who ran for the car and caught it, men who ran for the car and missed it. Her bright eyes did not miss an inch of the crowded streets.

Susan smiled dreamily. She was arranging the details of her own wedding, a simple but charming wedding in Old Saint Mary's. The groom was of course Mr. Peter Coleman.

CHAPTER II

The McAllister Street cable−car, packed to its last inch, throbbed upon its way so jerkily that Susan, who was wedged in close to the glass shield at the front of the car, had sometimes to cling to the seat with knees and finger−tips to keep from sliding against her neighbor, a young man deep in a trade−journal, and sometimes to brace herself to withstand his helpless sliding against her. They both laughed presently at the absurdity of it.

"My, don't they jerk!" said the friendly Susan, and the young man agreed fervently, in a bashful mumble, "It's fierce, all right," and returned to his book. Susan, when she got down at her corner, gave him a little nod and smile, and he lifted his hat, and smiled brightly in return.

There was a little bakery on this corner, with two gaslights flaring in its window. Several flat pies and small cakes were displayed there, and a limp curtain, on a string, shut off the shop, where a dozen people were waiting now. A bell in the door rang violently, whenever anyone came out or in. Susan knew the bakery well, knew when the rolls were hot, and just the price and variety of the cookies and the pies.

She knew, indeed, every inch of the block, a dreary block at best, perhaps especially dreary in this gloomy pitiless summer twilight. It was lined with shabby, bay−windowed, three−story wooden houses, all exactly alike. Each had a flight of wooden steps running up to the second floor, a basement entrance under the steps, and a small cemented yard, where papers and chaff and orange peels gathered, and grass languished and died. The dining−room of each house was in the basement, and slatternly maids, all along the block, could be seen setting tables, by flaring gas−light, inside. Even the Nottingham lace curtains at the second−story windows seemed akin, although they varied from the stiff, immaculate, well−darned lengths that adorned the rooms where the Clemenceaus—grandmother, daughter and granddaughter, and direct descendants of the Comte de Moran—were genteelly starving to death, to the soft, filthy, torn strips that finished off the parlor of the noisy, cheerful, irrepressible Daleys' once−pretentious home. Poverty walked visibly upon this block, the cold, forbidding poverty of pride and courage gone wrong, the idle, decorous, helpless poverty of fallen gentility. Poverty spoke through the unobtrusive little signs over every bell, "Rooms," and through the larger signs that said "Costello. Modes and Children's Dressmaker." Still another sign in a second−story bay said "Alice. Milliner," and a few hats, dimly discernible from the street, bore out the claim.

Upon the house where Susan Brown lived with her aunt, and her aunt's three daughters, there was no sign, although Mrs. Lancaster, and Mary Lou, Virginia and Georgianna had supported themselves for many years by the cheerless process known as taking boarders. Sometimes, when the Lancasters were in especially trying financial straits, the possibility of a little sign was discussed. But so far, the humiliating extreme had been somehow avoided.

"No, I feel that Papa wouldn't like it," Mrs. Lancaster persisted.

"Oh, Papa! He'd have died first!" the daughters would agree, in eager sympathy. And the question of the sign would be dismissed again.

"Papa" had been a power in his day, a splendid, audacious, autocratic person, successful as a pioneer, a miner, a speculator, proud of a beautiful and pampered Southern wife and a nurseryful of handsome children. These were the days of horses and carriages, when the Eddy Street mansion was built, when a score of servants waited upon Ma and the children. But terrible times came finally upon this grandeur, the stock madness seized "Papa," he was a rich man one day, a millionaire the next,—he would be a multi−millionaire next week! Ma never ceased to be grateful that Papa, on the very day that his fortune crashed to ruin, came home too sick and feverish to fully comprehend the calamity, and was lying in his quiet grave before his widow and her children did.

Mrs. Lancaster, in her fresh expensive black, with her five black− clad children beside her, thus had the world to face, at thirty− four. George, the first−born, destined to die in his twentieth summer, was eighteen then, Mary Lou sixteen, helpless and feminine, and Alfred, at thirteen, already showed indications of being entirely spoiled. Then came conscientious, gentle little Virginia, ten years old, and finally Georgianna, who was eight.

Out of the general wreckage, the Fulton Street house was saved, and to the Fulton Street house the spoiled, terrified little family moved. Mary Lou sometimes told Susan with mournful pride of the weeping and wailing of those days, of dear George's first job, that, with the check that Ma's uncle in Albany sent every month, supported

the family. Then the uncle died, and George died, and Ma, shaken from her silent and dignified retirement, rose to the occasion in a manner that Mary Lou always regarded as miraculous, and filled the house with boarders. And enjoyed the new venture thoroughly, too, although Mary Lou never suspected that. Perhaps Ma, herself, did not realize how much she liked to bustle and toil, how gratifying the stir and confusion in the house were, after the silent want and loneliness. Ma always spoke of women in business as unfortunate and hardened; she never spoke of her livelihood as anything but a temporary arrangement, never made out a bill in her life. Upon her first boarders, indeed, she took great pride in lavishing more than the luxuries for which their board money could possibly pay. Ma reminded them that she had no rent to pay, and that the girls would soon be married, and Alfie working.

But Papa had been dead for twenty years now, and still the girls were unmarried, and Alfred, if he was working, was doing it in so fitful and so casual a manner as to be much more of a burden than a help to his mother. Alfred lost one position after another because he drank, and Ma, upon whose father's table wine had been quite a matter of course, could not understand why a little too much drinking should be taken so seriously by Alfie's employers, and why they could not give the boy another—and another, and another— chance. Ma never alluded, herself, to this little weakness of Alfie's. He was still her darling, the one son she had left, the last of the Lancasters.

But, as the years went on, she grew to be less of the shrinking Southern lady, more the boarding−house keeper. If she wrote no bills, she kept them pretty straight in her head, and only her endless courage and industry kept the crazy enterprise afloat, and the three idle girls comfortable and decently dressed. Theoretically, they "helped Ma." Really, one well−trained servant could have done far more than Mary Lou, Virginia and Georgie did between them. This was, of course, primarily her own fault. Ma belonged to the brisk and bustling type that shoves aside a pair of eager little hands, with "Here, I can do that better myself!" She was indeed proud of the fact that Mary Lou, at thirty−six, could not rent a room or receipt a bill if her life were at stake. "While I'm here, I'll do this, dear," said Ma, cheerfully. "When I'm gone you'll have quite enough to do!"

Susan entered a small, square entrance−hall, papered in arabesques of green against a dark brown, where a bead of gas flickered dispiritedly in a red glass shade over the newel post. Some fly− specked calling cards languished in the brass tray of an enormous old walnut hat−rack, where several boarders had already hung wraps and hats.

The upper part of the front door was set with two panels of beveled glass, decorated with a scroll design in frosted glass. When Susan Brown had been a very small girl she would sometimes stand inside this door and study the passing show of Fulton Street for hours at a time. Somebody would come running up the street steps, and pull the bell! Susan could hear it tinkle far downstairs in the kitchen, and would bashfully retire to the niche by the hat−rack. Minnie or Lizzie, or perhaps a Japanese schoolboy,—whoever the servant of the hour might be, would come slowly up the inside stairs, and cautiously open the street door an inch or two.

A colloquy would ensue. No, Mrs. Lancaster wasn't in, no, none of the family wasn't in. He could leave it. She didn't know, they hadn't said. He could leave it. No, she didn't know.

The collector would discontentedly depart, and instantly Mary Lou or Georgie, or perhaps both, would hang over the railing in the upper hall.

"Lizzie, who was it?" they would call down softly, impatient and excited, as Lizzie dragged her way upstairs.

"Who was it, Mary Lou?"

"Why, how do I know?"

"Here, GIVE it to me, Lizzie!"

A silence. Then, "Oh, pshaw!" and the sound of a closing door. Then Lizzie would drag downstairs again, and Susan would return to her silent contemplation of the street.

She had seen nothing particularly odd or unattractive about the house in those little−girl days, and it seemed a perfectly normal establishment to her now. It was home, and it was good to get home after the long day. She ran up the flight of stairs that the gas− bead dimly lighted, and up another, where a second gas−jet, this one without a shade, burned unsteadily and opened the door, at the back of the third−floor hall, that gave upon the bedroom that she shared with Mary Lou and Georgianna. The boarding−house was crowded, at this particular time, and Georgie, who flitted about as a rule to whatever room chanced to be empty, was now quartered here and slept on a narrow couch, set at an angle from the bay−window, and covered with a worn strip of chenille.

It was a shabby room, and necessarily crowded, but it was bright, and its one window gave an attractive view of little tree−shaded backyards below, where small tragedies and comedies were continually being enacted by dogs and babies and cats and the crude little maids of the neighborhood. Susan enjoyed these thoroughly, and she and Georgie also liked to watch the girl in the house just behind theirs, who almost always forgot to draw the shades when she lighted her gas. Whatever this unconscious neighbor did they found very amusing.

"Oh, look, Georgie, she's changing her slippers. Don't miss this— She must be going out to−night!" Susan would quiver with excitement until her cousin joined her at the window.

"Well, I wish you could have seen her trying her new hat on to−day!" Georgie would contribute. And both girls would kneel at the window as long as the bedroom in the next house was lighted. "Gone down to meet that man in the light overcoat," Susan would surmise, when the light went out, and if she and Georgie, hurrying to the bakery, happened to encounter their neighbor, they had much difficulty in suppressing their mirth.

To−night the room that the cousins shared was empty, and Susan threw her hat and coat over the foot of the large, lumpy wooden bed that seemed to take up at least one−half of the floor−space. She sat down on the side of the bed, feeling the tension of the day relax, and a certain lassitude creep over her. An old magazine lay nearby on a chair, she reached for it, and began idly to re−read it.

Beside the bed and Georgie's cot, there was a walnut bureau in the room, two chairs and one rocking chair, and a washstand. One the latter was a china basin, half−full of cold, soapy water, a damp towel was spread upon the pitcher that stood beside it on the floor. The wet pink soap, lying in a blue saucer, scented the room. On the bureau were combs and brushes, powders and cold creams, little brass and china trays filled with pins and buttons, and an old hand− mirror, in a loosened, blackened silver mounting. There was a glazed paper candy−box with hairpins in it, and a little liqueur glass, with "Hotel Netherlands" written upon it in gold, held wooden collar buttons and odd cuff−links. A great many hatpins, some plain, some tarnished and ornate, all bent, were stuck into a little black china boot. A basket of china and gold wire was full of combings, some dotted veils were folded into squares, and pinned into the wooden frame of the mirror, and the mirror itself was thickly rimmed with cards and photographs and small souvenirs of all sorts, that had been stuck in between the glass and the frame. There were dance cards with dangling tiny pencils on tasseled cords, and score cards plastered with tiny stars. There were calling cards, and newspaper clippings, and tintypes taken of young people at the beach or the Chutes. A round pilot−biscuit, with a dozen names written on it in pencil, was tied with a midshipman's hat−ribbon, there were wooden plates and champagne corks, and toy candy−boxes in the shapes of guitars and fire−crackers. Miss Georgie Lancaster, at twenty−eight, was still very girlish and gay, and she shared with her mother and sisters the curious instinctive acquisitiveness of the woman who, powerless financially and incapable of replacing, can only save.

Moments went by, a quarter−hour, a half−hour, and still Susan sat hunched up stupidly over her book. It was not an interesting magazine, she had read it before, and her thoughts ran in an uneasy undercurrent while she read. "I ought to be doing my hair—it must be half−past six o'clock—I must stop this—"

It was almost half−past six when the door opened suddenly, and a large woman came in.

"Well, hello, little girlie!" said the newcomer, panting from the climb upstairs, and turning a cold, fresh−colored cheek for Susan's kiss. She took off a long coat, displaying beneath, a black walking− skirt, an elaborate high collar, and a view of shabby corset and shabby corset−cover between. "Ma wanted butter," she explained, with a pleasant, rueful smile, "and I just slipped into anything to go for it!"

"You're an angel, Mary Lou," Susan said affectionately.

"Oh, angel!" Miss Lancaster laughed wearily, but she liked the compliment for all that. "I'm not much of an angel," she said with a sigh, throwing her hat and coat down beside Susan's, and assuming a somewhat spotted serge skirt, and a limp silk waist a trifle too small for her generous proportions. Susan watched her in silence, while she vigorously jerked the little waist this way and that, pinning its torn edges down firmly, adjusting her skirt over it, and covering the safety−pin that united them with a cracked patent− leather belt.

"There!" said Mary Lou, "that doesn't look very well, but I guess it'll do. I have to serve to−night, and I will not wear my best skirt into the kitchen. Ready to go down?"

Susan flung her book down, yawned.

"I ought to do my hair—" she began.

"Oh, you look all right," her cousin assured her, "I wouldn't bother."

She took a small paper bag full of candy from her shopping bag and tucked it out of sight in a bureau drawer. "Here's a little sweet bite for you and me, Sue," said she, with childish, sweet slyness, "when Jinny and Ma go to the lecture to−night, we'll have OUR little party, too. Just a little secret between you and me."

They went downstairs with their arms about each other, to the big front dining−room in the basement. The lower hall was dark and draughty, and smelled of boiling vegetables. There was a telephone on a little table, close by the dining−room door, and a slender, pretty young woman was seated before it. She put her hand over the transmitter, as they came downstairs, and said in a smiling whisper, "Hello, darling!" to Susan. "Shut the door," she added, very low, "when you go into the dining−room."

Susan nodded, and Georgianna Lancaster returned at once to her telephoned conversation.

"Yes, you did!" said she, satirically, "I believe that! ... Oh, of course you did! ... And I suppose you wrote me a note, too, only I didn't get it. Now, listen, why don't you say that you forgot all about it, I wouldn't care ... Honestly, I wouldn't ... honestly, I wouldn't ... Yes, I've heard that before ... No, he didn't either, Rose was furious. ... No, I wasn't furious at all, but at the same time I didn't think it was a very gentlemanly way to act, on your part ..."

Susan and Mary Lou went into the dining−room, and the closing door shut off the rest of the conversation. The household was quite used to Georgie's quarrels with her male friends.

A large, handsome woman, who did not look her sixty years, was moving about the long table, which, spread with a limp and slightly spotted cloth, was partially laid for dinner. Knives, spoons, forks and rolled napkins were laid in a little heap at each place, the length of the table was broken by salt shakers of pink and blue glass, plates of soda crackers, and saucers of green pickles.

"Hello, Auntie!" Susan said, laying an arm about the portly figure, and giving the lady a kiss. Mrs. Lancaster's anxious eye went to her oldest daughter.

"Who's Georgie talking to?" she asked, in a low tone.

"I don't know, Ma," Mary Lou said, sympathetically, pushing a chair against the table with her knee, "Fred Persons, most likely."

"No. 'Tisn't Fred. She just spoke about Fred," said the mother uneasily. "This is the man that didn't meet them Sunday. Sometimes," she complained, "it don't seem like Georgie has any dignity at all!" She had moved to the china closet at one end of the room, and now stood staring at it. "What did I come here for?" she asked, helplessly.

"Glasses," prompted Susan, taking some down herself.

"Glasses," Mrs. Lancaster echoed, in relief. "Get the butter, Mary Lou?"

"In the kitchen, Ma." Miss Lancaster went into the kitchen herself, and Susan went on with the table−setting. Before she had finished, a boarder or two, against the unwritten law of the house, had come downstairs. Mrs. Cortelyou, a thin little wisp of a widow, was in the rocker in the bay−window, Major Kinney, fifty, gray, dried−up, was on the horsehair sofa, watching the kitchen door over his paper. Georgia, having finished her telephoning, had come in to drop idly into her own chair, and play with her knives and forks. Miss Lydia Lord, a plain, brisk woman, her upper lip darkened with hair, her figure flat and square, like a boy's, had come down for her sister's tray, and was talking to Susan in the resolutely cheerful tone that Susan always found annoying, when she was tired.

"The Keiths are off for Europe again, Susan,—dear me! isn't it lovely for the people who can do those things!" said Miss Lord, who was governess in a very wealthy household, and liked to talk of the city's prominent families. "Some day you and I will have to find a million dollars and run away for a year in Italy! I wonder, Sue," the mild banter ceased, "if you could get Mary's dinner? I hate to go into the kitchen, they're all so busy—"

Susan took the tray, and went through the swinging door, and into the kitchen. Two or three forms were flitting about in the steam and smoke and flickering gas−light, water was running, gravy hissing on the stove; Alice, the one poor servant the establishment boasted, was attempting to lift a pile of hot plates with an insufficient cloth. Susan filled her tray silently.

"Anything I can do, Mary Lou?"

"Just get out of the WAY, lovey—that's about all—I salted that once, Ma. If you don't want that table, Sue—and shut the door, dear! The smoke—"

Susan was glad to get out of the kitchen, and in a moment Mrs. Lancaster and Mary Lou came into the dining−room, too, and Alice rang the dinner bell. Instantly the boarders streamed downstairs, found their places

with a general murmuring of mild little pleasantries. Mrs. Lancaster helped the soup rapidly from a large tureen, her worried eyes moved over the table−furnishings without pause.

The soup was well cooled before the place next to Susan was filled by a tall and muscular young man, with very blue eyes, and a large and exceptionally charming mouth. The youth had teeth of a dazzling whiteness, a smile that was a bewildering Irish compound of laughter and tears, and sooty blue−black hair that fitted his head like a thick cap. He was a noisy lad, this William Oliver, opinionated, excitable, a type that in its bigness and broadness seemed almost coarse, sometimes, but he had all a big man's tenderness and sweetness, and everyone liked him. Susan and he quarreled with and criticized each other, William imitating her little affectations of speech and manner, Susan reviling his transparent and absurd ambitions, but they had been good friends for years. Young Oliver's mother had been Mrs. Lancaster's housekeeper for the most prosperous period in the history of the house, and if Susan naturally felt that the son of a working housekeeper was seriously handicapped in a social sense, she nevertheless had many affectionate memories of his mother, as the kindly dignified "Nellie" who used to amuse them so delightfully on rainy days. Nellie had been long dead, now, and her son had grown up into a vigorous, enthusiastic young person, burning his big hands with experiments in physics and chemistry, reading the Scientific American late into the night, until his broad shoulders were threatened with a permanent stoop, and his eager eyes blinked wearily at breakfast, anxious to disprove certain accepted theories, and as eager to introduce others, unaffected, irreverent, and irresistibly buoyant. William could not hear an opera praised without dragging Susan off to gallery seats, which the lady frankly characterized as "smelly," to see if his opinion agreed with that of the critics. If it did not, Susan must listen to long dissertations upon the degeneracy of modern music. His current passion was the German language, which he was studying in odd moments so that he might translate certain scientific treatises in a manner more to the scientific mind.

"Hello, Susan, darling!" he said now, as he slipped into his chair.

"Hello, heart's delight!" Susan answered composedly.

"Well, here—here—here!" said an aged gentleman who was known for no good reason as "Major," "what's all this? You young folks going to give us a wedding?"

"Not unless I'm chloroformed first, Major," Susan said, briskly, and everybody laughed absently at the well−known pleasantry. They were all accustomed to the absurdity of the Major's question, and far more absorbed just now in watching the roast, which had just come on. Another pot−roast. Everybody sighed.

"This isn't just what I meant to give you good people to−night," said Mrs. Lancaster cheerfully, as she stood up to carve, "but butchers can be tyrants, as we all know. Mary Lou, put vegetables on that for Mrs. Cortelyou."

Mary Lou briskly served potatoes and creamed carrots and summer squash; Susan went down a pyramid of saucers as she emptied a large bowl of rather watery tomato−sauce.

"Well, they tell us meat isn't good for us anyway!" piped Mrs. Kinney, who was rheumatic, and always had scrambled eggs for dinner.

"—ELEGANT chicken, capon, probably, and on Sundays, turkey all winter long!" a voice went on in the pause.

"My father ate meat three times a day, all his life," said Mrs. Parker, a dark, heavy woman, with an angelic−looking daughter of nineteen beside her, "and papa lived to be—let me see—"

"Ah, here's Jinny!" Mrs. Lancaster stopped carving to receive the kiss of a tall, sweet−faced, eye−glassed young woman who came in, and took the chair next hers. "Your soup's cold, dear," said she tenderly.

Miss Virginia Lancaster looked a little chilly; her eyes, always weak, were watery now from the sharp evening air, and her long nose red at the tip. She wore neat, plain clothes, and a small hat, and laid black lisle gloves and a small black book beside her plate as she sat down.

"Good evening, everybody!" said she, pleasantly. "Late comers mustn't complain, Ma, dear. I met Mrs. Curry, poor thing, coming out of the League rooms, and time flew, as time has a way of doing! She was telling me about Harry," Miss Virginia sighed, peppering her soup slowly. "He knew he was going," she resumed, "and he left all his little things—"

"Gracious! A child of seven?" Mrs. Parker said.

"Oh, yes! She said there was no doubt of it."

The conversation turned upon death, and the last acts of the dying. Loretta Parker related the death of a young saint. Miss Lord, pouring a little lime water into most of her food, chewed religiously, her eyes moving from one

speaker's face to another.

"I saw my pearl to−day," said William Oliver to Susan, under cover of the general conversation.

"Eleanor Harkness? Where?"

"On Market Street,—the little darling! Walking with Anna Carroll. Going to the boat."

"Oh, and how's Anna?"

"Fine, I guess. I only spoke to them for a minute. I wish you could have seen her dear little laugh—"

"Oh, Billy, you fatuous idiot! It'll be someone else to−morrow."

"It will NOT," said William, without conviction "No, my little treasure has all my heart—"

"Honestly," said Susan, in fine scorn, "it's cat−sickening to hear you go on that way! Especially with that snapshot of Anna Carroll still in your watch!"

"That snapshot doesn't happen to be still in my watch, if it's any business of yours!" the gentleman said, sweetly.

"Why, it is TOO! Let's see it, then!"

"No, I won't let you see it, but it's not there, just the same."

"Oh, Billy, what an awful lie!"

"Susan!" said Mrs. Lancaster, partly in reproof, partly to call her niece's attention to apple−pie and tapioca pudding.

"Pudding, please, auntie." Susan subsided, not to break forth again until the events of the day suddenly rushed into her mind. She hastily reviewed them for William's benefit.

"Well, what do you care?" he consoled her for the disappointment, "here's your chance to bone up on the segregating, or crediting, or whatever you call it."

"Yes, and then have someone else get it!"

"No one else could get it, if you understood it best!" he said impatiently.

"That shows just about how much you know about the office!" Susan retorted, vexed at his lack of sympathy. And she returned to her pudding, with the real cream of the day's news yet untold.

A few moments later Billy was excused, for a struggle with German in the night school, and departed with a joyous, "Auf wiedersehen, Fraulein Brown!" to Susan. Such boarders as desired were now drinking their choice between two dark, cool fluids that might have been tea, or might have been coffee, or might have been neither.

"I am going a little ahead of you and Georgie, Ma," said Virginia, rising, "for I want to see Mamie Evans about tickets for Saturday."

"Say, listen, Jin, I'm not going to−night," said Miss Georgie, hastily, and with a little effort.

"Why, you said you were, Georgie!" the older sister said reproachfully. "I thought you'd bring Ma."

"Well, I'm not, so you thought wrong!" Georgie responded airily.

"Somebody coming to see you, dear?" asked her mother.

"I don't know—maybe." Miss Georgie got up, brushing the crumbs from her lap.

"Who is it, dear?" her mother pursued, too casually.

"I tell you it may not be anyone, Ma!" the girl answered, suddenly irritated. A second later they heard her running upstairs.

"I really ought to be early—I promised Miss Evans—" Virginia murmured.

"Yes, I know, lovey," said her mother. "So you run right along. I'll just do a few little things here, and come right after you." Virginia was Mrs. Lancaster's favorite child, now she kissed her warmly. "Don't get all tired out, my darling!" said she, and when the girl was gone she added, "Never gives ONE thought to herself!"

"She's an angel!" said Loretta Parker fervently.

"But I kind of hate to have you go down to League Hall alone, Ma," said Mary Lou, who was piling dishes and straightening the room, with Susan's help.

"Yes, let us put you on the car," Susan suggested.

"I declare I hate to have you," the older woman hesitated.

"Well, I'll change," Mary Lou sighed wearily. "I'll get right into my things, a breath of air will do us both good, won't it, Sue?"

Presently they all walked to the McAllister Street car. Susan, always glad to be out at night, found something at which to stop in every shop window; she fairly danced along at her cousin's side, on the way back.

"I think Fillmore Street's as gay as Kearney, don't you, Mary Lou? Don't you just hate to go in. Don't you wish something exciting would happen?"

"What a girl you are for wanting excitement, Sue. I want to get back and see that Georgie hasn't shut everyone out of the parlor!" worried Mary Lou.

They went through the basement door to the dining room, where one or two old ladies were playing solitaire, on the red table−cloth, under the gas−light. Susan drew up a chair, and plunged into a new library book. Mary Lou, returning from a trip upstairs, said noiselessly, "Gone walking!" and Susan looked properly disgusted at Georgie's lack of propriety. Mary Lou began a listless game of patience, with a shabby deck of cards taken from the sideboard drawer, presently she grew interested, and Susan put aside her book, and began to watch the cards, too. The old ladies chatted at intervals over their cards. One game followed another, Mary Lou prefacing each with a firm, "Now, no more after this one, Sue," and a mention of the time.

It was like many of their evenings, like three hundred evenings a year. The room grew warm, the gas−lights crept higher and higher, flared noisily, and were lowered. Mary Lou unfastened her collar, Susan rumpled her hair. The conversation, always returning to the red king and the black four−spot, ranged idly here and there. Susan observed that she must write some letters, and meant to take a hot bath and go early to bed. But she sat on and on; the cards, by the smallest percentage of amusement, still held them.

At ten o'clock Mrs. Lancaster and Virginia came in, bright−eyed and chilly, eager to talk of the lecture. Mrs. Lancaster loosened her coat, laid aside the miserable little strip of fur she always wore about her throat, and hung her bonnet, with its dangling widow's veil, over the back of her deep chair. She drew Susan down to sit on her knee. "All the baby auntie's got," she said. Georgie presently came downstairs, her caller, "that fresh kid I met at Sallie's," had gone, and she was good−natured again. Mary Lou produced the forgotten bag of candy; they all munched it and talked. The old ladies had gone upstairs long ago.

All conversations led Mrs. Lancaster into the past, the girls could almost have reconstructed those long−ago, prosperous years, from hearing her tell of them.

"—Papa fairly glared at the man," she was saying presently, won to an old memory by the chance meeting of an old friend to−night, "I can see his face this day! I said, 'Why, papa, I'd JUST as soon have these rooms!' But, no. Papa had paid for the best, and he was going to have the best—"

"That was Papa!" laughed his daughters.

"That was Papa!" his widow smiled and sighed. "Well. The first thing I knew, there was the proprietor,—you may imagine! Papa says, 'Will you kindly tell me why I have to bring my wife, a delicate, refined Southern woman—'"

"And he said beautiful, too, Ma!"

Mrs. Lancaster laughed mildly.

"Poor papa! He was so proud of my looks! 'Will you tell me,' he says, 'why I have to put my wife into rooms like these?' 'Sir,' the landlord says, 'I have only one better suite—'"

"Bridal suite, he said, Ma!"

"Yes, he did. The regular bridal suite. I wasn't a bride then, that was after poor George was born, but I had a very high color, and I always dressed very elegantly. And I had a good figure, your father's two hands could meet around my waist. Anyway, then Papa— dear me, how it all comes back!—Papa says, fairly shouting, 'Well, why can't I have that suite?' 'Oh, sir,' the landlord says, 'a Mr. George Lancaster has engaged that for his wife, and they say that he's a man who WILL get what he pays for—'" Another mild laugh interrupted the narrative.

"Didn't you nearly DIE, Ma?"

"Well, my dear! If you could have seen the man's face when Papa—and how well he did this sort of thing, deary me!—whips out a card—"

They all laughed merrily. Then Mrs. Lancaster sighed.

"Poor Papa, I don't know what he would have done if he could have seen us to−day," she said. "It's just as well we couldn't see ahead, after all!"

"Gee, but I'd like to see what's coming," Susan said thoughtfully.

"Bed is coming next!" Mary Lou said, putting her arm about the girl. Upstairs they all filed sleepily, lowering the hall gases as they went. Susan yawningly kissed her aunt and Virginia good−night, on the second floor, where they had a dark and rather colorless room together. She and the other girls went on up to the third−story room,

where they spent nearly another hour in dilatory undressing. Susan hesitated again over the thought of a hot bath, decided against it, decided against even the usual brushing of her hair to− night, and sprang into bed to lie flat on her tired back, watching Mary Lou make up Georgie's bed with dislocating yawns, and Georgie, wincing as she put her hair into tight "kids." Susan slept in a small space bounded by the foot of the bed, the head of the bed, the wall, and her cousin's large person, and, as Mary Lou generally made the bed in the morning by flapping the covers back without removing them, they were apt to feel and smell unaired, and to be rumpled and loose at the foot. Susan could not turn over in the night without arousing Mary Lou, who would mutter a terrified "What is it—what is it?" for the next ten minutes. Years before, Susan, a timid, country−bred child, had awakened many a time in the night, frightened by the strange city noises, or the fire−bells, and had lain, with her mouth dry, and her little heart thundering, through lessening agonies of fright. But she never liked to awake Mary Lou. Now she was used to the city, and used to the lumpy, ill−made bed as well; indeed Susan often complained that she fell asleep too fast, that she wanted to lie awake and think.

But to−night she lay awake for a long time. Susan was at twenty−one no more than a sweet and sunny child, after all. She had accepted a rather cheerless destiny with all the extraordinary philosophy and patience of a child, thankful for small pleasures, enduring small discomforts gaily. No situation was too hopeless for Susan's laughter, and no prospect too dark for her bright dreams. Now, to− night for the first time, the tiny spark of a definite ambition was added to this natural endowment. She would study the work of the, office systematically, she would be promoted, she would be head girl some day, some day very soon, and obliged, as head girl, to come in and out of Mr. Peter Coleman's office constantly. And by the dignity and gravity of her manner, and her personal neatness, and her entire indifference to his charms—always neat little cuffs and collars basted in her tailor−made suit—always in her place on the stroke of half−past eight—

Susan began to get sleepy. She turned over cautiously, and bunched her pillow comfortably under one cheek. Hazy thoughts wheeled through her tired brain. Thorny—the man on the dummy—the black king—

CHAPTER III

Among Mrs. Lancaster's reminiscences Susan had heard none more often than the one in which the first appearance of Billy Oliver and his mother in the boarding−house was described. Mrs. Oliver had been newly widowed then, and had the round−faced, square−shouldered little Billy to support, in a city that was strange and unfriendly. She had gone to Mrs. Lancaster's intending merely to spend a day or two, until the right work and the right home for herself and Billy should be found.

"It happened to be a bad time for me," Mrs. Lancaster would say, recalling the event. "My cook had gone, the house was full, and I had a quinsy sore throat. But I managed to find her a room, and Alfie and George carried in a couch for the little boy. She borrowed a broom, I remember, and cleaned out the I room herself. I explained how things were with me, and that I ought to have been on my back THEN! She was the cleanest soul I ever saw, she washed out the very bureau drawers, and she took the little half−curtain down, it was quite black,—we used to keep that window open a good deal. Well, and we got to talking, and she told me about her husband's death, he was a surveyor, and a pretty clever man, I guess. Poor thing, she burst right out crying—"

"And you kept feeling sicker and sicker, Ma."

"I began to feel worse and worse, yes. And at about four o'clock I sent Ceely,—you remember Ceely, Mary Lou!—for the doctor. She was getting dinner—everything was upset!"

"Was that the day I broke the pitchers, Ma?"

"No. That was another day. Well, when the doctor came, he said BED. I was too wretched then to say boo to a goose, and I simply tumbled in. And I wasn't out of bed for five weeks!"

"Ma!"

"Not for five weeks. Well. But that first night, somebody knocked at my door, and who should it be but my little widow! with her nice little black gown on, and a white apron. She'd brought me some gruel, and she began to hang up my things and straighten the room. I asked about dinner, and she said she had helped Ceely and that it was all right. The relief! And from that moment she took hold, got a new cook, cleaned house, managed everything! And how she adored that boy! I don't think that, in the seven years that she was with me, Nellie ever spent an evening away from him. Poor Nellie! And a witty, sweet woman she was, too, far above that sort of work. She was taking the public library examinations when she died. Nellie would have gone a long way. She was a real little lady. Billy must be more like his father, I imagine."

"Oh, now, Ma!" There was always someone to defend Billy. "Look how good and steady Billy is!"

"Steady, yes, and a dear, dear boy, as we all know. But—but very different from what I would wish a son of mine to be!" Mrs. Lancaster would say regretfully.

Susan agreed with her aunt that it was a great pity that a person of Billy's intelligence should voluntarily grub away in a dirty iron foundry all the days of his youth, associating with the commonest types of laboring men. A clerkship, an agency, a hundred refined employments in offices would have seemed more suitable, or even a professional vocation of some sort. But she had in all honesty to admit that Alfred's disinclination to do anything at all, and Alfred's bad habits, made Billy's industry and cleanness and temperance a little less grateful to Mrs. Lancaster than they might otherwise have been.

Alfred tried a great many positions, and lost them all because he could not work, and could not refrain from drinking. The women of his family called Alfred nothing more unkind than "unfortunate," and endured the drunkenness, the sullen aftermath, the depression while a new job was being found, and Alfie's insufferable complacency when the new job was found, with tireless patience and gentleness. Mary Lou carried Alfie's breakfast upstairs to his bed, on Sunday mornings, Mrs. Lancaster often gave him an early dinner, and hung over him adoringly while he ate it, because he so hated to dine with the boarders. Susan loaned him money, Virginia's prayers were all for him, and Georgie laughed at his jokes and quoted him as if he had been the most model of brothers. How much they realized of Alfie's deficiencies, how important the matter seemed to them, even Susan could not guess Mrs. Lancaster majestically forbade any discussion of Alfie. "Many a boy has his little weakness in early youth," she said, "Alfie will come out all right!"

She had the same visionary optimism in regarding her daughters' futures. The girls were all to marry, of

course, and marry well, far above their present station, indeed.

"Somehow I always think of Mary Lou's husband as a prominent officer, or a diplomat," Mrs. Lancaster would say. "Not necessarily very rich, but with a comfortable private income. Mary Lou makes friends very easily, she likes to make a good appearance, she has a very gracious manner, and with her fine figure, and her lovely neck, she would make a very handsome mistress for a big home—yes, indeed you would, dear! Where many a woman would want to run away and hide, Mary Lou would be quite in her element—"

"Well, one thing," Mary Lou would say modestly, "I'm never afraid to meet strangers, and, don't you know you've spoken of it, Ma? I never have any trouble in talking to them. Do you remember that woman in the grocery that night, Georgie, who said she thought I must have traveled a great deal, I had such an easy way of speaking? And I'd love to dress every night for dinner."

"Of course you would!" her mother always said approvingly. "Now, Georgie," she would pursue, "is different again. Where Mary Lou only wants the very NICEST people about her, Georgie cares a good deal more for the money and having a good time!"

"The man I marry has got to make up his mind that I'm going to keep on the go," Georgie would admit, with an independent toss of her head.

"But you wouldn't marry just for that, dear? Love must come, too."

"Oh, the love would come fast enough, if the money was there!" Georgie would declare naughtily.

"I don't like to have you say that even in fun, dear! ... Now Jinny," and Mrs. Lancaster would shake her head, "sometimes I think Jinny would be almost too hard upon any man," she would say, lovingly. "There are mighty few in this world good enough for her. And I would certainly warn any man," she usually added seriously, "that Jinny is far finer and more particular than most women. But a good, good man, older than she, who could give her a beautiful home− −"

"I would love to begin, on my wedding−day, to do some beautiful, big, charitable thing every day," Virginia herself would say eagerly. "I would like to be known far and wide as a woman of immense charities. I'd have only one handsome street suit or two, each season, beside evening dresses, and people would get to know me by sight, and bring their babies up to me in the street—" Her weak, kind eyes always watered at the picture.

"But Mama is not ready yet to let you go!" her mother would say jealously. "We'll hope that Mr. Right will be a long time arriving!"

Then it was Susan's turn.

"And I want some fine, good man to make my Sue happy, some day," her aunt often said, affectionately. Susan writhed in spirit under the implication that no fine, good man yet had desired the honor; she had a girl's desire that her affairs—or the absence of affairs—of the heart should not be discussed. Susan felt keenly the fact that she had never had an offer of marriage; her one consolation, in this humiliation, was that no one but herself could be quite sure of it. Boys had liked her, confided in her, made her small Christmas presents,—just how other girls led them from these stages to the moment of a positive declaration, she often wondered. She knew that she was attractive to most people; babies and old men and women, servants and her associates in the office, strangers on ferryboats and sick people in hospitals alike responded to her friendliness and gaiety. But none of these was marriageable, of course, and the moment Susan met a person who was, a subtle change crept over her whole personality, veiled the bright charm, made the friendliness stiff, the gaiety forced. Susan, like all other girls, was not herself with the young unmarried men of her acquaintance; she was too eager to be exactly what they supposedly wanted her to be. She felt vaguely the utter unnaturalness of this, without ever being able to analyze it. Her attitude, the attitude of all her sex, was too entirely false to make an honest analysis possible. Susan, and her cousins, and the girls in the office, rather than reveal their secret longings to be married, would have gone cheerfully to the stake. Nevertheless, all their talk was of men and marriage, and each girl innocently appraised every man she met, and was mentally accepting or refusing an offer of marriage from him before she had known him five minutes.

Susan viewed the single state of her three pretty cousins with secret uneasiness. Georgie always said that she had refused "dozens of fellows," meeting her mother's occasional mild challenge of some specific statement with an unanswerable "of course you didn't know, for I never told you, Ma." And Virginia liked to bemoan the fact that so many nice men seemed inclined to fall in love with herself, a girl who gave absolutely no thought to such things at all. Mrs. Lancaster supported Virginia's suspicions by memories of young men who had suddenly and

mysteriously appeared, to ask her to accept them as boarders, and young attorneys who had their places in church changed to the pews that surrounded the Lancaster pew. But Susan dismissed these romantic vapors, and in her heart held Mary Lou in genuine admiration, because Mary Lou had undoubtedly and indisputably had a real lover, years ago.

Mary Lou loved to talk of Ferd Eastman still; his youth, his manly charms, his crossing an empty ball−room floor, on the memorable evening of their meeting, especially to be introduced to her, and to tell her that brown hair was his favorite color for hair. After that the memories, if still fondly cherished, were less bright. Mary Lou had been "perfectly wretched," she had "cried for nights and nights" at the idea of leaving Ma; Ma had fainted frequently. "Ma made it really hard for me," said Mary Lou. Ma was also held to blame for not reconciling the young people after the first quarrel. Ma might have sent for Ferd. Mary Lou, of course, could do nothing but weep.

Poor Mary Lou's weeping soon had good cause. Ferd rushed away, rushed into another marriage, with an heiress and a beauty, as it happened, and Mary Lou had only the dubious consolation of a severe illness.

After that, she became cheerful, mild, unnecessary Mary Lou, doing a little bit of everything about the house, appreciated by nobody. Ferd and his wife were the great people of their own little town, near Virginia City, and after a while Mary Lou had several pictures of their little boy to treasure,—Robbie with stiff curls falling over a lace collar, and plaid kilts, in a swing, and Robbie in velvet knickerbockers, on a velocipede.

The boarding−house had a younger affair than Mary Lou's just now in the attachment felt for lovely Loretta Parker by a young Mission doctor, Joseph O'Connor. Susan did not admire the gentleman very much, with his well−trimmed little beard, and his throaty little voice, but she could not but respect the dreamy and indifferent Loretta for his unquestionable ardor. Loretta wanted to enter a convent, to her mother's bitter anguish, and Susan once convulsed Georgie by the remark that she thought Joe O'Connor would make a cute nun, himself.

"But think of sacrificing that lovely beard!" said Georgie.

"Oh, you and I could treasure it, Georgie! Love's token, don't you know?"

Loretta's affair was of course extremely interesting to everyone at Mrs. Lancaster's, as were the various "cases" that Georgie continually talked of, and the changing stream of young men that came to see her night after night. But also interesting were all the other lives that were shut up here together, the varied forms which sickness and money−trouble can take for the class that has not learned to be poor. Little pretenses, timid enjoyments and mild extravagances were all overshadowed by a poverty real enough to show them ever more shadowy than they were. Susan grew up in an atmosphere where a lost pair of overshoes, or a dentist's bill, or a counterfeit half−dollar, was a real tragedy. She was well used to seeing reddened eyes, and hearing resigned sighs at the breakfast table, without ever knowing what little unforeseen calamity had caused them. Every door in the dark hallways shut in its own little story of suffering and privation. Susan always thought of second− floor alcoved bedrooms as filled with the pungent fumes of Miss Beattie's asthma powder, and of back rooms as redolent of hot kerosene and scorched woolen, from the pressing of old Mr. Keane's suits, by Mrs. Keane. She could have identified with her eyes shut any room in the house. A curious chilliness lurked in the halls, from August to May, and an odor compounded of stale cigarette smoke, and carbolic acid, and coal−gas, and dust.

Those women in the house who did not go to business every day generally came down to the breakfast table very much as they rose from bed. Limp faded wrappers and "Juliet" slippers were the only additions made to sleeping wear. The one or two men of the house, with Susan and Jane Beattie and Lydia Lord, had breakfasted and gone long before these ladies drifted downstairs. Sometimes Mrs. Parker and Loretta made an early trip to Church, but even then they wore only long cloaks over very informal attire, and joined the others, in wrappers, upon their return.

Loitering over coffee and toast, in the sunny dining−room, the morning wasted away. The newspapers were idly discussed, various scraps of the house gossip went the rounds. Many a time, before her entrance into the business world, Susan had known this pleasant idleness to continue until ten o'clock, until eleven o'clock, while the room, between the stove inside and the winter sunshine outside, grew warmer and warmer, and the bedrooms upstairs waited in every stage of appalling disorder and confusion.

Nowadays Susan ran downstairs just before eight o'clock, to gulp down her breakfast, with one eye on the clock. The clatter of a cable car passing the corner meant that Susan had just time to pin on her hat, seize her gloves and her lunch, and catch the next cable−car. She flashed through the dreary little entrance yard, past other

yards, past the bakery, and took her seat on the dummy breathless with her hurry, exhilarated by the morning freshness of the air, and filled with happy expectation for the new day.

On the Monday morning that Mr. Peter Coleman made his appearance as a member of the Front Office staff, Susan Brown was the first girl to reach the office. This was usually the case, but to−day Susan, realizing that the newcomer would probably be late, wished that she had the shred of an excuse to be late herself, to have an entrance, as it were. Her plain suit had been well brushed, and the coat was embellished by a fresh, dainty collar and wide cuffs of white linen. Susan had risen early to wash and press these, and they were very becoming to her fresh, unaffected beauty. But they must, of course, be hung in the closet, and Susan, taking her place at her desk, looked quite as usual, except for the spray of heliotrope pinned against her lavender shirtwaist.

The other girls were earlier than was customary, there was much laughing and chatting as desks were dusted, and inkwells filled for the day. Susan, watching soberly from her corner, saw that Miss Cottle was wearing her best hat, that Miss Murray had on the silk gown she usually saved for Saturdays, that Thorny's hair was unusually crimped and puffed, and that the Kirks were wearing coquettish black silk aprons, with pink and blue bows. Susan's face began to burn. Her hand unobtrusively stole to her heliotrope, which fell, a moment later, a crushed little fragrant lump, into her waste−basket. Presently she went into the coat closet.

"Remind me to take these to the French Laundry at noon," said Susan, pausing before Thorny's desk, on her way back to her own, with a tight roll of linen in her hand. "I left 'em on my coat from yesterday. They're filthy."

"Sure, but why don't you do 'em yourself, Susan, and save your two bits?"

"Well, maybe I will. I usually do." Susan yawned.

"Still sleepy?"

"Dying for sleep. I went with my cousin to St. Mary's last night, to hear that Mission priest. He's a wonder."

"Not for me! I've not been inside a church for years. I had my friend last night. Say, Susan, has he come?"

"Has who come?"

"Oh, you go to, Susan! Young Coleman."

"Oh, sure!" Susan's eyes brightened intelligently. "That's so, he was coming down to−day, wasn't he?"

"Girls," said Miss Thornton, attracting the attention of the entire room, "what do you know about Susan Brown's trying to get away with it that she's forgotten about Peter Coleman!"

"Oh, Lord, what a bluff!" somebody said, for the crowd.

"I don't see why it's a bluff," said Susan hardily, back at her own desk, and turning her light on, full above her bright, innocent face. "I intended to wear my grandfather's gray uniform and my aunt's widow's veil to make an impression on him, and you see I didn't!"

"Oh, Susan, you're awful!" Miss Thornton said, through the general shocked laughter. "You oughtn't say things like that," Miss Garvey remonstrated. "It's awful bad luck. Mamma had a married cousin in Detroit and she put on a widow's veil for fun—"

At ten o'clock a flutter went through the office. Young Mr. Coleman was suddenly to be seen, standing beside Mr. Brauer at his high desk. He was exceptionally big and broad, handsome and fresh looking, with a look of careful grooming and dressing that set off his fine head and his fine hands; he wore a very smart light suit, and carried well the affectation of lavender tie and handkerchief and hose, and an opal scarf−pin.

He seemed to be laughing a good deal over his new work, but finally sat down to a pile of bills, and did not interrupt Mr. Brauer after that oftener than ten times a minute. Susan met his eye, as she went along the deck, but he did not remember her, or was too confused to recognize her among the other girls, and they did not bow. She was very circumspect and very dignified for a week or two, always busy when Peter Coleman came into Front Office, and unusually neat in appearance. Miss Murray sat next to him on the car one morning, and they chatted for fifteen minutes; Miss Thornton began to quote him now and then; Miss Kirk, as credit clerk, spent at least a morning a week in Mr. Brauer's office, three feet away from Mr. Coleman, and her sister tripped in there now and then on real or imagined errands.

But Susan bided her time. And one afternoon, late in October, returning early to the office, she found Mr. Coleman loitering disconsolately about the deck.

"Excuse me, Miss Brown," said he, clearing his throat. He had, of course, noticed this busy, absorbed young woman.

Susan stopped, attentive, unsmiling.

"Brauer," complained the young man, "has gone off and locked my hat in his office. I can't go to lunch."

"Why didn't you walk through Front Office?" said Susan, leading the way so readily and so sedately, that the gentleman was instantly put in the position of having addressed her on very slight provocation.

"This inner door is always unlocked," she explained, with maternal gentleness.

Peter Coleman colored.

"I see—I am a bally ass!" he said, laughing.

"You ought to know," Susan conceded politely. And suddenly her dimples were in view, her blue eyes danced as they met his, and she laughed too.

This was a rare opportunity, the office was empty, Susan knew she looked well, for she had just brushed her hair and powdered her nose. She cast about desperately in her mind for something— anything!—to keep the conversation going. She had often thought of the words in which she would remind him of their former meeting.

"Don't think I'm quite as informal as this, Mr. Coleman, you and I have been properly introduced, you know! I'm not entirely flattered by having you forget me so completely, Mr. Coleman!"

Before she could choose either form, he said it himself.

"Say, look here, look here—didn't my uncle introduce us once, on a car, or something? Doesn't he know your mother?"

"My mother's dead," said Susan primly. But so irresistible was the well of gaiety bubbling up in her heart that she made the statement mirthful.

"Oh, gosh, I do beg your pardon—" the man stammered. They both, although Susan was already ashamed of herself, laughed violently again.

"Your uncle knows my aunt," she said presently, coldly and unsmilingly.

"That's it," he said, relieved. "Quite a French sentence, 'does the uncle know the aunt'?" he grinned.

"Or 'Has the governess of the gardener some meat and a pen'?" gurgled Susan. And again, and more merrily, they laughed together.

"Lord, didn't you hate French?" he asked confidentially.

"Oh, HATE it!" Susan had never had a French lesson.

There was a short pause—a longer pause. Suddenly both spoke.

"I beg your pardon—?"

"No, you. You were first."

"Oh, no, you. What were you going to say?"

"I wasn't going to say anything. I was just going to say—I was going to ask how that pretty, motherly aunt of yours is,—Mrs. Baxter?"

"Aunt Clara. Isn't she a peach? She's fine." He wanted to keep talking, too, it was obvious. "She brought me up, you know." He laughed boyishly. "Not that I'd want you to hold that against her, or anything like that!"

"Oh, she'll live that down!" said Susan.

That was all. But when Peter Colernan went on his way a moment later he was still smiling, and Susan walked to her desk on air.

The office seemed a pleasant place to be that afternoon. Susan began her work with energy and interest, the light falling on her bright hair, her fingers flying. She hummed as she worked, and one or two other girls hummed with her.

There was rather a musical atmosphere in Front Office; the girls without exception kept in touch with the popular music of the day, and liked to claim a certain knowledge of the old classics as well. Certain girls always hummed certain airs, and no other girl ever usurped them. Thus Thorny vocalized the "Spring Song," when she felt particularly cheerful, and to Miss Violet Kirk were ceded all rights to Carmen's own solos in "Carmen." Susan's privilege included "The Rosary" and the little Hawaiian fare−well, "Aloha aoi." After the latter Thorny never failed to say dreamily, "I love that song!" and Susan to mutter surprisedly, "I didn't know I was humming it!"

All the girls hummed the Toreador's song, and the immediate favorites of the hour, "Just Because She Made Those Goo−Goo Eyes," and "I Don't Know Why I Love You but I Do," and "Hilee−Hilo" and "The Mosquito Parade." Hot discussions as to the merits of various compositions arose, and the technique of various singers.

"Yes, Collamarini's dramatic, and she has a good natural voice," Miss Thornton would admit, "but she can't

get AT it."

Or, "That's all very well," Miss Cottle would assert boldly, "but Salassa sings better than either Plancon or de Reszke. I'm not saying this myself, but a party that KNOWS told me so."

"Probably the person who told you so had never heard them," Miss Thornton would say, bringing the angry color to Miss Cottle's face, and the angry answer:

"Well, if I could tell you who it IS, you'd feel pretty small!"

Susan had small respect for the other girls' opinions, and almost as little for her own. She knew how ignorant she was. But she took to herself what credit accrued to general quoting, quoting from newspapers, from her aunt's boarders, from chance conversations overheard on the cars.

"Oh, Puccini will never do anything to TOUCH Bizet!" Susan asserted firmly. Or, "Well, we'd be fighting Spain still if it wasn't for McKinley!" Or, "My grandmother had three hundred slaves, and slavery worked perfectly well, then!" If challenged, she got very angry. "You simply are proving that you don't know anything about it!" was Susan's last, and adequate, answer to questioners.

But as a rule she was not challenged. Some quality in Susan set her apart from the other girls, and they saw it as she did. It was not that she was richer, or prettier, or better born, or better educated, than any or all of them. But there was some sparkling, bubbling quality about her that was all her own. She read, and assimilated rather than remembered what she read, adopted this little affectation in speech, this little nicety of manner. She glowed with varied and absurd ambitions, and took the office into her confidence about them. Wavering and incomplete as her aunt's influence had been, one fact had early been impressed upon her; she was primarily and absolutely a "lady." Susan's forebears had really been rather ordinary folk, improvident and carefree, enjoying prosperity when they had it with the uneducated, unpractical serenity of the Old South, shiftless and lazy and unhappy in less prosperous times.

But she thought of them as most distinguished and accomplished gentlefolk, beautiful women environed by spacious estates, by exquisite old linen and silver and jewels, and dashing cavaliers rising in gay gallantry alike to the conquest of feminine hearts, or to their country's defense. She bore herself proudly, as became their descendants. She brought the gaze of her honest blue eyes frankly to all the other eyes in the world, a lady was unembarrassed in the presence of her equals, a lady was always gracious to her inferiors.

Her own father had been less elevated in rank than his wife, yet Susan could think of him with genuine satisfaction. He was only a vague memory to her now, this bold heart who had challenged a whole family's opposition, a quarter of a century before, and carried off Miss Sue Rose Ralston, whose age was not quite half his forty years, under her father's very eyes.

When Susan was born, four years later, the young wife was still regarded by her family as an outcast. But even the baby Susan, growing happily old enough to toddle about in the Santa Barbara rose−garden that sheltered the still infatuated pair, knew that Mother was supremely indifferent to the feeling toward her in any heart but one. Martin Brown was an Irishman, and a writer of random essays. His position on a Los Angeles daily newspaper kept the little family in touch with just the people they cared to see, and, when the husband and father was found dead at his desk one day, with his wife's picture over the heart that had suddenly and simply ceased to serve him, there were friends all about to urge the beautiful widow to take up at least a part of his work, in the old environment.

But Sue Rose was not quite thirty, and still girlish, and shrinking, and helpless. Beside, there was Lou's house to go to, and five thousand dollars life insurance, and three thousand more from the sale of the little home, to meet the immediate need. So Susan and her mother came up to Mrs. Lancaster, and had a very fine large room together, and became merged in the older family. And the eight thousand dollars lasted a long time, it was still paying little bills, and buying birthday presents, and treating Alfie to a "safety bicycle," and Mary Lou to dancing lessons when, on a wet afternoon in her thirteenth summer, little Susan Brown came in from school to find that Mother was very ill.

"Just an ugly, sharp pain, ducky, don't look so scared!" said Mother, smiling gallantly, but writhing under the bed covers. "Dr. Forsythe has been here, and it's nothing at all. Ah−h−h!" said Mother, whimsically, "the poor little babies! They go through this, and we laugh at them, and call it colic! Never−laugh−at−another− baby, Sue! I shan't. You'd better call Auntie, dear. This—this won't do."

A day or two later there was talk of an operation. Susan was told very little of it. Long afterward she

remembered with certain resentment the cavalier manner in which her claims were dismissed. Her mother went to the hospital, and two days later, when she was well over the wretchedness of the ether, Susan went with Mary Lou to see her, and kissed the pale, brave little face, sunk in the great white pillows.

"Home in no time, Sue!" her mother said bravely.

But a few days later something happened, Susan was waked from sleep, was rushed to the hospital again, was pressed by some unknown hand into a kneeling position beside a livid and heavily breathing creature whom she hardly recognized as her mother. It was all confusing and terrifying; it was over very soon. Susan came blinking out of the dimly lighted room with Mary Lou, who was sobbing, "Oh, Aunt Sue Rose! Aunt Sue Rose!" Susan did not cry, but her eyes hurt her, and the back of her head ached sharply.

She cried later, in the nights, after her cousins had seemed to be unsympathetic, feeling that she needed her mother to take her part. But on the whole the cousins were devoted and kind to Susan, and the child was as happy as she could have been anywhere. But her restless ambition forced her into many a discontented hour, as she grew, and when an office position was offered her Susan was wild with eagerness to try her own feet.

"I can't bear it!" mourned her aunt, "why can't you stay here happily with us, lovey? My own girls are happy. I don't know what has gotten into you girls lately, wanting to rush out like great, coarse men! Why can't you stay at home, doing all the little dainty, pretty things that only a woman can do, to make a home lovely?"

"Don't you suppose I'd much RATHER not work?" Susan demanded impatiently. "I can't have you supporting me, Auntie. That's it."

"Well, if that's it, that's nonsense, dear. As long as Auntie lives all she asks is to keep a comfortable home for her girls."

"Why, Sue, you'll be implying that we all ought to have taken horrid office positions," Virginia said, in smiling warning.

Susan remained mutinously silent.

"Have you any fault to find with Auntie's provision for you, dear?" asked Mrs. Lancaster, patiently.

"Oh, NO, auntie! That's not it AT ALL!" Susan protested, "it's just simply that I—I can't—I need money, sometimes—" She stopped, miserably.

"Come, now!" Mrs. Lancaster, all sweet tolerance of the vagary, folded her hands to await enlightenment. "Come, now! Tell auntie what you need money for. What is this special great need?"

"No one special thing, auntie—" Susan was anything but sure of her ground. As a matter of fact she did not want to work at all, she merely felt a frantic impulse to do something else than settle down for life as Mary Lou and Virginia and Georgie had done. "But clothes cost money," she pursued vaguely.

"What sort of a gown did you want, dear?" Mrs. Lancaster reached for her shabby purse. Susan refused the gift of a gown with many kisses, and no more was said for a while of her working.

This was in her seventeenth summer. For more than a year after that she drifted idly, reading a great many romantic novels, and wishing herself a young actress, a lone orphan, the adored daughter of an invalid father or of a rich and adoring mother, the capable, worshiped oldest sister in a jolly big family, a lovely cripple in a bright hospital ward, anything, in short, except what she was.

Then came the offer of a position in Front Office, and Susan took it on her own responsibility, and resigned herself to her aunt's anger. This was a most unhappy time for all concerned.

But it was all over now. Auntie rebeled no more, she accepted the fact as she had accepted other unwelcome facts in her life. And soon Susan's little salary came to be depended upon by the family; it was not much, but it did pay a gas or a laundry bill, it could be "borrowed" for the slippers Georgie must have in a hurry, or the ticket that should carry Alfie to Sacramento or Stockton for his new job. Virginia wondered if Sue would lend her two dollars for the subscription to the "Weekly Era," or asked, during the walk to church, if Susan had "plate−money" for two? Mary Lou used Susan's purse as her own. "I owe you a dollar, Sue," she would observe carelessly, "I took it yesterday for the cleaner."

Or, on their evening walks, Mary Lou would glance in the candy−store window. "My! Don't those caramels look delicious! This is my treat, now, remind me to give it back to you." "Oh, Ma told me to get eggs," she would remember suddenly, a moment later. "I'll have to ask you to pay for them, dearie, until we get home."

Susan never was repaid these little loans. She could not ask it. She knew very well that none of the girls ever had a cent given her except for some definite and unavoidable purchase. Her aunt never spent money. They lived

in a continual and agonizing shortage of coin.

Lately, however, Susan had determined that if her salary were raised she would save the extra money, and not mention the fact of the raise at home. She wanted a gray feather boa, such as Peter Coleman's girl friends wore. It would cost twenty dollars, but what beauty and distinction it lent to the simplest costume!

Since young Mr. Coleman's appearance in Front Office certain young girls very prominent in San Francisco society found various reasons for coming down, in mid−afternoon, to the establishment of Hunter, Baxter Hunter, for a chat with old Mr. Baxter, who appeared to be a great favorite with all girls. Susan, looking down through the glass walls of Front Office, would suddenly notice the invasion of flowered hats and smart frocks, and of black and gray and white feather−boas, such as her heart desired. She did not consciously envy these girls, but she felt that, with their advantages, she would have been as attractive as any, and a boa seemed the first step in the desired direction. She always knew it when Mr. Baxter sent for Peter, and generally managed to see him as he stood laughing and talking with his friends, and when he saw them to their carriages. She would watch him wistfully when he came upstairs, and be glad when he returned briskly to his work, as if the interruption had meant very little to him after all.

One day, when a trio of exquisitely pretty girls came to carry him off bodily, at an early five o'clock, Miss Thornton came up the office to Susan's desk. Susan, who was quite openly watching the floor below, turned with a smile, and sat down in her place.

"S'listen, Susan," said Miss Thornton, leaning on the desk, "are you going to the big game?"

"I don't know," said Susan, suddenly wild to go.

"Well, I want to go," pursued Miss Thornton, "but Wally's in Los Angeles." Wally was Miss Thornton's "friend."

"What would it cost us, Thorny?"

"Two−fifty."

"Gosh," said Susan thoughtfully. The big intercollegiate game was not to be seen for nothing. Still, it was undoubtedly THE event of the sporting year.

"Hat come?" asked Thorny.

"Ye−es." Susan was thinking. "Yes, and she's made it look lovely," she admitted. She drew a sketch of a little face on her scratch pad. "Who's that?" asked Miss Thornton, interestedly. "Oh, no one!" Susan said, and scratched it out.

"Oh, come on, Susan, I'm dying to go!" said the tempter.

"We need a man for that, Thorny. There's an awful crowd."

"Not if we go early enough. They say it's going to be the closest YET. Come on!"

"Thorny, honest, I oughtn't to spend the money," Susan persisted.

"S'listen, Susan." Miss Thornton spoke very low, after a cautious glance about her. "Swear you won't breathe this!"

"Oh, honestly I won't!"

"Wait a minute. Is Elsie Kirk there?" asked Miss Thornton. Susan glanced down the office.

"Nope. She's upstairs, and Violet's in Brauer's office. What is it?"

"Well, say, listen. Last night—" began Miss Thornton, impressively, "Last night I and Min and Floss and Harold Clarke went into the Techau for supper, after the Orpheum show. Well, after we got seated—we had a table way at the back—I suddenly noticed Violet Kirk, sitting in one of those private alcoves, you know—?"

"For Heaven's sake!" said Susan, in proper horror.

"Yes. And champagne, if you please, all as bold as life! And all dressed up, Susan, I wish you could have seen her! Well. I couldn't see who she was with—"

"A party?"

"A party—no! One man."

"Oh, Thorny—" Susan began to be doubtful, slowly shook her head.

"But I tell you I SAW her, Sue! And listen, that's not all. We sat there and sat there, an hour I guess, and she was there all that time. And when she got up to go, Sue, I saw the man. And who do you suppose it was?"

"Do I know him?" A sick premonition seized Susan, she felt a stir of agonizing jealousy at her heart. "Peter Coleman?" she guessed, with burning cheeks. "Peter Coleman! That kid! No, it was Mr. Phil!"

"Mr. Phil HUNTER!" But, through all her horror, Susan felt the warm blood creep back to her heart.

"Sure."

"But—but Thorny, he's married!"

Miss Thornton shrugged her shoulders, and pursed her lips, as one well accustomed, if not reconciled, to the wickedness of the world.

"So now we know how she can afford a velvet tailor−made and ostrich plumes," said she. Susan shrank in natural cleanness of heart, from the ugliness of it.

"Ah, don't say such things, Thorny!" she said. Her brows contracted. "His wife enjoying Europe!" she mused. "Can you beat it?"

"I think it's the limit," said Miss Thornton virtuously, "and I think old J. B. would raise the roof. But anyway, it shows why she got the crediting."

"Oh, Thorny, I can't BELIEVE it! Perhaps she doesn't realize how it looks!"

"Violet Hunter!" Thorny said, with fine scorn. "Now you mark my words, Susan, it won't last—things like this don't—"

"But—but don't they sometimes last, for years?" Susan asked, a little timidly, yet wishing to show some worldly wisdom, too.

"Not like her, there's nothing TO her," said the sapient Miss Thornton. "No. You'll be doing that work in a few months, and getting forty. So come along to the big game, Sue."

"Well—" Susan half−promised. But the big game was temporarily lost sight of in this horrid news of Violet Kirk. Susan watched Miss Kirk during the remainder of the afternoon, and burst out with the whole story, to Mary Lou, when they went out to match a piece of tape that night.

"Dear me, Ma would hate to have you coming in contact with things like that, Sue!" worried Mary Lou. "I wonder if Ma would miss us if we took the car out to the end of the line? It's such a glorious night! Let's,—if you have carfare. No, Sue, it's easy enough to rob a girl of her good name. There were some people who came to the house once, a man and his wife. Well, I suppose I was ordinarily polite to the man, as I am to all men, and once or twice he brought me candy—but it never entered my head—"

It was deliciously bracing to go rushing on, on the car, past the Children's Hospital, past miles of sandhills, out to the very shore of the ocean, where the air was salt, and filled with the dull roaring of surf. Mary Lou, sharing with her mother a distaste for peanuts, crowds, tin−type men, and noisy pleasure−seekers, ignored Susan's hints that they walk down to the beach, and they went back on the same car.

When they entered the close, odorous dining−room, an hour later, Georgie, lazily engaged with Fan−tan, had a piece of news.

"Susan, you sly thing! He's adorable!" said Georgie.

"Who?" said Susan, taking a card from her cousin's hand. Dazedly she read it. "Mr. Peter Coleman."

"Did he call?" she asked, her heart giving a great bound.

"Did he call? With a perfect heart−breaker of a puppy—!"

"London Baby," Susan said, eagerly.

"He was airing the puppy, he SAID" Georgie added archly.

"One excuse as well as another!" Mary Lou laughed delightedly as she kissed Susan's glowing cheek.

"He wouldn't come in," continued Georgie, "which was really just as well, for Loretta and her prize idiot were in the parlor, and I couldn't have asked him down here. Well, he's a darling. You have my blessing, Sue."

"It's manners to wait until you're axed," Susan said demurely. But her heart sang. She had to listen to a little dissertation upon the joys of courtship, when she and Mary Lou were undressing, a little later, tactfully concealing her sense of the contrast between their two affairs.

"It's a happy, happy time," said Mary Lou, sighing, as she spread the two halves of a shabby corset upon the bed, and proceeded to insert a fresh lacing between them. "It takes me back to the first time Ferd called upon me, but I was younger than you are, of course, Sue. And Ferd—!" she laughed proudly, "Do you think you could have sent Ferd away with an excuse? No, sir, he would have come in and waited until you got home, poor Ferd! Not but what I think Peter—" He was already Peter!—"did quite the correct thing! And I think I'm going to like him, Sue, if for no other reason than that he had the sense to be attracted to a plainly−dressed, hard−working little mouse like my Sue—"

"His grandfather ran a livery stable!" said Susan, smarting under the role of the beggar maiden.

"Ah, well, there isn't a girl in society to−day who wouldn't give her eyes to get him!" said Mary Lou wisely. And Susan secretly agreed.

She was kept out of bed by the corset−lacing, and so took a bath to− night and brushed and braided her hair. Feeling refreshed in body and spirit by these achievements, she finally climbed into bed, and drifted off upon a sea of golden dreams. Georgie's teasing and Mary Lou's inferences might be all nonsense, still, he HAD come to see her, she had that tangible fact upon which to build a new and glorious castle in Spain.

Thanksgiving broke dull and overcast, there was a spatter of rain on the sidewalk, as Susan loitered over her late holiday breakfast, and Georgie, who was to go driving that afternoon with an elderly admirer, scolded violently over her coffee and rolls. No boarders happened to be present. Mrs. Lancaster and Virginia were to go to a funeral, and dwelt with a sort of melancholy pleasure upon the sad paradox of such an event on such a day. Mary Lou felt a little guilty about not attending the funeral, but she was responsible for the roasting of three great turkeys to−day, and could not be spared. Mrs. Lancaster had stuffed the fowls the night before.

"I'll roast the big one from two o'clock on," said Mary Lou, "and give the little ones turn and turn about. The oven won't hold more than two."

"I'll be home in time to make the pudding sauce," her mother said, "but open it early, dear, so that it won't taste tinny. Poor Hardings! A sad, sad Thanksgiving for them!" And Mrs. Lancaster sighed. Her hair was arranged in crisp damp scallops under her best bonnet and veil, and she wore the heavy black skirt of her best suit. But her costume was temporarily completed by a light kimono.

"We'll hope it's a happy, happy Thanksgiving for dear Mr. Harding, Ma," Virginia said gently.

"I know, dear," her mother said, "but I'm not like you, dear. I'm afraid I'm a very poor, weak, human sort!"

"Rotten day for the game!" grumbled Susan.

"Oh, it makes me so darn mad!" Georgie added, "here I've been working that precious idiot for a month up to the point where he would take his old horse out, and now look at it!"

Everyone was used to Georgie's half−serious rages, and Mrs. Lancaster only smiled at her absently.

"But you won't attempt to go to the game on a day like this!" she said to Susan.

"Not if it pours," Susan agreed disconsolately.

"You haven't wasted your good money on a ticket yet, I hope, dear?"

"No−o," Susan said, wishing that she had her two and a half dollars back. "That's just the way of it!" she said bitterly to Billy, a little later. "Other girls can get up parties for the game, and give dinners after it, and do everything decently! I can't even arrange to go with Thorny, but what it has to rain!"

"Oh, cheer up," the boy said, squinting down the barrel of the rifle he was lovingly cleaning. "It's going to be a perfect day! I'm going to the game myself. If it rains, you and I'll go to the Orpheum mat., what do you say?"

"Well—" said Susan, departing comforted. And true to his prediction the sky really did clear at eleven o'clock, and at one o'clock, Susan, the happiest girl in the world, walked out into the sunny street, in her best hat and her best gown, her prettiest embroidered linen collar, her heavy gold chain, and immaculate new gloves.

How could she possibly have hesitated about it, she wondered, when she came near the ball−grounds, and saw the gathering crowds; tall young men, with a red carnation or a shaggy great yellow chrysanthemum in their buttonholes; girls in furs; dancingly impatient small boys, and agitated and breathless chaperones. And here was Thorny, very pretty in her best gown, with a little unusual and unnatural color on her cheeks, and Billy Oliver, who would watch the game from the "dollar section," providentially on hand to help them through the crowd, and buy Susan a chrysanthemum as a foil to Thorny's red ribbons. The damp cool air was sweet with violets; a delightful stir and excitement thrilled the moving crowd. Here was the gate. Tickets? And what a satisfaction to produce them, and enter unchallenged into the rising roadway, leaving behind a line of jealously watching and waiting people. With Billy's help the seats were easily found, "the best seats on the field," said Susan, in immense satisfaction, as she settled into hers. She and Thorny were free to watch the little tragedies going on all about them, people in the wrong seats, and people with one ticket too few.

Girls and young men—girls and young men—girls and young men— streamed in the big gateways, and filed about the field. Susan envied no one to−day, her heart was dancing. There was a racy autumnal tang in the air, laughter and shouting. The "rooters" were already in place, their leader occasionally leaped into the air like a maniac, and conducted a "yell" with a vigor that needed every muscle of his body.

And suddenly the bleachers went mad and the air fluttered with banners, as the big teams rushed onto the field. The players, all giants they looked, in their clumsy, padded suits, began a little practice play desperately and violently. Susan could hear the quarter's voice clear and sharp, "Nineteen−four−eighty−eight!"

"Hello, Miss Brown!" said a voice at her knee. She took her eyes from the field. Peter Coleman, one of a noisy party, was taking the seat directly in front of her.

"Well!" she said, gaily, "be you a−follering of me, or be I a− follering of you?"

"I don't know!—How do you do, Miss Thornton!" Peter said, with his delighted laugh. He drew to Susan the attention of a stout lady in purple velvet, beside him. "Mrs. Fox—Miss Brown," said he, "and Miss Thornton—Mrs. Fox."

"Mrs. Fox," said Susan, pleasantly brief.

"Miss Brown," said Mrs. Fox, with a wintry smile.

"Pleased to meet any friend of Mr. Coleman's, I'm sure," Thorny said, engagingly.

"Miss Thornton," Mrs. Fox responded, with as little tone as is possible to the human voice.

After that the newcomers, twelve or fourteen in all, settled into their seats, and a moment later everyone's attention was riveted on the field. The men were lining up, big backs bent double, big arms hanging loose, like the arms of gorillas. Breathless attention held the big audience silent and tense.

"Don't you LOVE it?" breathed Susan, to Thorny.

"Crazy about it!" Peter Coleman answered her, without turning.

It was a wonderful game that followed. Susan never saw another that seemed to her to have the same peculiar charm. Between halves, Peter Coleman talked almost exclusively to her, and they laughed over the peanuts that disappeared so fast.

The sun slipped down and down the sky, and the air rose chilly and sweet from the damp earth. It began to grow dark. Susan began to feel a nervous apprehension that somehow, in leaving the field, she and Thorny would become awkwardly involved in Mrs. Fox's party, would seem to be trying to include themselves in this distinguished group.

"We've got to rush," she muttered, buttoning up her coat.

"Oh, what's your hurry?" asked Thorny, who would not have objected to the very thing Susan dreaded.

"It's so dark!" Susan said, pushing ahead. They were carried by the crowd through the big gates, out to the street. Lights were beginning to prick through the dusk, a long line of street cars was waiting, empty and brightly lighted. Suddenly Susan felt a touch on her shoulder.

"Lord, you're in a rush!" said Peter Coleman, pushing through the crowd to join them. He was somehow dragging Mrs. Fox with him, the lady seemed outraged and was breathless. Peter brought her triumphantly up to Susan.

"Now what is it that you want me to do, you ridiculous boy!" gasped Mrs. Fox,—"ask Miss Brown to come and have tea with us, is that it? I'm chaperoning a few of the girls down to the Palace for a cup of tea, Miss Brown,—perhaps you will waive all formality, and come too?"

Susan didn't like it, the "waive all formality" showed her exactly how Mrs. Fox regarded the matter. Her pride was instantly touched. But she longed desperately to go. A sudden thought of the politely interested Thorny decided her.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you, Mr. Coleman," she smiled, "but I can't, to−night. Miss Thornton and I are just—"

"Don't decline on MY account, Miss Brown," said Thorny, mincingly, "for I have an engagement this evening, and I have to go straight home—"

"No, don't decline on any account!" Peter said masterfully, "and don't tell wicked lies, or you'll get your mouth washed out with soap! Now, I'll put Miss Thornton on her car, and you talk to Hart here—Miss Brown, this is Mr. Hart—Gordon, Miss Brown—until I come back!"

He disappeared with Thorny, and Susan, half terrified, half delighted, talked to Mr. Hart at quite a desperate rate, as the whole party got on the dummy of a car. Just as they started, Peter Coleman joined them, and during the trip downtown Susan kept both young men laughing, and was her gayest, happiest self.

The Palace Hotel, grimy and dull in a light rainfall, was nevertheless the most enchanting place in the world to go for tea, as Susan knew by instinct, or hearsay, or tradition, and as all these other young people had proved a hundred times. A covered arcade from the street led through a row of small, bright shops into the very center of

the hotel, where there was an enormous court called the "Palm−garden," walled by eight rising tiers of windows, and roofed, far above, with glass. At one side of this was the little waiting−room called the "Turkish Room," full of Oriental inlay and draperies, and embroideries of daggers and crescents.

To Susan the place was enchanting beyond words. The coming and going of strange people, the arriving carriages with their slipping horses, the luggage plastered with labels, the little shops,—so full of delightful, unnecessary things, candy and glace fruits, and orchids and exquisite Chinese embroideries, and postal cards, and theater tickets, and oranges, and paper−covered novels, and alligator pears! The very sight of these things aroused in her heart a longing that was as keen as pain. Oh, to push her way, somehow, into the world, to have a right to enjoy these things, to be a part of this brilliant, moving show, to play her part in this wonderful game!

Mrs. Fox led the girls of her party to the Turkish Room to−night, where, with much laughter and chatter, they busied themselves with small combs, mirrors powder boxes, hairpins and veils. One girl, a Miss Emily Saunders, even loosened her long, thin, silky hair, and let it fall about her shoulders, and another took off her collar while she rubbed and powdered her face.

Susan sat rather stiffly on a small, uncomfortable wooden chair, entirely ignored, and utterly miserable. She smiled, as she looked pleasantly from one face to another, but her heart was sick within her. No one spoke to her, or seemed to realize that she was in the room. A steady stream of talk—such gay, confidential talk!—went on.

"Let me get there, Connie, you old pig, I'm next. Listen, girls, did you hear Ward to−day? Wasn't that the richest ever, after last night! Ward makes me tired, anyway. Did Margaret tell you about Richard and Ward, last Sunday? Isn't that rich! I don't believe it, but to hear Margaret tell it, you'd think—Wait a minute, Louise, while I pin this up! Whom are you going with to−night? Are you going to dinner there? Why don't you let us call for you? That's all right, bring him along. Will you? All right. That's fine. No, and I don't care. If it comes I'll wear it, and if it doesn't come I'll wear that old white rag,—it's filthy, but I don't care. Telephone your aunt, Con, and then we can all go together. Love to, darling, but I've got a suitor. You have not! I have TOO! Who is it? Who is it, I like that! Isn't she awful, Margaret? Mother has an awful crush on you, Mary, she said—Wait a minute! I'm just going to powder my nose. Who said Joe Chickering belonged to you? What nerve! He's mine. Isn't Joe my property? Don't come in here, Alice, we're just talking about you—"

"Oh, if I could only slip out somehow!" thought Susan desperately. "Oh, if only I hadn't come!"

Their loosened wraps were displaying all sorts of pretty little costumes now. Susan knew that the simplest of blue linen shirtwaists was under her own coat. She had not courage to ask to borrow a comb, to borrow powder. She knew her hair was mussed, she knew her nose was shiny—

Her heart was beating so fast, with angry resentment of their serene rudeness, and shame that she had so readily accepted the casual invitation that gave them this chance to be rude, that she could hardly think. But it seemed to be best, at any cost, to leave the party now, before things grew any worse. She would make some brief excuse to Mrs. Fox,—headache or the memory of an engagement—

"Do you know where Mrs. Fox is?" she asked the girl nearest her. For Mrs. Fox had sauntered out into the corridor with some idea of summoning the men.

The girl did not answer, perhaps did not hear. Susan tried again.

"Do you know where Mrs. Fox went to?"

Now the girl looked at her for a brief instant, and rose, crossing the little room to the side of another girl.

"No, I really don't," she said lightly, civilly, as she went.

Susan's face burned. She got up, and went to the door. But she was too late. The young men were just gathering there in a noisy group. It appeared that there was sudden need of haste. The "rooters" were to gather in the court presently, for more cheering, and nobody wanted to miss the sight.

"Come, girls! Be quick!" called Mrs. Fox. "Come, Louise, dear! Connie," this to her own daughter, "you and Peter run ahead, and ask for my table. Peter, will you take Connie? Come, everybody!"

Somehow, they had all paired off, in a flash, without her. Susan needed no further spur. With more assurance than she had yet shown, she touched the last girl, as she passed, on the arm. It chanced to be Miss Emily Saunders. She and her escort both stopped, laughing with that nervous apprehension that seizes their class at the appearance of the unexpected.

"Miss Saunders," said Susan quickly, "will you tell Mrs. Fox that my headache is much worse. I'm afraid I'd better go straight home—"

"Oh, too bad!" Miss Saunders said, her round, pale, rather unwholesome face, expressing proper regret. "Perhaps tea will help it?" she added sweetly.

It was the first personal word Susan had won. She felt suddenly, horrifyingly—near to tears.

"Oh, thank you, I'm afraid not!" she smiled bravely. "Thank you so much. And tell her I'm sorry. Good−night."

"Good−night!" said Miss Saunders. And Susan went, with a sense of escape and relief, up the long passageway, and into the cool, friendly darkness of the streets. She had an unreasoning fear that they might follow her, somehow bring her back, and walked a swift block or two, rather than wait for the car where she might be found.

Half an hour later she rushed into the house, just as the Thanksgiving dinner was announced, half−mad with excitement, her cheeks ablaze, and her eyes unnaturally bright. The scene in the dining−room was not of the gayest; Mrs. Lancaster and Virginia were tired and depressed, Mary Lou nervously concerned for the dinner, Georgie and almost all of the few boarders who had no alternative to dining in a boarding−house to−day were cross and silent.

But the dinner was delicious, and Susan, arriving at the crucial moment, had a more definite effect on the party than a case of champagne would have had. She chattered recklessly and incessantly, and when Mrs. Lancaster's mild "Sue, dear!" challenged one remark, she capped it with another still less conventional.

Her spirits were infectious, the gaiety became general. Mrs. Parker laughed until the tears streamed down her fat cheeks, and Mary Lord, the bony, sallow−faced, crippled sister who was the light and joy of Lydia Lord's drudging life, and who had been brought downstairs to− day as a special event, at a notable cost to her sister's and William Oliver's muscles, nearly choked over her cranberry sauce. Susan insisted that everyone should wear the paper caps that came in the bonbons, and looked like a pretty witch herself, under a cone− shaped hat of pink and blue. When, as was usual on all such occasions, a limited supply of claret came on with the dessert, she brought the whole company from laughter very close to tears, as she proposed, with pretty dignify, a toast to her aunt, "who makes this house such a happy home for us all." The toast was drunk standing, and Mrs. Lancaster cried into her napkin, with pride and tender emotion.

After dinner the diminished group trailed, still laughing and talking, upstairs to the little drawing−room, where perhaps seven or eight of them settled about the coal fire. Mrs. Lancaster, looking her best in a low−necked black silk, if rather breathless after the hearty dinner, eaten in too−tight corsets, had her big chair, Georgia curled girlishly on a footstool at her feet. Miss Lydia Lord stealthily ate a soda mint tablet now and then; her sister, propped with a dozen pillows on the sofa, fairly glowed with the unusual pleasure and excitement. Little Mrs. Cortelyou rocked back and forth; always loquacious, she was especially talkative after to− night's glass of wine.

Virginia, who played certain simple melodies very prettily, went to the piano and gave them "Maryland" and "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes," and was heartily applauded. Mary Lou was finally persuaded to sing Tosti's "Farewell to Summer," in a high, sweet, self−conscious soprano.

Susan had disappeared. Just after dinner she had waylaid William Oliver, with a tense, "Will you walk around the block with me, Billy? I want to talk to you," and William, giving her a startled glance, had quietly followed her through the dark lower hall, and into the deserted, moonlighted, wind−swept street. The wind had fallen: stars were shining.

"Billy," said Susan, taking his arm and walking him along very rapidly, "I'm going away—"

"Going away?" he said sympathetically. This statement always meant that something had gone very wrong with Susan.

"Absolutely!" Susan said passionately. "I want to go where nobody knows me, where I can make a fresh start. I'm going to Chicago."

"What the DEUCE are you raving about?" Mr. Oliver asked, stopping short in the street. "What have you been doing now?"

"Nothing!" Susan said, with suddenly brimming eyes. "But I hate this place, and I hate everyone in it, and I'm simply sick of being treated as if, just because I'm poor—"

"You sound like a bum second act, with somebody throwing a handful of torn paper down from the wings!" Billy observed. But his tone was kinder than his words, and Susan, laying a hand on his coat sleeve, told him the story of the afternoon; of Mrs. Fox, with her supercilious smile; of the girls, so bitterly insulting; of Peter,

involving her in these embarrassments and then forgetting to stand by her.

"If one of those girls came to us a stranger," Susan declared, with a heaving breast, "do you suppose we'd treat her like that?"

"Well, that only proves we have better manners than they have!"

"Oh, Bill, what rot! If there's one thing society people have, it's manners!" Susan said impatiently. "Do you wonder people go crazy to get hold of money?" she added vigorously.

"Nope. You've GOT to have it. There are lots of other things in the world," he agreed, "but money's first and foremost. The only reason *I* want it," said Billy, "is because I want to show other rich people where they make their mistakes."

"Do you really think you'll be rich some day, Billy?"

"Sure."

Susan walked on thoughtfully.

"There's where a man has the advantage," she said. "He can really work toward the thing he wants."

"Well, girls ought to have the same chance," Billy said generously. "Now I was talking to Mrs. Carroll Sunday—"

"Oh, how are the Carrolls?" asked Susan, diverted for an instant.

"Fine. They were awfully disappointed you weren't along.—And she was talking about that very thing. And she said her three girls were going to work just as Phil and Jim do."

"But Billy, if a girl has a gift, yes. But you can't put a girl in a foundry or a grocery."

"Not in a foundry. But you could in a grocery. And she said she had talked to Anna and Jo since they were kids, just as she did to the boys, about their work."

"Wouldn't Auntie think she was crazy!" Susan smiled. After a while she said more mildly:

"I don't believe Peter Coleman is quite as bad as the others!"

"Because you have a crush on him," suggested Billy frankly. "I think he acted like a skunk."

"Very well. Think what you like!" Susan said icily. But presently, in a more softened tone, she added, "I do feel badly about Thorny! I oughtn't to have left her. It was all so quick! And she DID have a date, at least I know a crowd of people were coming to their house to dinner. And I was so utterly taken aback to be asked out with that crowd! The most exclusive people in the city,—that set."

"You give me an awful pain when you talk like that," said Billy, bluntly. "You give them a chance to sit on you, and they do, and then you want to run away to Chicago, because you feel so hurt. Why don't you stay in your own crowd?"

"Because I like nice people. And besides, the Fox crowd isn't ONE bit better than I am!" said the inconsistent Susan, hotly. "Who were their ancestors! Miners and servants and farmers! I'd like to go away," she resumed, feverishly, "and work up to be something GREAT, and come back here and have them tumbling over themselves to be nice to me—"

"What a pipe dream!" Billy observed. "Let 'em alone. And if Coleman ever offers you another invitation—"

"He won't!" interposed Susan.

"—Why, you sit on him so quick it'll make his head spin! Get busy at something, Susan. If you had a lot of work to do, and enough money to buy yourself pretty clothes, and to go off on nice little trips every Sunday,—up the mountain, or down to Santa Cruz, you'd forget this bunch!"

"Get busy at what?" asked Susan, half−hopeful, half in scorn.

"Oh, anything!"

"Yes, and Thorny getting forty−five after twelve years!"

"Well, but you've told me yourself how Thorny wastes time, and makes mistakes, and conies in late, and goes home early—−"

"As if that made any difference! Nobody takes the least notice!" Susan said hotly. But she was restored enough to laugh now, and a passing pop−corn cart made a sudden diversion. "Let's get some crisps, Bill! Let's get a lot, and take some home to the others!"

So the evening ended with Billy and Susan in the group about the fire, listening idly to the reminiscences that the holiday mood awakened in the older women. Mrs. Cortelyou had been a California pioneer, and liked to talk of the old prairie wagons, of Indian raids, of flood and fire and famine. Susan, stirred by tales of real trouble,

forgot her own imaginary ones. Indians and wolves in the strange woods all about, a child at the breast, another at the knee, and the men gone for food,—four long days' trip! The women of those days, thought Susan, carried their share of the load. She had heard the story of the Hatch child before, the three−year−old, who, playing about the wagons, at the noontime rest on the plains, was suddenly missing! Of the desperate hunt, the half−mad mother's frantic searching, her agonies when the long−delayed start must be made, her screams when she was driven away with her tinier child in her arms, knowing that behind one of those thousands of mesquite or cactus bushes, the little yellow head must be pillowed on the sand, the little beloved mouth smiling in sleep.

"Mrs. Hatch used to sit for hours, strainin' her eyes back of us, toward St. Joe," Mrs. Cortelyou said, sighing. "But there was plenty of trouble ahead, for all of us, too! It's a life of sorrow."

"You never said a truer word than that," Mrs. Lancaster agreed mournfully. And the talk came about once more to the Harding funeral.

CHAPTER IV

"Good−morning!" said Susan, bravely, when Miss Thornton came into the office the next morning. Miss Thornton glanced politely toward her.

"Oh, good−morning, Miss Brown!" said she, civilly, disappearing into the coat closet. Susan felt her cheeks burn. But she had been lying awake and thinking in the still watches of the night, and she was the wiser for it. Susan's appearance was a study in simple neatness this morning, a black gown, severe white collar and cuffs, severely braided hair. Her table was already piled with bills, and she was working busily. Presently she got up, and came down to Miss Thornton's desk.

"Mad at me, Thorny?" she asked penitently. She had to ask it twice.

"Why should I be?" asked Miss Thornton lightly then. "Excuse me—" she turned a page, and marked a price. "Excuse me—" This time Susan's hand was in the way.

"Ah, Thorny, don't be mad at me," said Susan, childishly.

"I hope I know when I am not wanted," said Miss Thornton stiffly, after a silence.

"I don't!" laughed Susan, and stopped. Miss Thornton looked quickly up, and the story came out. Thorny was instantly won. She observed with a little complacence that she had anticipated just some such event, and so had given Peter Coleman no chance to ask HER. "I could see he was dying to," said Thorny, "but I know that crowd! Don't you care, Susan, what's the difference?" said Thorny, patting her hand affectionately.

So that little trouble was smoothed away. Another episode made the day more bearable for Susan.

Mr. Brauer called her into his office at ten o'clock. Peter was at his desk, but Susan apparently did not see him.

"Will you hurry this bill, Miss Brown?" said Mr. Brauer, in his careful English. "Al−zo, I wished to say how gratifite I am wiz your work, before zese las' weeks,—zis monss. You work hardt, and well. I wish all could do so hardt, and so well."

"Oh, thank you!" stammered Susan, in honest shame. Had one month's work been so noticeable? She made new resolves for the month to come. "Was that all, Mr. Brauer?" she asked primly.

"All? Yes."

"What was your rush yesterday?" asked Peter Coleman, turning around.

"Headache," said Susan, mildly, her hand on the door.

"Oh, rot! I bet it didn't ache at all!" he said, with his gay laugh. But Susan did not laugh, and there was a pause. Peter's face grew red.

"Did—did Miss Thornton get home all right?" he asked. Susan knew he was at a loss for something to say, but answered him seriously.

"Quite, thank you. She was a little—at least I felt that she might be a little vexed at my leaving her, but she was very sweet about it."

"She should have come, too!" Peter said, embarrassedly.

Susan did not answer, she eyed him gravely for a few seconds, as one waiting for further remarks, then turned and went out, sauntering to her desk with the pleasant conviction that hers were the honors of war.

The feeling of having regained her dignity was so exhilarating that Susan was careful, during the next few weeks, to preserve it. She bowed and smiled to Peter, answered his occasional pleasantries briefly and reservedly, and attended strictly to her affairs alone.

Thus Thanksgiving became a memory less humiliating, and on Christmas Day joy came gloriously into Susan's heart, to make it memorable among all the Christmas Days of her life. Easy to−day to sit for a laughing hour with poor Mary Lord, to go to late service, and dream through a long sermon, with the odor of incense and spicy evergreen sweet all about her, to set tables, to dust the parlor, to be kissed by Loretta's little doctor under the mistletoe, to sweep up tissue− paper and red ribbon and nutshells and tinsel, to hook Mary Lou's best gown, and accompany Virginia to evening service, and to lend Georgie her best gloves. Susan had not had many Christmas presents: cologne and handkerchiefs and calendars and candy, from various girl friends, five dollars from the firm, a silk waist from Auntie, and a handsome umbrella from Billy, who gave each one of the cousins exactly the same thing.

These, if appreciated, were more or less expected, too. But beside them, this year, was a great box of violets,—Susan never forgot the delicious wet odor of those violets!—and inside the big box a smaller one, holding an old silver chain with a pendant of lapis lazuli, set in a curious and lovely design. Susan honestly thought it the handsomest thing she had ever seen. And to own it, as a gift from him! Small wonder that her heart flew like a leaf in a high wind. The card that came with it she had slipped inside her silk blouse, and so wore against her heart. "Mr. Peter Webster Coleman," said one side of the card. On the other was written, "S.B. from P.— Happy Fourth of July!" Susan took it out and read it a hundred times. The "P" indicated a friendliness that brought the happy color over and over again to her face. She dashed him off a gay little note of thanks; signed it "Susan," thought better of that and re− wrote it, to sign it "Susan Ralston Brown"; wrote it a third time, and affixed only the initials, "S.B." All day long she wondered at intervals if the note had been too chilly, and turned cold, or turned rosy wondering if it had been too warm.

Mr. Coleman did not come into the office during the following week, and one day a newspaper item, under the heading of "The Smart Set," jumped at Susan with the familiar name. "Peter Coleman, who is at present the guest of Mrs. Rodney Chauncey, at her New Year's house party," it ran, "may accompany Mr. Paul Wallace and Miss Isabel Wallace in a short visit to Mexico next week." The news made Susan vaguely unhappy.

One January Saturday she was idling along the deck, when he came suddenly up behind her, to tell her, with his usual exuberant laughter, that he WAS going away for a fortnight with the Wallaces, just a flying trip, "in the old man's private car." He expected "a peach of a time."

"You certainly ought to have it!" smiled Susan gallantly, "Isabel Wallace looks like a perfect darling!"

"She's a wonder!" he said absently, adding eagerly, "Say, why can't you come and help me buy some things this afternoon? Come on, and we'll have tea at the club?"

Susan saw no reason against it, they would meet at one.

"I'll be down in J.G.'s office," he said, and Susan went back to her desk with fresh joy and fresh pain at her heart.

On Saturdays, because of the early closing, the girls had no lunch hour. But they always sent out for a bag of graham crackers, which they nibbled as they worked, and, between eleven and one, they took turns at disappearing in the direction of the lunch−room, to return with well scrubbed hands and powdered noses, fresh collars and carefully arranged hair. Best hats were usually worn on Saturdays, and Susan rejoiced that she had worn her best to−day. After the twelve o'clock whistle blew, she went upstairs.

On the last flight, just below the lunch−room, she suddenly stopped short, her heart giving a sick plunge. Somebody up there was laughing—crying—making a horrible noise—! Susan ran up the rest of the flight.

Thorny was standing by the table. One or two other girls were in the room, Miss Sherman was mending a glove, Miss Cashell stood in the roof doorway, manicuring her nails with a hairpin. Miss Elsie Kirk sat in the corner seat, with her arm about the bowed shoulders of another girl, who was crying, with her head on the table.

"If you would mind your own affairs for about five minutes, Miss Thornton," Elsie Kirk was saying passionately, as Susan came in, "you'd be a good deal better off!"

"I consider what concerns Front Office concerns me!" said Miss Thornton loftily.

"Ah, don't!" Miss Sherman murmured pitifully.

"If Violet wasn't such a darn FOOL—" Miss Cashell said lightly, and stopped.

"What IS it?" asked Susan.

Her voice died on a dead silence. Miss Thornton, beginning to gather up veil and gloves and handbag scattered on the table, pursed her lips virtuously. Miss Cashell manicured steadily. Miss Sherman bit off a thread.

"It's nothing at all!" said Elsie Kirk, at last. "My sister's got a headache, that's all, and she doesn't feel well." She patted the bowed shoulders. "And parties who have nothing better to do," she added, viciously turning to Miss Thornton, "have butted in about it!"

"I'm all right now," said Violet suddenly, raising a face so terribly blotched and swollen from tears that Susan was genuinely horrified. Violet's weak eyes were set in puffy rings of unnatural whiteness, her loose, weak little mouth sagged, her bosom, in its preposterous, transparent white lace shirtwaist, rose and fell convulsively. In her voice was some shocking quality of unwomanliness, some lack of pride, and reserve, and courage.

"All I wanted was to do like other girls do," said the swollen lips, as Violet began to cry again, and to dab her eyes with a soaked rag of a handkerchief. "I never meant nothing! 'N' Mamma says she KNOWS it wasn't all my

fault!" she went on, half maudlin in her abandonment.

Susan gasped. There was a general gasp.

"Don't, Vi!" said her sister tenderly. "It ain't your fault if there are skunks in the world like Mr. Phil Hunter," she said, in a reckless half−whisper. "If Papa was alive he'd shoot him down like a dog!"

"He ought to be shot down!" cried Susan, firing.

"Well, of course he ought!" Miss Elsie Kirk, strong under opposition, softened suddenly under this championship, and began to tremble. "Come on, Vi," said she.

"Well, of course he ought," Thorny said, almost with sympathy. "Here, let's move the table a little, if you want to get out."

"Well, why do you make such a fuss about it?" Miss Cashell asked softly. "You know as well as—as anyone else, that if a man gets a girl into trouble, he ought to stand for—"

"Yes, but my sister doesn't take that kind of money!" flashed Elsie bitterly.

"Well, of course not!" Miss Cashell said quickly, "but—"

"No, you're doing the dignified thing, Violet," Miss Thornton said, with approval, "and you'll feel glad, later on, that you acted this way. And, as far as my carrying tales, I never carried one. I DID say that I thought I knew why you were leaving, and I don't deny it− −Use my powder, right there by the mirror—But as far as anything else goes—"

"We're both going," Elsie said. "I wouldn't take another dollar of their dirty money if I was starving! Come on, Vi."

And a few minutes later they all said a somewhat subdued and embarrassed farewell to the Misses Kirk, who went down the stairs, veiled and silent, and out of the world of Hunter, Baxter Hunter's forever.

"Will she sue him, Thorny?" asked Susan, awed.

"Sue him? For what? She's not got anything to sue for." Miss Thornton examined a finger nail critically. "This isn't the first time this has happened down here," she said. "There was a lovely girl here—but she wasn't such a fool as Violet is. She kept her mouth shut. Violet went down to Phil Hunter's office this morning, and made a perfect scene. He's going on East to meet his wife you know; it must have been terribly embarrassing for him! Then old J.G. sent for Violet, and told her that there'd been a great many errors in the crediting, and showed 'em to her, too! Poor kid—"

Susan went wondering back to Front Office. The crediting should be hers, now, by all rights! But she felt only sorry, and sore, and puzzled. "She wanted a good time and pretty things," said Susan to herself. Just as Susan herself wanted this delightful afternoon with Peter Coleman! "How much money has to do with life!" the girl thought.

But even the morning's events did not cloud the afternoon. She met Peter at the door of Mr. Baxter's office, and they went laughing out into the clear winter sunshine together.

Where first? To Roos Brothers, for one of the new folding trunks. Quite near enough to walk, they decided, joining the released throng of office workers who were streaming up to Kearney Street and the theater district.

The trunk was found, and a very smart pigskin toilet−case to go in the trunk; Susan found a sort of fascination in the ease with which a person of Peter's income could add a box of silk socks to his purchase, because their color chanced to strike his fancy, could add two or three handsome ties. They strolled along Kearney Street and Post Street, and Susan selected an enormous bunch of violets at Podesta and Baldocchi's, declining the unwholesome−looking orchid that was Peter's choice. They bought a camera, which was left that a neat "P.W.C." might be stamped upon it, and went into Shreve's, a place always fascinating to Susan, to leave Mr. Coleman's watch to be regulated, and look at new scarf−pins. And finally they wandered up into "Chinatown," as the Chinese quarter was called, laughing all the way, and keenly alert for any little odd occurrence in the crowded streets. At Sing Fat's gorgeous bazaar, Peter bought a mandarin coat for himself, the smiling Oriental bringing its price down from two hundred dollars to less than three−quarters of that sum, and Susan taking a great fancy to a little howling teakwood god; he bought that, too, and they named it "Claude" after much discussion.

"We can't carry all these things to the University Club for tea," said Peter then, when it was nearly five o'clock. "So let's go home and have tea with Aunt Clara—she'd love it!"

Tea at his own home! Susan's heart raced—

"Oh, I couldn't," she said, in duty bound.

"Couldn't? Why couldn't you?"

"Why, because Auntie mightn't like it. Suppose your aunt is out?"

"Shucks!" he pondered; he wanted his way. "I'll tell you," he said suddenly. "We'll drive there, and if Aunt Clara isn't home you needn't come in. How's that?"

Susan could find no fault with that. She got into a carriage in great spirits.

"Don't you love it when we stop people on the crossings?" she asked naively. Peter shouted, but she could see that he was pleased as well as amused.

They bumped and rattled out Bush Street, and stopped at the stately door of the old Baxter mansion. Mrs. Baxter fortunately was at home, and Susan followed Peter into the great square hall, and into the magnificent library, built in a day of larger homes and more splendid proportions. Here she was introduced to the little, nervous mistress of the house, who had been enjoying alone a glorious coal fire.

"Let in a little more light, Peter, you wild, noisy boy, you!" said Mrs. Baxter, adding, to Susan, "This was a very sweet thing of you to do, my dear, I don't like my little cup of tea alone."

"Little cup—ha!" said Peter, eying the woman with immense satisfaction. "You'll see her drink five, Miss Brown!"

"We'll send him upstairs, that's what we'll do," threatened his aunt. "Yes, tea, Burns," she added to the butler. "Green tea, dear? Orange−Pekoe? I like that best myself. And muffins, Burns, and toast, something nice and hot. And jam. Mr. Peter likes jam, and some of the almond cakes, if she has them. And please ask Ada to bring me that box of candy from my desk. Santa Barbara nougat, Peter, it just came."

"ISN'T this fun!" said Susan, so joyously that Mrs. Baxter patted the girl's arm with a veiny, approving little hand, and Peter, eying his aunt significantly, said: "Isn't SHE fun?"

It was a perfect hour, and when, at six, Susan said she must go, the old lady sent her home in her own carriage. Peter saw her to the door, "Shall you be going out to−night, sir?" Susan heard the younger man−servant ask respectfully, as they passed. "Not to− night!" said Peter, and, so sensitive was Susan now to all that concerned him, she was unreasonably glad that he was not engaged to− night, not to see other girls and have good times in which she had no share. It seemed to make him more her own.

The tea, the firelight, the fragrant dying violets had worked a spell upon her. Susan sat back luxuriously in the carriage, dreaming of herself as Peter Coleman's wife, of entering that big hall as familiarly as he did, of having tea and happy chatter ready for him every afternoon before the fire—−

There was no one at the windows, unfortunately, to be edified by the sight of Susan Brown being driven home in a private carriage, and the halls, as she entered, reeked of boiling cabbage and corned beef. She groped in the darkness for a match with which to light the hall gas. She could hear Loretta Barker's sweet high voice chattering on behind closed doors, and, higher up, the deep moaning of Mary Lord, who was going through one of her bad times. But she met nobody as she ran up to her room.

"Hello, Mary Lou, darling! Where's everyone?" she asked gaily, discerning in the darkness a portly form prone on the bed.

"Jinny's lying down, she's been to the oculist. Ma's in the kitchen− −don't light up, Sue," said the patient, melancholy voice.

"Don't light up!" Susan echoed, amazedly, instantly doing so, the better to see her cousin's tear−reddened eyes and pale face. "Why, what's the matter?"

"Oh, we've had sad, sad news," faltered Mary Lou, her lips trembling. "A telegram from Ferd Eastman. They've lost Robbie!"

"No!" said Susan, genuinely shocked. And to the details she listened sympathetically, cheering Mary Lou while she inserted cuff−links into her cousin's fresh shirtwaist, and persuaded her to come down to dinner. Then Susan must leave her hot soup while she ran up to Virginia's room, for Virginia was late.

"Ha! What is it?" said Virginia heavily, rousing herself from sleep. Protesting that she was a perfect fright, she kept Susan waiting while she arranged her hair.

"And what does Verriker say of your eyes, Jinny?"

"Oh, they may operate, after all!" Virginia sighed. "But don't say anything to Ma until we're sure," she said.

Not the congenial atmosphere into which to bring a singing heart! Susan sighed. When they went downstairs Mrs. Parker's heavy voice was filling the dining−room.

"The world needs good wives and mothers more than it needs nuns, my dear! There's nothing selfish about a woman who takes her share of toil and care and worry, instead of running away from it. Dear me! many of us who married and stayed in the world would be glad enough to change places with the placid lives of the Sisters!"

"Then, Mama," Loretta said sweetly and merrily, detecting the inconsistency of her mother's argument, as she always did, "if it's such a serene, happy life—"

Loretta always carried off the honors of war. Susan used to wonder how Mrs. Parker could resist the temptation to slap her pretty, stupid little face. Loretta's deep, wise, mysterious smile seemed to imply that she, at nineteen, could afford to assume the maternal attitude toward her easily confused and disturbed parent.

"No vocation for mine!" said Georgianna, hardily, "I'd always be getting my habit mixed up, and coming into chapel without my veil on!"

This, because of its audacity, made everyone laugh, but Loretta fixed on Georgie the sweet bright smile in which Susan already perceived the nun.

"Are you so sure that you haven't a vocation, Georgie?" she asked gently.

"Want to go to a bum show at the 'Central' to−night?" Billy Oliver inquired of Susan in an aside. "Bartlett's sister is leading lady, and he's handing passes out to everyone."

"Always!" trilled Susan, and at last she had a chance to add, "Wait until I tell you what fun I've been having!"

She told him when they were on the car, and he was properly interested, but Susan felt that the tea episode somehow fell flat; had no significance for William.

"Crime he didn't take you to the University Club," said Billy, "they say it's a keen club."

Susan, smiling over happy memories, did not contradict him.

The evening, in spite of the "bum" show, proved a great success, and the two afterwards went to Zinkand's for sardine sandwiches and domestic ginger−ale. This modest order was popular with them because of the moderateness of its cost.

"But, Bill," said Susan to−night, "wouldn't you like to order once without reading the price first and then looking back to see what it was? Do you remember the night we nearly fainted with joy when we found a ten cent dish at Tech's, and then discovered that it was Chili Sauce!"

They both laughed, Susan giving her usual little bounce of joy as she settled into her seat, and the orchestra began a spirited selection. "Look there, Bill, what are those people getting?" she asked.

"It's terrapin," said William, and Susan looked it up on the menu.

"Terrapin Parnasse, one−fifty," read Susan, "for seven of them,— Gee! Gracious!" "Gracious" followed, because Susan had made up her mind not to say "Gee" any more.

"His little supper will stand him in about fifteen dollars," estimated Billy, with deep interest. "He's ordering champagne,— it'll stand him in thirty. Gosh!"

"What would you order if you could, Bill?" Susan asked. It was all part of their usual program.

"Planked steak," answered Billy, readily.

"Planked steak," Susan hunted for it, "would it be three dollars?" she asked, awed.

"That's it."

"I'd have breast of hen pheasant with Virginia ham," Susan decided. A moment later her roving eye rested on a group at a nearby table, and, with the pleased color rushing into her race, she bowed to one of the members of the party.

"That's Miss Emily Saunders," said Susan, in a low voice. "Don't look now—now you can look. Isn't she sweet?"

Miss Saunders, beautifully gowned, was sitting with an old man, an elderly woman, a handsome, very stout woman of perhaps forty, and a very young man. She was a pale, rather heavy girl, with prominent eyes and smooth skin. Susan thought her very aristocratic looking.

"Me for the fat one," said Billy simply. "Who's she?"

"I don't know. DON'T let them see us looking, Bill!" Susan brought her gaze suddenly back to her own table, and began a conversation.

There were some rolls on a plate, between them, but there was no butter on the table. Their order had not yet been served.

"We want some butter here," said Billy, as Susan took a roll, broke it in two, and laid it down again.

"Oh, don't bother, Bill! I don't honestly want it!" she protested.

"Rot!" said William. "He's got a right to bring it!" In a moment a head−waiter was bending over them, his eyes moving rapidly from one to the other, under contracted brows.

"Butter, please," said William briskly.

"Beg pardon?"

"BUTTER. We've no butter."

"Oh, certainly!" He was gone in a second, and in another the butter was served, and Susan and Billy began on the rolls.

"Here comes Miss—−, your friend," said William presently.

Susan whirled. Miss Saunders and the very young man were looking toward their table, as they went out. Catching Susan's eye, they came over to shake hands.

"How do you do, Miss Brown?" said the young woman easily. "My cousin, Mr. Brice. He's nicer than he looks. Mr. Oliver? Were you at the Columbia?"

"We were—How do you do? No, we weren't at the Columbia," Susan stammered, confused by the other's languid ease of manner, by the memory of the playhouse they had attended, and by the arrival of the sardines and ginger−ale, which were just now placed on the table.

"I'm coming to take you to lunch with me some day, remember," said Miss Saunders, departing. And she smiled another farewell from the door.

"Isn't she sweet?" said Susan.

"And how well she would come along just as our rich and expensive order is served!" Billy added, and they both laughed.

"It looks good to ME!" Susan assured him contentedly. "I'll give you half that other sandwich if you can tell me what the orchestra is playing now."

"The slipper thing, from 'Boheme'," Billy said scornfully. Susan's eyes widened with approval and surprise. His appreciation of music was an incongruous note in Billy's character.

There was presently a bill to settle, which Susan, as became a lady, seemed to ignore. But she could not long ignore her escort's scowling scrutiny of it.

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Oliver, scowling at the card. "Twenty cents for WHAT?"

"For bread and butter, sir," said the waiter, in a hoarse, confidential whisper. "Not served with sandwiches, sir." Susan's heart began to thump.

"Billy—" she began.

"Wait a minute," Billy muttered. "Just wait a minute! It doesn't say anything about that."

The waiter respectfully indicated a line on the menu card, which Mr. Oliver studied fixedly, for what seemed to Susan a long time.

"That's right," he said finally, heavily, laying a silver dollar on the check. Keep it." The waiter did not show much gratitude for his tip. Susan and Billy, ruffled and self−conscious, walked, with what dignity they could, out into the night.

"Damn him!" said Billy, after a rapidly covered half−block.

"Oh, Billy, don't! What do you care!" Susan said, soothingly.

"I don't care," he snapped. Adding, after another brooding minute, "we ought to have better sense than to go into such places!"

"We're as good as anyone else!" Susan asserted, hotly.

"No, we're not. We're not as rich," he answered bitterly.

"Billy, as if MONEY mattered!"

"Oh, of course, money doesn't matter," he said with fine satire. "Not at all! But because we haven't got it, those fellows, on thirty per, can throw the hooks into us at every turn. And, if we threw enough money around, we could be the rottenest man and woman on the face of the globe, we could be murderers and thieves, even, and they'd all be falling over each other to wait on us!"

"Well, let's murder and thieve, then!" said Susan blithely.

"I may not do that—"

"You mayn't? Oh, Bill, don't commit yourself! You may want to, later."

"I may not do that," repeated Mr. Oliver, gloomily, "but, by George, some day I'll have a wad in the bank that'll make me feel that I can afford to turn those fellows down! They'll know that I've got it, all right."

"Bill, I don't think that's much of an ambition," Susan said, candidly, "to want so much money that you aren't afraid of a waiter! Get some crisps while we're passing the man, Billy!" she interrupted herself to say, urgently, "we can talk on the car!"

He bought them, grinning sheepishly.

"But honestly, Sue, don't you get mad when you think that about the only standard of the world is money?" he resumed presently.

"Well, we know that we're BETTER than lots of rich people, Bill."

"How are we better?"

"More refined. Better born. Better ancestry."

"Oh, rot! A lot they care for that! No, people that have money can get the best of people who haven't, coming and going. And for that reason, Sue," they were on the car now, and Billy was standing on the running board, just in front of her, "for that reason, Sue, I'm going to MAKE money, and when I have so much that everyone knows it then I'll do as I darn please. And I won't please to do the things they do, either!"

"You're very sure of yourself, Bill! How are you going to make it?"

"The way other men make it, by gosh!" Mr. Oliver said seriously. "I'm going into blue−printing with Ross, on the side. I've got nearly three thousand in Panhandle lots—"

"Oh, you have NOT!"

"Oh, I have, too! Spence put me onto it. They're no good now, but you bet your life they will be! And I'm going to stick along at the foundry until the old man wakes up some day, and realizes that I'm getting more out of my men than any other two foremen in the place. Those boys would do anything for me—"

"Because you're a very unusual type of man to be in that sort of place, Bill!" Susan interrupted.

"Shucks," he said, in embarrassment. "Well," he resumed, "then some day I'm going to the old man and ask him for a year's leave. Then I'll visit every big iron−works in the East, and when I come back, I'll take a job of casting from my own blue−prints, at not less than a hundred a week. Then I'll run up some flats in the Panhandle—"

"Having married the beautiful daughter of the old man himself—" Susan interposed. "And won first prize in the Louisiana lottery—"

"Sure," he said gravely. "And meanwhile," he added, with a business− like look, "Coleman has got a crush on you, Sue. It'd be a dandy marriage for you, and don't you forget it!"

"Well, of all nerve!" Susan said unaffectedly, and with flaming cheeks. "There is a little motto, to every nation dear, in English it's forget−me−not, in French it's mind your own business, Bill!"

"Well, that may be," he said doggedly, "but you know as well as I do that it's up to you—"

"Suppose it is," Susan said, satisfied that he should think so. "That doesn't give YOU any right to interfere with my affairs!"

"You're just like Georgie and Mary Lou," he told her, "always bluffing yourself. But you've got more brains than they have, Sue, and it'd give the whole crowd of them a hand up if you made a marriage like that. Don't think I'm trying to butt in," he gave her his winning, apologetic smile, "you know I'm as interested as your own brother could be, Sue! If you like him, don't keep the matter hanging fire. There's no question that he's crazy about you—everybody knows that!"

"No, there's no question about THAT," Susan said, softly.

But what would she not have given for the joy of knowing, in her secret heart, that it was true!

Two weeks later, Miss Brown, summoned to Mr. Brauer's office, was asked if she thought that she could do the crediting, at forty dollars a month. Susan assented gravely, and entered that day upon her new work, and upon a new era. She worked hard and silently, now, with only occasional flashes of her old silliness. She printed upon a card, and hung above her desk, these words:

"I hold it true, with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping−stones
Of their dead selves, to higher things."

On stepping−stones of her dead selves, Susan mounted. She wore a preoccupied, a responsible air, her voice softened, her manner was almost too sweet, too bright and gentle. She began to take cold, or almost cold, baths daily, to brush her hair and mend her gloves. She began to say "Not really?" instead of "Sat−so?" and "It's of no consequence," instead of "Don't matter." She called her long woolen coat, familiarly known as her "sweater," her "field−jacket," and pronounced her own name "Syusan." Thorny, Georgianna, and Billy had separately the pleasure of laughing at Susan in these days.

"They should really have a lift, to take the girls up to the lunch room," said Susan to Billy.

"Of course they should," said Billy, "and a sink to bring you down again!"

Peter Coleman did not return to San Francisco until the middle of March, but Susan had two of the long, ill−written and ill−spelled letters that are characteristic of the college graduate. It was a wet afternoon in the week before Holy Week when she saw him again. Front Office was very busy at three o'clock, and Miss Garvey had been telling a story.

"'Don't whistle, Mary, there's a good girl,' the priest says," related Miss Garvey. "'I never like to hear a girl whistle,' he says. Well, so that night Aggie,"—Aggie was Miss Kelly—"Aggie wrote a question, and she put it in the question−box they had at church for questions during the Mission. 'Is it a sin to whistle?' she wrote. And that night, when he was readin' the questions out from the pulpit, he come to this one, and he looked right down at our pew over his glasses, and he says, 'The girl that asks this question is here,' he says, 'and I would say to her, 'tis no sin to do anything that injures neither God nor your neighbor!' Well, I thought Aggie and me would go through the floor!" And Miss Kelly and Miss Garvey put their heads down on their desks, and laughed until they cried.

Susan, looking up to laugh too, felt a thrill weaken her whole body, and her spine grow cold. Peter Coleman, in his gloves and big overcoat, with his hat on the back of his head, was in Mr. Brauer's office, and the electric light, turned on early this dark afternoon, shone full in his handsome, clean−shaven face.

Susan had some bills that she had planned to show to Mr. Brauer this afternoon. Six months ago she would have taken them in to him at once, and been glad of the excuse. But now she dropped her eyes, and busied herself with her work. Her heart beat high, she attacked a particularly difficult bill, one she had been avoiding for days, and disposed of it in ten minutes.

A little later she glanced at Mr. Brauer's office. Peter was gone, and Susan felt a sensation of sickness. She looked down at Mr. Baxter's office, and saw him there, spreading kodak pictures over the old man's desk, laughing and talking. Presently he was gone again, and she saw him no more that day.

The next day, however, she found him at her desk when she came in. They had ten minutes of inconsequential banter before Miss Cashell came in.

"How about a fool trip to the Chutes to−morrow night?" Peter asked in a low tone, just before departing.

"Lent," Susan said reluctantly.

"Oh, so it is. I suppose Auntie wouldn't stand for a dinner?"

"Pos−i−to−ri−ly NOT!" Susan was hedged with convention.

"Positorily not? Well, let's walk the pup? What? All right, I'll come at eight."

"At eight," said Susan, with a dancing heart.

She thought of nothing else until Friday came, slipped away from the office a little earlier than usual, and went home planning just the gown and hat most suitable. Visitors were in the parlor; Auntie, thinking of pan−gravy and hot biscuits, was being visibly driven to madness by them. Susan charitably took Mrs. Cobb and Annie and Daisy off Mrs. Lancaster's hands, and listened sympathetically to a dissertation upon the thanklessness of sons. Mrs. Cobb's sons, leaving their mother and their unmarried sisters in a comfortable home, had married the women of their own choice, and were not yet forgiven.

"And how's Alfie doing?" Mrs. Cobb asked heavily, departing.

"Pretty well. He's in Portland now, he has another job," Susan said cautiously. Alfred was never criticized in his mother's hearing. A moment later she closed the hall door upon the callers with a sigh of relief, and ran downstairs.

The telephone bell was ringing. Susan answered it.

"Hello Miss Brown! You see I know you in any disguise!" It was Peter Coleman's voice.

"Hello!" said Susan, with a chill premonition.

"I'm calling off that party to−night," said Peter. "I'm awfully sorry. We'll do it some other night. I'm in

Berkeley."

"Oh, very well!" Susan agreed, brightly.

"Can you HEAR me? I say I'm—−"

"Yes, I hear perfectly."

"What?"

"I say I can hear!"

"And it's all right? I'm awfully sorry!"

"Oh, certainly!"

"All right. These fellows are making such a racket I can't hear you. See you to−morrow!"

Susan hung up the receiver. She sat quite still in the darkness for awhile, staring straight ahead of her. When she went into the dining−room she was very sober. Mr. Oliver was there; he had taken one of his men to a hospital, with a burned arm, too late in the afternoon to make a return to the foundry worth while.

"Harkee, Susan wench!" said he, "do 'ee smell asparagus?"

"Aye. It'll be asparagus, Gaffer," said Susan dispiritedly, dropping into her chair.

"And I nearly got my dinner out to−night!" Billy said, with a shudder. "Say, listen, Susan, can you come over to the Carrolls, Sunday? Going to be a bully walk!"

"I don't know, Billy," she said quietly.

"Well, listen what we're all going to do, some Thursday. We're going to the theater, and then dawdle over supper at some cheap place, you know, and then go down on the docks, at about three, to see the fishing fleet come in? Are you on? It's great. They pile the fish up to their waists, you know—"

"That sounds lovely!" said Susan, eying him scornfully. "I see Jo and Anna Carroll enjoying THAT!"

"Lord, what a grouch you've got!" Billy said, with a sort of awed admiration.

Susan began to mold the damp salt in an open glass salt−cellar with the handle of a fork. Her eyes blurred with sudden tears.

"What's the matter?" Billy asked in a lowered voice.

She gulped, merely shook her head.

"You're dead, aren't you?" he said repentantly.

"Oh, all in!" It was a relief to ascribe it to that. "I'm awfully tired."

"Too tired to go to church with Mary Lou and me, dear?" asked Virginia, coming in. "Friday in Passion Week, you know. We're going to St, Ignatius. But if you're dead—?"

"Oh, I am. I'm going straight to bed," Susan said. But after dinner, when Mary Lou was dressing, she suddenly changed her mind, dragged herself up from the couch where she was lying and, being Susan, brushed her hair, pinned a rose on her coat lapel, and powdered her nose. Walking down the street with her two cousins, Susan, storm− shaken and subdued, still felt "good," and liked the feeling. Spring was in the air, the early darkness was sweet with the odors of grass and flowers.

When they reached the church, the great edifice was throbbing with the notes of the organ, a careless voluntary that stopped short, rambled, began again. They were early, and the lights were only lighted here and there; women, and now and then a man, drifted up the center aisle. Boots cheeped unseen in the arches, sibilant whispers smote the silence, pew−doors creaked, and from far corners of the church violent coughing sounded with muffled reverberations. Mary Lou would have slipped into the very last pew, but Virginia led the way up—up—up—in the darkness, nearer and nearer the altar, with its winking red light, and genuflected before one of the very first pews. Susan followed her into it with a sigh of satisfaction; she liked to see and hear, and all the pews were open to−night. They knelt for awhile, then sat back, silent, reverential, but not praying, and interested in the arriving congregation.

A young woman, seeing Virginia, came to whisper to her in a rasping aside. She "had St. Joseph" for Easter, she said, would Virginia help her "fix him"? Virginia nodded, she loved to assist those devout young women who decorated, with exquisite flowers and hundreds of candles, the various side altars of the church.

There was a constant crisping of shoes in the aisle now, the pews were filling fast. "Lord, where do all these widows come from?" thought Susan. A "Brother," in a soutane, was going about from pillar to pillar, lighting the gas. Group after group of the pendent globes sprang into a soft, moony glow; the hanging glass prisms jingled softly. The altar−boys in red, without surplices, were moving about the altar now, lighting the candles. The great

crucifix, the altar−paintings and the tall candle−sticks were swathed in purple cloth, there were no flowers to−night on the High Altar, but it twinkled with a thousand candles.

The hour began to have its effect on Susan. She felt herself a little girl again, yielding to the spell of the devotion all about her; the clicking rosary−beads, the whispered audible prayers, the very odors,—odors of close−packed humanity,—that reached her were all a part of this old mood. A little woman fluttered up the aisle, and squeezed in beside her, panting like a frightened rabbit. Now there was not a seat to be seen, even the benches by the confessionals were full.

And now the organ broke softly, miraculously, into enchanting and enveloping sound, that seemed to shake the church bodily with its great trembling touch, and from a door on the left of the altar the procession streamed,—altar−boys and altar−boys and altar−boys, followed through the altar−gate by the tall young priest who would "say the Stations." Other priests, a score of them, filled the altar−stalls; one, seated on the right between two boys, would presently preach.

The procession halted somewhere over in the distant: arches, the organ thundered the "Stabat Mater." Susan could only see the candles and the boys, but the priest's voice was loud and clear. The congregation knelt and rose again, knelt and rose again, turned and swayed to follow the slow movement of the procession about the church.

When priest and boys had returned to the altar, a wavering high soprano voice floated across the church in an intricate "Veni Creator." Susan and Mary Lou sat back in their seats, but Virginia knelt, wrapped in prayer, her face buried in her hands, her hat forcing the woman in front of her to sit well forward in her place.

The pulpit was pushed across a little track laid in the altar enclosure, and the preacher mounted it, shook his lace cuffs into place, laid his book and notes to one side, and composedly studied his audience.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen. 'Ask and ye shall receive—−'" suddenly the clear voice rang out.

Susan lost the sermon. But she got the text, and pondered it with new interest. It was not new to her. She had "asked" all her life long; for patience, for truthfulness, for "final perseverance," for help for Virginia's eyes and Auntie's business and Alfie's intemperance, for the protection of this widow, the conversion of that friend, "the speedy recovery or happy death" of some person dangerously ill. Susan had never slipped into church at night with Mary Lou, without finding some special request to incorporate in her prayers.

To−night, in the solemn pause of Benediction, she asked for Peter Coleman's love. Here was a temporal favor, indeed, indicating a lesser spiritual degree than utter resignation to the Divine Will. Susan was not sure of her right to ask it. But, standing to sing the "Laudate," there came a sudden rush of confidence and hope to her heart. She was praying for this gift now, and that fact alone seemed to lift it above the level of ordinary, earthly desires. Not entirely unworthy was any hope that she could bring to this tribunal, and beg for on her knees.

CHAPTER V

Two weeks later she and Peter Coleman had their evening at the Chutes, and a wonderful evening it was; then came a theater trip, and a Sunday afternoon that they spent in idly drifting about Golden Gate Park, enjoying the spring sunshine, and the holiday crowd, feeding the animals and eating peanuts. Susan bowed to Thorny and the faithful Wally on this last occasion and was teased by Thorny about Peter Coleman the next day, to her secret pleasure. She liked anything that made her friendship for Peter seem real, a thing noticed and accepted by others, not all the romantic fabric of her own unfounded dreams.

Tangible proof of his affection there was indeed, to display to the eyes of her world. But it was for intangible proof that Susan's heart longed day after day. In spite of comment and of envy from the office, in spite of the flowers and messages and calls upon which Auntie and the girls were placing such flattering significance, Susan was far too honest with life not to realize that she had not even a thread by which to hold Peter Coleman, that he had not given an instant's thought, and did not wish to give an instant's thought to her, or to any woman, as a possible sweetheart and wife.

She surprised him, she amused him, she was the company he liked best, easiest to entertain, most entertaining in turn, this she knew. He liked her raptures over pleasures that would only have bored the other girls he knew, he liked the ready nonsense that inspired answering nonsense in him, the occasional flashes of real wit, the inexhaustible originality of Susan's point−of−view. They had their own vocabulary, phrases remembered from plays, good and bad, that they had seen together, or overheard in the car; they laughed and laughed together at a thousand things that Susan could not remember when she was alone, or, remembering, found no longer amusing. This was all wonderful, but it was not love.

But, perhaps, she consoled herself, courtship, in his class, was not the serious affair she had always known it to be in hers. Rich people took nothing very seriously, yet they married and made good husbands for all that. Susan would blame herself for daring to criticize, even in the tiniest particular, the great gift that the gods laid at her feet.

One June day, when Susan felt rather ill, and was sitting huddled at her desk, with chilled feet and burning cheeks, she was sent for by old Mr. Baxter, and found Miss Emily Saunders in his office. The visitor was chatting with Peter and the old man, and gaily carried Susan off to luncheon, after Peter had regretted his inability to come too. They went to the Palace Hotel, and Susan thought everything, Miss Emily especially, very wonderful and delightful, and, warmed and sustained by a delicious lunch, congratulated herself all during the afternoon that she herself had risen to the demand of the occasion, had really been "funny" and "nice," had really "made good." She knew Emily had been amused and attracted, and suspected that she would hear from that fascinating young person again.

A few weeks later a letter came from Miss Saunders asking Susan to lunch with the family, in their San Rafael home. Susan admired the handsome stationery, the monogram, the bold, dashing hand. Something in Mary Lou's and Georgianna's pleasure in this pleasure for her made her heart ache as she wrote her acceptance. She was far enough from the world of ease and beauty and luxury, but how much further were these sweet, uncomplaining, beauty−starved cousins of hers!

Mary Lou went with her to the ferry, when the Sunday came, just for a ride on the hot day, and the two, being early, roamed happily over the great ferry building, watching German and Italian picnics form and file through the gateways, and late−comers rush madly up to the closing doors. Susan had been to church at seven o'clock, and had since washed her hair, and washed and pressed her best shirtwaist, but she felt fresh and gay.

Presently, with a shout of pleasure that drew some attention to their group, Peter Coleman came up to them. It appeared that he was to be Miss Saunders' guest at luncheon, too, and he took charge of the radiant Susan with evident satisfaction, and much laughter.

"Dear me! I wish I was going, too," said Mary Lou mildly, as they parted. "But I presume a certain young man is very glad I am not," she added, with deep finesse. Peter laughed out, but turned red, and Susan wished impatiently that Mary Lou would not feel these embarrassing inanities to be either welcome or in good taste.

But no small cloud could long shadow the perfect day. The Saunders' home, set in emerald lawns, brightened

by gay−striped awnings, fragrant with flowers indoors and out, was quite the most beautiful she had ever seen. Emily's family was all cordiality; the frail, nervous, richly dressed little mother made a visible effort to be gracious to this stranger, and Emily's big sister, Ella, in whom Susan recognized the very fat young woman of the Zinkand party, was won by Susan's irrepressible merriment to abandon her attitude of bored, good−natured silence, and entered into the conversation at luncheon with sudden zest. The party was completed by Mrs. Saunders' trained nurse, Miss Baker, a placid young woman who did not seem, to Susan, to appreciate her advantages in this wonderful place, and the son of the house, Kenneth, a silent, handsome, pale young man, who confined his remarks during luncheon to the single observation, made to Peter, that he was "on the wagon."

The guest wondered what dinner would be, if this were luncheon merely. Everything was beautifully served, smoking hot or icy cold, garnished and seasoned miraculously. Subtle flavors contended with other flavors, whipped cream appeared in most unexpected places—on the bouillon, and in a rosette that topped the salad—of the hot bread and the various chutneys and jellies and spiced fruits and cheeses and olives alone, Susan could have made a most satisfactory meal. She delighted in the sparkling glass, the heavy linen and silver, the exquisite flowers. Together they seemed to form a lulling draught for her senses; Susan felt as if undue cold, undue heat, haste and worry and work, the office with its pencil−dust and ink−stains and her aunt's house, odorous, dreary and dark, were alike a half−forgotten dream.

After luncheon they drove to a bright, wide tennis−court, set in glowing gardens, and here Susan was introduced to a score of noisy, white−clad young people, and established herself comfortably on a bench near the older women, to watch the games. This second social experience was far happier than her first, perhaps because Susan resolutely put her thoughts on something else than herself to−day, watched and laughed, talked when she could, was happily silent when she could not, and battled successfully with the thought of neglect whenever it raised its head. Bitter as her lesson had been she was grateful for it to−day.

Peter, very lithe, very big, gloriously happy, played in one set, and, winning, came to throw himself on the grass at Susan's feet, panting and hot. This made Susan the very nucleus of the gathering group, the girls strolled up under their lazily twirling parasols, the men ranged themselves beside Peter on the lawn. Susan said very little; again she found the conversation a difficult one to enter, but to−day she did not care; it was a curious, and, as she was to learn later, a characteristic conversation, and she analyzed it lazily as she listened.

There was a bright insincerity about everything they said, a languid assumption that nothing in the world was worth an instant's seriousness, whether it was life or death, tragedy or pathos. Susan had seen this before in Peter, she saw him in his element now. He laughed incessantly, as they all did. The conversation called for no particular effort; it consisted of one or two phrases repeated constantly, and with varying inflections, and interspersed by the most trivial and casual of statements. To−day the phrase, "Would a nice girl DO that?" seemed to have caught the general fancy. Susan also heard the verb to love curiously abused.

"Look out, George—your racket!" some girl said vigorously.

"Would a nice girl DO that? I nearly put your eye out, didn't I? I tell you all I'm a dangerous character," her neighbor answered laughingly.

"Oh, I love that!" another girl's voice said, adding presently, "Look at Louise's coat. Don't you love it?"

"I love it," said several voices. Another languidly added, "I'm crazy about it."

"I'm crazy about it," said the wearer modestly, "Aunt Fanny sent it."

"Can a nice girl DO that?" asked Peter, and there was a general shout.

"But I'm crazy about your aunt," some girl asserted, "you know she told Mother that I was a perfect little lady—honestly she did! Don't you love that?"

"Oh, I LOVE that," Emily Saunders said, as freshly as if coining the phrase. "I'm crazy about it!"

"Don't you love it? You've got your aunt's number," they all said. And somebody added thoughtfully, "Can a nice girl DO that?"

How sure of themselves they were, how unembarrassed and how marvelously poised, thought Susan. How casually these fortunate young women could ask what friends they pleased to dinner, could plan for to−day, to−morrow, for all the days that were! Nothing to prevent them from going where they wanted to go, buying what they fancied, doing as they pleased! Susan felt that an impassable barrier stood between their lives and hers.

Late in the afternoon Miss Ella, driving in with a gray−haired young man in a very smart trap, paid a visit to the tennis court, and was rapturously hailed. She was evidently a great favorite.

"See here, Miss Brown," she called out, after a few moments, noticing Susan, "don't you want to come for a little spin with me?"

"Very much," Susan said, a little shyly.

"Get down, Jerry," Miss Saunders said, giving her companion a little shove with her elbow.

"Look here, who you pushing?" demanded the gray−haired young man, without venom.

"I'm pushing you."

"'It's habit. I keep right on loving her!'" quoted Mr. Phillips to the bystanders. But he got lazily down, and Susan got up, and they were presently spinning away into the quiet of the lovely, warm summer afternoon.

Miss Saunders talked rapidly, constantly, and well. Susan was amused and interested, and took pains to show it. In great harmony they spent perhaps an hour in driving, and were homeward bound when they encountered two loaded buckboards, the first of which was driven by Peter Coleman.

Miss Saunders stopped the second, to question her sister, who, held on the laps of a girl and young man on the front seat, was evidently in wild spirits.

"We're only going up to Cameroncourt!" Miss Emily shouted cheerfully. "Keep Miss Brown to dinner! Miss Brown, I'll never speak to you again if you don't stay!" And Susan heard a jovial echo of "Can a nice girl DO that?" as they drove away.

"A noisy, rotten crowd," said Miss Saunders. "Mamma hates Emily to go with them, and what my cousins—the Bridges and the Eastenbys of Maryland are our cousins, I've just been visiting them—would say to a crowd like that I hate to think! That's why I wanted Emily to come out in Washington. You know we really have no connections here, and no old friends. My uncle, General Botheby Hargrove, has a widowed daughter living with him in Baltimore, Mrs. Stephen Kay, she is now,—well, I suppose she's really in the most exclusive little set you could find anywhere—"

Susan listened interestedly. But when they were home again, and Ella was dressing for some dinner party, she very firmly declined the old lady's eager invitation to remain. She was a little more touched by Emily's rudeness than she would admit, a little afraid to trust herself any further to so uncertain a hostess.

She went soberly home, in the summer twilight, soothed in spite of herself by the beauty of the quiet bay, and pondering deeply. Had she deserved this slight in any way? she wondered. Should she have come away directly after luncheon? No, for they had asked her, with great warmth, for dinner! Was it something that she should, in all dignity, resent? Should Peter be treated a little coolly; Emily's next overture declined?

She decided against any display of resentment. It was only the strange way of these people, no claim of courtesy was strong enough to offset the counter−claim of any random desire. They were too used to taking what they wanted, to forgetting what it was not entirely convenient to remember. They would think it absurd, even delightfully amusing in her, to show the least feeling.

Arriving late, she gave her cousins a glowing account of the day, and laughed with Georgie over the account of a call from Loretta's Doctor O'Connor. "Loretta's beau having the nerve to call on me!" Georgie said, with great amusement.

Almost hourly, in these days when she saw him constantly, Susan tried to convince herself that her heart was not quite committed yet to Peter Coleman's keeping. But always without success. The big, sweet−tempered, laughing fellow, with his generosity, his wealth, his position, had become all her world, or rather he had become the reigning personage in that other world at whose doorway Susan stood, longing and enraptured.

A year ago, at the prospect of seeing him so often, of feeling so sure of his admiration and affection, of calling him "Peter," Susan would have felt herself only too fortunate. But these privileges, fully realized now, brought her more pain than joy. A restless unhappiness clouded their gay times together, and when she was alone Susan spent troubled hours in analysis of his tones, his looks, his words. If a chance careless phrase of his seemed to indicate a deepening of the feeling between them, Susan hugged that phrase to her heart. If Peter, on the other hand, eagerly sketched to her plans for a future that had no place for her, Susan drooped, and lay wakeful and heartsick long into the night. She cared for him truly and deeply, although she never said so, even to herself, and she longed with all her ardent young soul for the place in the world that awaited his wife. Susan knew that she could fill it, that he would never be anything but proud of her; she only awaited the word− −less than a word!—that should give her the right to enter into her kingdom.

By all the conventions of her world these thoughts should not have come to her until Peter's attitude was

absolutely ascertained. But Susan was honest with herself; she must have been curiously lacking in human tenderness, indeed, NOT to have yielded her affection to so joyous and so winning a claimant.

As the weeks went by she understood his ideals and those of his associates more and more clearly, and if Peter lost something of his old quality as a god, by the analysis, Susan loved him all the more for finding him not quite perfect. She knew that he was young, that his head was perhaps a little turned by sudden wealth and popularity, that life was sweet to him just as it was; he was not ready yet for responsibilities and bonds. He thought Miss Susan Brown was the "bulliest" girl he knew, loved to give her good times and resented the mere mention of any other man's admiration for her. Of what could she complain?

Of course—Susan could imagine him as disposing of the thought comfortably—she DIDN'T complain. She took things just as he wanted her to, had a glorious time whenever she was with him, and was just as happy doing other things when he wasn't about. Peter went for a month to Tahoe this summer, and wrote Susan that there wasn't a fellow at the hotel that was half as much fun as she was. He told her that if she didn't immediately answer that she missed him like Hannibal he would jump into the lake.

Susan pondered over the letter. How answer it most effectively? If she admitted that she really did miss him terribly—but Susan was afraid of the statement, in cold black−and−white. Suppose that she hinted at herself as consoled by some newer admirer? The admirer did not exist, but Peter would not know that. She discarded this subterfuge as "cheap."

But how did other girls manage it? The papers were full of engagements, men WERE proposing matrimony, girls WERE announcing themselves as promised, in all happy certainty. Susan decided that, when Peter came home, she would allow their friendship to proceed just a little further and then suddenly discourage every overture, refuse invitations, and generally make herself as unpleasant as possible, on the ground that Auntie "didn't like it." This would do one of two things, either stop their friendship off short,—it wouldn't do that, she was happily confident,—or commence things upon a new and more definite basis.

But when Peter came back he dragged his little aunt all the way up to Mr. Brauer's office especially to ask Miss Brown if she would dine with them informally that very evening. This was definite enough! Susan accepted and planned a flying trip home for a fresh shirtwaist at five o'clock. But at five a troublesome bill delayed her, and Susan, resisting an impulse to shut it into a desk drawer and run away from it, settled down soberly to master it. She was conscious, as she shook hands with her hostess two hours later, of soiled cuffs, but old Mr. Baxter, hearing her apologies, brought her downstairs a beautifully embroidered Turkish robe, in dull pinks and blues, and Susan, feeling that virtue sometimes was rewarded, had the satisfaction of knowing that she looked like a pretty gipsy during the whole evening, and was immensely gratifying her old host as well. To Peter, it was just a quiet, happy evening at home, with the pianola and flashlight photographs, and a rarebit that wouldn't grow creamy in spite of his and Susan's combined efforts. But to Susan it was a glimpse of Paradise.

"Peter loves to have his girl friends dine here," smiled old Mrs. Baxter in parting. "You must come again. He has company two or three times a week." Susan smiled in response, but the little speech was the one blot on a happy evening.

Every happy time seemed to have its one blot. Susan would have her hour, would try to keep the tenderness out of her "When do I see you again, Peter?" to be met by his cheerful "Well, I don't know. I'm going up to the Yellands' for a week, you know. Do you know Clare Yelland? She's the dandiest girl you ever saw—nineteen, and a raving beauty!" Or, wearing one of Peter's roses on her black office−dress, she would have to smile through Thorny's interested speculations as to his friendship for this society girl or that. "The Chronicle said yesterday that he was supposed to be terribly crushed on that Washington girl," Thorny would report. "Of course, no names, but you could tell who they meant!"

Susan began to talk of going away "to work."

"Lord, aren't you working now?" asked William Oliver in healthy scorn.

"Not working as hard as I could!" Susan said. "I can't—can't seem to get interested—" Tears thickened her voice, she stopped short.

The two were sitting on the upper step of the second flight of stairs in the late evening, just outside the door of the room where Alfred Lancaster was tossing and moaning in the grip of a heavy cold and fever. Alfred had lost his position, had been drinking again, and now had come home to his mother for the fiftieth time to be nursed and consoled. Mrs. Lancaster, her good face all mother−love and pity, sat at his side. Mary Lou wept steadily and

unobtrusively. Susan and Billy were waiting for the doctor.

"No," the girl resumed thoughtfully, after a pause, "I feel as if I'd gotten all twisted up and I want to go away somewhere and get started fresh. I could work like a slave, Bill, in a great clean institution, or a newspaper office, or as an actress. But I can't seem to straighten things out here. This isn't MY house, I didn't have anything to do with the making of it, and I can't feel interested in it. I'd rather do things wrong, but do them MY way!"

"It seems to me you're getting industrious all of a sudden, Sue."

"No." She hardly understood herself. "But I want to GET somewhere in this life, Bill," she mused. "I don't want to sit back and wait for things to come to me. I want to go to them. I want some alternative. So that—" her voice sank, "so that, if marriage doesn't come, I can say to myself, 'Never mind, I've got my work!'"

"Just as a man would," he submitted thoughtfully.

"Just as a man would," she echoed, eager for his sympathy.

"Well, that's Mrs. Carroll's idea. She says that very often, when a girl thinks she wants to get married, what she really wants is financial independence and pretty clothes and an interest in life."

"I think that's perfectly true," Susan said, struck. "Isn't she wise?" she added.

"Yes, she's a wonder! Wise and strong,—she's doing too much now, though. How long since you've been over there, Sue?"

"Oh, ages! I'm ashamed to say. Months. I write to Anna now and then, but somehow, on Sundays—"

She did not finish, but his thoughts supplied the reason. Susan was always at home on Sundays now, unless she went out with Peter Coleman.

"You ought to take Coleman over there some day, Sue, they used to know him when he was a kid. Let's all go over some Sunday."

"That would be fun!" But he knew she did not mean it. The atmosphere of the Carrolls' home, their poverty, their hard work, their gallant endurance of privation and restriction were not in accord with Susan's present mood. "How are all of them?" she presently asked, after an interval, in which Alfie's moaning and the hoarse deep voice of Mary Lord upstairs had been the only sounds.

"Pretty good. Joe's working now, the little darling!"

"Joe is! What at?"

"She's in an architect's office, Huxley and Huxley. It's a pretty good job, I guess."

"But, Billy, doesn't that seem terrible? Joe's so beautiful, and when you think how rich their grandfather was! And who's home?"

"Well, Anna gets home from the hospital every other week, and Phil comes home with Joe, of course. Jim's still in school, and Betsey helps with housework. Betsey has a little job, too. She teaches an infant class at that little private school over there."

"Billy, don't those people have a hard time! Is Phil behaving?"

"Better than he did. Yes, I guess he's pretty good now. But there are all Jim's typhoid bills to pay. Mrs. Carroll worries a good deal. Anna's an angel about everything, but of course Betts is only a kid, and she gets awfully mad."

"And Josephine," Susan smiled. "How's she?"

"Honestly, Sue," Mr. Oliver's face assumed the engaging expression reserved only for his love affairs, "she is the dearest little darling ever! She followed me out to the porch on Sunday, and said 'Don't catch cold, and die before your time,'—the little cutie!"

"Oh, Bill, you imbecile! There's nothing to THAT," Susan laughed out gaily.

"Aw, well," he began affrontedly, "it was the little way she said it—"

"Sh−sh!" said Mary Lou, white faced, heavy−eyed, at Alfred's door. "He's just dropped off... The doctor just came up the steps, Bill, will you go down and ask him to come right up? Why don't you go to bed, Sue?"

"How long are you going to wait?" asked Susan.

"Oh, just until after the doctor goes, I guess," Mary Lou sighed.

"Well, then I'll wait for you. I'll run up and see Mary Lord a few minutes. You stop in for me when you're ready."

And Susan, blowing her cousin an airy kiss, ran noiselessly up the last flight of stairs, and rapped on the door of the big upper front bedroom.

This room had been Mary Lord's world for ten long years. The invalid was on a couch just opposite the door, and looked up as Susan entered. Her dark, rather heavy face brightened instantly.

"Sue! I was afraid it was poor Mrs. Parker ready to weep about Loretta," she said eagerly. "Come in, you nice child! Tell me something cheerful!"

"Raw ginger is a drug on the market," said Susan gaily. "Here, I brought you some roses."

"And I have eleven guesses who sent them," laughed Miss Lord, drinking in the sweetness and beauty of the great pink blossoms hungrily. "When'd they come?"

"Just before dinner!" Susan told her. Turning to the invalid's sister she said: "Miss Lydia, you're busy, and I'm disturbing you."

"I wish you'd disturb us a little oftener, then," said Lydia Lord, affectionately. "I can work all the better for knowing that Mary isn't dying to interrupt me."

The older sister, seated at a little table under the gaslight, was deep in work.

"She's been doing that every night this week," said Miss Mary angrily, "as if she didn't have enough to do!"

"What is it?" asked Susan. Miss Lydia threw down her pen, and stretched her cramped fingers.

"Why, Mrs. Lawrence's sister is going to be married," she explained, "and the family wants an alphabetic list of friends to send the announcements to. This is the old list, and this the new one, and here's his list, and some names her mother jotted down,—they're all to be put in order. It's quite a job."

"At double pay, of course," Miss Mary said bitterly.

"I should hope so," Susan added.

Miss Lydia merely smiled humorously, benevolently, over her work.

"All in the day's work, Susan."

"All in your grandmother's foot," Susan said, inelegantly. Miss Lydia laughed a little reproachfully, but the invalid's rare, hearty laugh would have atoned to her for a far more irreverent remark.

"And no 'Halma'?" Susan said, suddenly. For the invalid lived for her game, every night. "Why didn't you tell me. I could have come up every night—" She got out the board, set up the men, shook Mary's pillows and pushed them behind the aching back. "Come on, Macduff," said she.

"Oh, Susan, you angel!" Mary Lord settled herself for an hour of the keenest pleasure she ever knew. She reared herself in her pillows, her lanky yellow hand hovered over the board, she had no eyes for anything but the absurd little red and yellow men.

She was a bony woman, perhaps forty−five, with hair cut across her lined forehead in the deep bang that had been popular in her girlhood. It was graying now, as were the untidy loops of hair above it, her face was yellow, furrowed, and the long neck that disappeared into her little flannel bed−sack was lined and yellowed too. She lay, restlessly and incessantly shifting herself, in a welter of slipping quilts and loose blankets, with her shoulders propped by fancy pillows,—some made of cigar−ribbons, one of braided strips of black and red satin, one in a shield of rough, coarse knotted lace, and one with a little boy printed in color upon it, a boy whose trousers were finished with real tin buttons. Mary Lord was always the first person Susan thought of when the girls in the office argued, ignorantly and vigorously, for or against the law of compensation. Here, in this stuffy boarding−house room, the impatient, restless spirit must remain, chained and tortured day after day and year after year, her only contact with the outer world brought by the little private governess,—her sister—who was often so tired and so dispirited when she reached home, that even her gallant efforts could not hide her depression from the keen eyes of the sick woman. Lydia taught the three small children of one of the city's richest women, and she and Mary were happy or were despondent in exact accord with young Mrs. Lawrence's mood. If the great lady were ungracious, were cold, or dissatisfied, Lydia trembled, for the little sum she earned by teaching was more than two−thirds of all that she and Mary had. If Mrs. Lawrence were in a happier frame of mind, Lydia brightened, and gratefully accepted the occasional flowers or candy, that meant to both sisters so much more than mere carnations or mere chocolates.

But if Lydia's life was limited, what of Mary, whose brain was so active that merely to read of great and successful deeds tortured her like a pain? Just to have a little share of the world's work, just to dig and water the tiniest garden, just to be able to fill a glass for herself with water, or to make a pudding, or to wash up the breakfast dishes, would have been to her the most exquisite delight in the world.

As it was she lay still, reading, sometimes writing a letter, or copying something for Lydia, always eager for a

game of "Halma" or "Parchesi," a greater part of the time out of pain, and for a certain part of the twenty−four hours tortured by the slow−creeping agonies that waited for her like beasts in the darkness of every night. Sometimes Susan, rousing from the deep delicious sleep that always befriended her, would hear in the early morning, rarely earlier than two o'clock or later than four, the hoarse call in the front room, "Lyddie! Lyddie!" and the sleepy answer and stumbling feet of the younger sister, as she ran for the merciful pill that would send Miss Mary, spent with long endurance, into deep and heavenly sleep. Susan had two or three times seen the cruel trial of courage that went before the pill, the racked and twisting body, the bitten lip, the tortured eyes on the clock.

Twice or three times a year Miss Mary had very bad times, and had to see her doctor. Perhaps four times a month Miss Lydia beamed at Susan across the breakfast table, "No pill last night!" These were the variations of the invalid's life.

Susan, while Mary considered her moves to−night, studied the room idly, the thousand crowded, useless little possessions so dear to the sick; the china statuettes, the picture post−cards, the photographs and match−boxes and old calendars, the dried "whispering−grass" and the penwipers. Her eyes reached an old photograph; Susan knew it by heart. It represented an old−fashioned mansion, set in a sweeping lawn, shaded by great trees. Before one wing an open barouche stood, with driver and lackey on the box, and behind the carriage a group of perhaps ten or a dozen colored girls and men were standing on the steps, in the black−and−white of house servants. On the wide main steps of the house were a group of people, ladies in spreading ruffled skirts, a bearded, magnificent old man, young men with heavy mustaches of the sixties, and some small children in stiff white. Susan knew that the heavy big baby on a lady's lap was Lydia, and that among the children Mary was to be found, with her hair pushed straight back under a round−comb, and scallops on the top of her high black boots. The old man was her grandfather, and the house the ancestral home of the Lords... Whose fault was it that just a little of that ease had not been safely guarded for these two lonely women, Susan wondered. What WAS the secret of living honestly, with the past, with the present, with those who were to come?

"Your play. Wake up. Sue!" laughed Mary. "I have you now, I can yard in seven moves!"

"No skill to that," said Susan hardily, "just sheer luck!"

"Oh you wicked story−teller!" Mary laughed delightedly, and they set the men for another game.

"No, but you're really the lucky one, Sue," said the older woman presently.

"*I* lucky!" and Susan laughed as she moved her man.

"Well, don't you think you are?"

"I think I'm darned unlucky!" the girl declared seriously.

"Here—here! Descriptive adjectives!" called Lydia, but the others paid no heed.

"Sue, how can you say so!"

"Well, I admit, Miss Mary," Susan said with pretty gravity, "that God hasn't sent me what he has sent you to bear, for some inscrutable reason,—I'd go mad if He had! But I'm poor—"

"Now, look here," Mary said authoritatively. "You're young, aren't you? And you're good−looking, aren't you?"

"Don't mince matters, Miss Mary. Say beautiful," giggled Susan.

"I'm in earnest. You're the youngest and prettiest woman in this house. You have a good position, and good health, and no encumbrances—"

"I have a husband and three children in the Mission, Miss Mary. I never mentioned them—"

"Oh, behave yourself, Sue! Well! And, more than that, you have—we won't mention one special friend, because I don't want to make you blush, but at least a dozen good friends among the very richest people of society. You go to lunch with Miss Emily Saunders, and to Burlingame with Miss Ella Saunders, you get all sorts of handsome presents—isn't this all true?"

"Absolutely," said Susan so seriously, so sadly, that the invalid laid a bony cold one over the smooth brown one arrested on the "Halma" board.

"Why, I wasn't scolding you, dearie!" she said kindly. "I just wanted you to appreciate your blessings!"

"I know—I know," Susan answered, smiling with an effort. She went to bed a little while later profoundly depressed.

It was all true, it was all true! But, now that she had it, it seemed so little! She was beginning to be popular in the Saunders set,—her unspoiled freshness appealed to more than one new friend, as it had appealed to Peter

Coleman and to Emily and Ella Saunders. She was carried off for Saturday matinees, she was in demand for one Sunday after another. She was always gay, always talkative, she had her value, as she herself was beginning to perceive. And, although she met very few society men, just now, being called upon to amuse feminine luncheons or stay overnight with Emily when nobody else was at home, still her social progress seemed miraculously swift to Thorny, to Billy and Georgie and Virginia, even sometimes to herself. But she wanted more—more—more! She wanted to be one of this group herself, to patronize instead of accepting patronage.

Slowly her whole nature changed to meet this new hope. She made use of every hour now, discarded certain questionable expressions, read good books, struggled gallantly with her natural inclination to procrastinate. Her speech improved, the tones of her voice, her carriage, she wore quiet colors how, and became fastidious in the matter of belts and cuffs, buttons and collars and corsets. She diverted Mary Lou by faithfully practicing certain beautifying calisthenics at night.

Susan was not deceived by the glittering, prismatic thing known as Society. She knew that Peter Coleman's and Emily Saunders' reverence for it was quite the weakest thing in their respective characters. She knew that Ella's boasted family was no better than her own, and that Peter's undeniable egoism was the natural result of Peter's up− bringing, and that Emily's bright unselfish interest in her, whatever it had now become, had commenced with Emily's simple desire to know Peter through Susan, and have an excuse to come frequently to Hunter, Baxter Hunter's when Peter was there.

Still, she could not divest these three of the old glory of her first impressions. She liked Emily and Ella none the less because she understood them better, and felt that, if Peter had his human weaknesses, he was all the nearer her for that.

Mrs. Lancaster would not allow her to dine down−town with him alone. Susan laughed at the idea that she could possibly do anything questionable, but kept the rule faithfully, and, if she went to the theater alone with Peter, never let him take her to supper afterward. But they had many a happy tea−hour together, and on Sundays lunched in Sausalito, roamed over the lovely country roads, perhaps stopped for tea at the Carrolls', or came back to the city and had it at the quiet Palace. Twice Peter was asked to dine at Mrs. Lancaster's, but on the first occasion he and Susan were begged by old Mrs. Baxter to come and amuse her loneliness instead, and on the second Susan telephoned at the last moment to say that Alfie was at home and that Auntie wanted to ask Peter to come some other time.

Alfie was at home for a dreadful week, during which the devoted women suffered agonies of shame and terror. After that he secured, in the miraculous way that Alfie always did secure, another position and went away again.

"I can stand Alfie," said Susan to Billy in strong disgust. "But it does make me sick to have Auntie blaming his employers for firing him, and calling him a dear unfortunate boy! She said to me to−day that the other clerks were always jealous of Alfie, and tried to lead him astray! Did you ever hear such blindness!"

"She's always talked that way," Billy answered, surprised at her vehemence. "You used to talk that way yourself. You're the one that has changed."

Winter came on rapidly. The mornings were dark and cold now when Susan dressed, the office did not grow comfortably warm until ten o'clock, and the girls wore their coats loose across their shoulders as they worked.

Sometimes at noon Miss Thornton and Susan fared forth into the cold, sunny streets, and spent the last half of the lunch−hour in a brisk walk. They went into the high−vaulted old Post Street Library for books, threaded their way along Kearney Street, where the noontide crowd was gaily ebbing and flowing, and loitered at the Flower Market, at Lotta's Fountain, drinking in the glory of violets and daffodils, under the winter sun. Now and then they lunched uptown at some inexpensive restaurant that was still quiet and refined. The big hotels were far too costly but there were several pretty lunchrooms, "The Bird of Paradise," "The London Tearoom," and, most popular of all, "The Ladies Exchange."

The girls always divided a twenty−five−cent entree between them, and each selected a ten−cent dessert, leaving a tip for the waitress out of their stipulated half−dollar. It was among the unwritten laws that the meal must appear to more than satisfy both.

"Thorny, you've got to have the rest of this rice!" Susan would urge, gathering the slender remains of "Curried chicken family style" in her serving spoon.

"Honestly, Susan, I couldn't! I've got more than I want here," was the orthodox response.

"It'll simply go to waste here," Susan always said, but somehow it never did. The girls loitered over these meals, watching the other tables, and the women who came to the counters to buy embroidered baby−sacques, and home−made cakes and jellies.

"Wouldn't you honestly like another piece of plum pie, Sue?" Thorny would ask.

"I? Oh, I couldn't! But YOU have one, Thorny—"

"I simply couldn't!" So it was time to ask for the check.

They were better satisfied, if less elegantly surrounded, when they went to one of the downtown markets, and had fried oysters for lunch. Susan loved the big, echoing places, cool on the hottest day, never too cold, lined with long rows of dangling, picked fowls, bright with boxes of apples and oranges. The air was pleasantly odorous of cheeses and cooked meats, cocks crowed unseen in crates and cages, bare−headed boys pushed loaded trucks through the narrow aisles. Susan and Miss Thornton would climb a short flight of whitewashed stairs to a little lunch−room over one of the oyster stalls. Here they could sit at a small table, and look down at the market, the shoppers coming and going, stout matrons sampling sausages and cheeses, and Chinese cooks, bareheaded, bare−ankled, dressed in dark blue duck, selecting broilers and roasts.

Their tablecloth here was coarse, but clean, and a generous management supplied several sauces, a thick china bowl of crackers, a plate heaped with bread, salty yellow butter, and saucers of boiled shrimps with which guests might occupy themselves until the arrival of the oysters. Presently the main dish arrived, some forty small, brown, buttery oysters on each smoking hot plate. No pretense was necessary at this meal, there was enough, and more than enough. Susan's cheeks would burn rosily all afternoon. She and Thorny departing never tailed to remark, "How can they do it for twenty− five cents?" and sometimes spent the walk back to the office in a careful calculation of exactly what the meal had cost the proprietor.

"Did he send you a Christmas present?" asked Thorny one January day, when an irregular bill had brought her to Susan's desk.

"Who? Oh, Mr. Coleman?" Susan looked up innocently. "Yes, yes indeed he did. A lovely silver bureau set. Auntie was in two minds about letting me keep it." She studied the bill. "Well, that's the regular H. B. H. Talcum Powder," she said, "only he's made them a price on a dozen gross. Send it back, and have Mr. Phil O. K. it!"

"A silver set! You lucky kid! How many pieces?"

"Oh, everything. Even toilet−water bottles, and a hatpin holder. Gorgeous." Susan wrote "Mr. P. Hunter will please O. K." in the margin against the questioned sale.

"You take it pretty coolly, Sue," Miss Thornton said, curiously.

"It's cool weather, Thorny dear." Susan smiled, locked her firm young hands idly on her ledger, eyed Miss Thornton honestly. "How should I take it?" said she.

The silver set had filled all Mrs. Lancaster's house with awed admiration on Christmas Day, but Susan could not forget that Peter had been out of town on both holidays, and that she had gained her only knowledge of his whereabouts from the newspapers. A handsome present had been more than enough to satisfy her wildest dreams, the year before. It was not enough now.

"S'listen, Susan. You're engaged to him?"

"Honestly,—cross my heart!—I'm not."

"But you will be when he asks you?"

"Thorny, aren't you awful!" Susan laughed; colored brilliantly.

"Well, WOULDN'T you?" the other persisted.

"I don't suppose one thinks of those things until they actually happen," Susan said slowly, wrinkling a thoughtful forehead. Thorny watched her for a moment with keen interest, then her own face softened suddenly.

"No, of course you don't!" she agreed kindly. "Do you mind my asking, Sue?"

"No−o−o!" Susan reassured her. As a matter of fact, she was glad when any casual onlooker confirmed her own secret hopes as to the seriousness of Peter Coleman's intention.

Peter took her to church on Easter Sunday, and afterward they went to lunch with his uncle and aunt, spent a delightful rainy afternoon with books and the piano, and, in the casual way that only wealth makes possible, were taken downtown to dinner by old Mr. Baxter at six o'clock. Taking her home at nine o' clock, Peter told her that he was planning a short visit to Honolulu with the Harvey Brocks. "Gee, I wish you were going along!" he said.

"Wouldn't it be fun!" Susan agreed.

"Well, say! Mrs. Brock would love it—" he began eagerly.

"Oh, Peter, don't talk nonsense!" Susan felt, at a moment like this, that she actually disliked him.

"I suppose it couldn't be worked," he said sadly. And no more of it was said.

He came into the office but once that week. Late in a summer−like afternoon Susan looked down at Mr. Baxter's office to see Peter spreading his steamer tickets on the desk. He looked up and laughed at her, and later ran up to the deck for a few minutes to say good− bye. They said it laughingly, among the hot−water bags and surgical accessories, but when Susan went back to her desk the laughter had died from her eyes.

It was an unseasonably warm spring day, she was wearing the first shirtwaist of the year, and had come downtown that morning through the fresh early air on the dummy−front. It was hard to−day to be shut up in a stuffy office. Outside, the watercarts were making the season's first trip along Front Street and pedestrians chose the shady side to−day. Susan thought of the big Oriental liner, the awnings that shaded the decks, the exquisitely cool and orderly little cabins, the green water rushing alongside. And for her the languorous bright afternoon had lost its charm.

She did not see Peter Coleman again for a long time. Summer came, and Susan went on quiet little Sunday picnics to the beach with Auntie and Mary Lou, or stayed at home and pressed her collars and washed her hair. Once or twice she and Billy went over to the Carrolls' Sausalito home, to spend a happy, quiet week−end. Susan gossiped with the busy, cheerful mother over the dish−pan, played "Parchesi" with fifteen−year−old Jim and seventeen−year−old Betsey, reveled in a confidential, sisterly attitude with handsome Phil, the oldest of the half−dozen, and lay awake deep into the warm nights to talk, and talk, and talk with Josephine, who, at her own age, seemed to Susan a much finer, stronger and more developed character. If Anna, the lovely serious oldest daughter, happened to be at home on one of her rare absences from the training−hospital, Susan became her shadow. She loved few people in the world as she loved Anna Carroll. But, in a lesser degree, she loved them all, and found these hours in the shabby, frugal little home among the very happiest of a lonely summer.

About once a month she was carried off by the Saunders, in whose perfectly appointed guest−room she was by this time quite at home. The Fourth of July fell on a Friday this year, and Mr. Brauer, of his own volition, offered Susan the following day as a holiday, too. So that Susan, with a heart as light as sunshine itself, was free to go with Ella Saunders for a memorable visit to Del Monte and Santa Cruz.

It was one of the perfect experiences only possible to youth and irresponsibility. They swam, they went for the Seventeen−Mile Drive, they rode horseback. Ella knew every inch of the great hotels, even some of the waiters and housekeepers. She had the best rooms, she saw that Susan missed nothing. They dressed for dinner, loitered about among the roses in the long twilight, and Susan met a young Englishman who later wrote her three letters on his way home to Oxfordshire. Ella's exquisite gowns had a chapter all to themselves when Susan was telling her cousins about it, but Susan herself alternated contentedly enough between the brown linen with the daisy−hat and the black net with the pearl band in her hair. Miss Saunders' compliments, her confidences, half−intoxicated the girl.

It was with a little effort that she came back to sober every−day living. She gave a whole evening to Mary Lord, in her eagerness to share her pleasure. The sick woman was not interested in gowns, but she went fairly wild when Susan spoke of Monterey,—the riotous gardens with their walls of white plaster topped with red pipe, the gulls wheeling over the little town, the breakers creaming in lazy, interlocking curves on the crescent of the beach, and the little old plaster church, with its hundred−year−old red altar−cloth, and its altar−step worn into grooves from the knees of the faithful.

"Oh, I must see the sea again!" cried Mary.

"Well, don't talk that way! You will," Lydia said cheerfully. But Susan, seeing the shadow on the kind, plain face, wished that she had held her tongue.

CHAPTER VI

It was late in July that Georgianna Lancaster startled and shocked the whole boarding−house out of its mid−summer calm. Susan, chronically affected by a wish that "something would happen," had been somewhat sobered by the fact that in poor Virginia's case something HAD happened. Suddenly Virginia's sight, accepted for years by them all as "bad," was very bad indeed. The great eye− doctor was angry that it had not been attended to before. "But it wasn't like this before!" Virginia protested patiently. She was always very patient after that, so brave indeed that the terrible thing that was coming swiftly and inevitably down upon her seemed quite impossible for the others to credit. But sometimes Susan heard her voice and Mrs. Lancaster's voice rising and falling for long, long talks in the night. "I don't believe it!" said Susan boldly, finding this attitude the most tenable in regard to Virginia's blindness.

Georgie's news, if startling, was not all bad. "Perhaps it'll raise the hoodoo from all of us old maids!" said Susan, inelegantly, to Mr. Oliver. "O'Connor doesn't look as if he had sense enough to raise anything, even the rent!" answered Billy cheerfully.

Susan heard the first of it on a windy, gritty Saturday afternoon, when she was glad to get indoors, and to take off the hat that had been wrenching her hair about. She came running upstairs to find Virginia lying limp upon the big bed, and Mary Lou, red−eyed and pale, sitting in the rocking−chair.

"Come in, dear, and shut it," said Mary Lou, sighing. "Sit down, Sue."

"What is it?" said Susan uneasily.

"Oh, Sue—−!" began Virginia, and burst into tears.

"Now, now, darling!" Mary Lou patted her sister's hand.

"Auntie—" Susan asked, turning pale.

"No, Ma's all right," Mary Lou reassured her, "and there's nothing really wrong, Sue. But Georgie—Georgie, dear, she's married to Joe O'Connor! Isn't it DREADFUL?"

"But Ma's going to have it annulled," said Virginia instantly.

"Married!" Susan gasped. "You mean engaged!"

"No, dear, married," Mary Lou repeated, in a sad, musical voice. "They were married on Monday night—"

"Tell me!" commanded Susan, her eyes flashing with pleasurable excitement.

"We don't know much, Sue dear. Georgie's been acting rather odd and she began to cry after breakfast this morning, and Ma got it out of her. I thought Ma would faint, and Georgie just SCREAMED. I kept calling out to Ma to be calm—" Susan could imagine the scene. "So then Ma took Georgie upstairs, and Jinny and I worked around, and came up here and made up this room. And just before lunch Ma came up, and—she looked chalk−white, didn't she, Jinny?"

"She looked−well, as white as this spread," agreed Virginia.

"Well, but what accounts for it!" gasped Susan. "Is Georgie CRAZY! Joe O'Connor! That snip! And hasn't he an awful old mother, or someone, who said that she'd never let him come home again if he married?"

"Listen, Sue!—You haven't heard half. It seems that they've been engaged for two months—"

"They HAVE!"

"Yes. And on Monday night Joe showed Georgie that he'd gotten the license, and they got thinking how long it would be before they could be married, what with his mother, and no prospects and all, and they simply walked into St. Peter's and were married!"

"Well, he'll have to leave his mother, that's all!" said Susan.

"Oh, my dear, that's just what they quarreled about! He WON'T."

"He—WON'T?"

"No, if you please! And you can imagine how furious that made Georgie! And when Ma told us that, she simply set her lips,—you know Ma! And then she said that she was going to see Father Birch with Georgie this afternoon, to have it annulled at once."

"Without saying a word to Joe!"

"Oh, they went first to Joe's. Oh, no, Joe is perfectly willing. It was, as Ma says, a mistake from beginning to

end."

"But how can it be annulled, Mary Lou?" Susan asked.

"Well, I don't understand exactly," Mary Lou answered coloring. "I think it's because they didn't go on any honeymoon—they didn't set up housekeeping, you know, or something like that!"

"Oh," said Susan, hastily, coloring too. "But wouldn't you know that if any one of us did get married, it would be annulled!" she said disgustedly. The others both began to laugh.

Still, it was all very exciting. When Georgie and her mother got home at dinner−time, the bride was pale and red−eyed, excited, breathing hard. She barely touched her dinner. Susan could not keep her eyes from the familiar hand, with its unfamiliar ring.

"I am very much surprised and disappointed in Father Birch," said Mrs. Lancaster, in a family conference in the dining−room just after dinner. "He seems to feel that the marriage may hold, which of course is too preposterous! If Joe O'Connor has so little appreciation—!"

"Ma!" said Georgie wearily, pleadingly.

"Well, I won't, my dear." Mrs. Lancaster interrupted herself with a visible effort. "And if I am disappointed in Joe," she presently resumed majestically. "I am doubly disappointed in Georgie. My baby− −that I always trusted—!"

Young Mrs. O'Connor began silently, bitterly, to cry. Susan went to sit beside her, and put a comforting arm about her.

"I have looked forward to my girls' wedding days," said Mrs. Lancaster, "with such feelings of joy! How could I anticipate that my own daughter, secretly, could contract a marriage with a man whose mother—" Her tone, low at first, rose so suddenly and so passionately that she was unable to control it. The veins about her forehead swelled.

"Ma!" said Mary Lou, "you only lower yourself to her level!"

"Do you mean that she won't let him bring Georgie there?" asked Susan.

"Whether she would or not," Mrs. Lancaster answered, with admirable loftiness, "she will not have a chance to insult my daughter. Joe, I pity!" she added majestically. "He fell deeply and passionately in love—"

"With Loretta," supplied Susan, innocently.

"He never cared for Loretta!" her aunt said positively. "No. With Georgie. And, not being a gentleman, we could hardly expect him to act like one! But we'll say no more about it. It will all be over in a few days, and then we'll try to forget it!"

Poor Georgie, it was but a sorry romance! Joe telephoned, Joe called, Father Birch came, the affair hung fire. Georgie was neither married nor free. Dr. O'Connor would not desert his mother, his mother refused to accept Georgie. Georgie cried day and night, merely asseverating that she hated Joe, and loved Ma, and she wished people would let her alone.

These were not very cheerful days in the boarding−house. Billy Oliver was worried and depressed, very unlike himself. He had been recently promoted to the post of foreman, was beginning to be a power among the men who associated with him and, as his natural instinct for leadership asserted itself, he found himself attracting some attention from the authorities themselves. He was questioned about the men, about their attitude toward this regulation or that superintendent. It was hinted that the spreading of heresies among the laborers was to be promptly discouraged. The men were not to be invited to express themselves as to hours, pay and the advantages of unifying. In other words, Mr. William Oliver, unless he became a little less interested and less active in the wrongs and rights of his fellow−men in the iron−works, might be surprised by a request to carry himself and his public sentiments elsewhere.

Susan, in her turn, was a little disturbed by the rumor that Front Office was soon to be abolished; begun for a whim, it might easily be ended for another whim. For herself she did not very much care; a certain confidence in the future was characteristic of her, but she found herself wondering what would become of the other girls, Miss Sherman and Miss Murray and Miss Cottle.

She felt far more deeply the pain that Peter's attitude gave her, a pain that gnawed at her heart day and night. He was home from Honolulu now, and had sent her several curious gifts from Hawaii, but, except for distant glimpses in the office, she had not seen him.

One evening, just before dinner, as she was dressing and thinking sadly of the weeks, the months, that had

passed since their last happy evening together, Lydia Lord came suddenly into the room. The little governess looked white and sick, and shared her distress with Susan in a few brief sentences. Here was Mrs. Lawrence's check in her hand, and here Mrs. Lawrence's note to say that her services, as governess to Chrissy and Donald and little Hazel, would be no longer required. The blow was almost too great to be realized.

"But I brought it on myself, Sue, yes I did!" said Lydia, with dry lips. She sat, a shapeless, shabby figure, on the side of the bed, and pressed a veined hand tightly against her knobby temples, "I brought it on myself. I want to tell you about it. I haven't given Mary even a hint! Chrissy has been ill, her throat—they've had a nurse, but she liked me to sit with her now and then. So I was sitting there awhile this morning, and Mrs. Lawrence's sister, Miss Bacon, came in, and she happened to ask me—oh, if only she HADN'T!− −if I knew that they meant to let Yates operate on Chrissy's throat. She said she thought it was a great pity. Oh, if only I'd held my tongue, fool, fool, FOOL that I was!" Miss Lydia took down her hand, and regarded Susan with hot, dry eyes. "But, before I thought," she pursued distressedly, "I said yes, I thought so too,—I don't know just what words I used, but no more than that! Chrissy asked her aunt if it would hurt, and she said, 'No, no, dear!' and I began reading. And now, here's this note from Mrs. Lawrence saying that she cannot overlook the fact that her conduct was criticized and discussed before Christina—! And after five years, Sue! Here, read it!"

"Beast!" Susan scowled at the monogrammed sheet, and the dashing hand. Miss Lydia clutched her wrist with a hot hand.

"What shall I do, Sue?" she asked, in agony.

"Well, I'd simply—" Susan began boldly enough. But a look at the pathetic, gray−haired figure on the bed stopped her short. She came, with the glory of her bright hair hanging loose about her face, to sit beside Lydia. "Really, I don't know, dear," she said gently. "What do YOU think?"

"Sue, I don't know!" And, to Susan's horror, poor Lydia twisted about, rested her arm on the foot of the bed, and began to cry.

"Oh, these rich!" raged Susan, attacking her hair with angry sweeps of the brush. "Do you wonder they think that the earth was made for them and Heaven too! They have everything! They can dash you off a note that takes away your whole income, they can saunter in late to church on Easter Sunday and rustle into their big empty pews, when the rest of us have been standing in the aisles for half an hour; they can call in a doctor for a cut finger, when Mary has to fight perfect agonies before she dares afford it—Don't mind me," she broke off, penitently, "but let's think what's to be done. You couldn't take the public school examinations, could you, Miss Lydia? it would be so glorious to simply let Mrs. Lawrence slide!"

"I always meant to do that some day," said Lydia, wiping her eyes and gulping, "but it would take time. And meanwhile—And there are Mary's doctor's bills, and the interest on our Piedmont lot—" For the Lord sisters, for patient years, had been paying interest, and an occasional installment, on a barren little tract of land nine blocks away from the Piedmont trolley.

"You could borrow—" began Susan.

But Lydia was more practical. She dried her eyes, straightened her hair and collar, and came, with her own quiet dignity, to the discussion of possibilities. She was convinced that Mrs. Lawrence had written in haste, and was already regretting it.

"No, she's too proud ever to send for me," she assured Susan, when the girl suggested their simply biding their time, "but I know that by taking me back at once she would save herself any amount of annoyance and time. So I'd better go and see her to−night, for by to−morrow she might have committed herself to a change."

"But you hate to go, don't you?" Susan asked, watching her keenly.

"Ah, well, it's unpleasant of course," Lydia said simply. "She may be unwilling to accept my apology. She may not even see me. One feels so—so humiliated, Sue."

"In that case, I'm going along to buck you up," said Susan, cheerfully.

In spite of Lydia's protests, go she did. They walked to the Lawrence home in a night so dark that Susan blinked when they finally entered the magnificent, lighted hallway.

The butler obviously disapproved of them. He did not quite attempt to shut the door on them, but Susan felt that they intruded.

"Mrs. Lawrence is at dinner, Miss Lord," he reminded Lydia, gravely.

"Yes, I know, but this is rather—important, Hughes," said Lydia, clearing her throat nervously.

"You had better see her at the usual time to−morrow," suggested the butler, smoothly. Susan's face burned. She longed to snatch one of the iron Japanese swords that decorated the hall, and with it prove to Hughes that his insolence was appreciated. But more reasonable tactics must prevail.

"Will you say that I am here, Hughes?" Miss Lord asked quietly.

"Presently," he answered, impassively.

Susan followed him for a few steps across the hall, spoke to him in a low tone.

"Too bad to ask you to interrupt her, Mr. Hughes," said she, in her friendly little way, "but you know Miss Lord's sister has been having one of her bad times, and of course you understand—?" The blue eyes and the pitiful little smile conquered. Hughes became human.

"Certainly, Miss," he said hoarsely, "but Madam is going to the theater to−night, and it's no time to see her."

"I know," Susan interposed, sympathetically.

"However, ye may depend upon my taking the best moment," Hughes said, before disappearing, and when he came back a few moments later, he was almost gracious.

"Mrs. Lawrence says that if you wish to see her you'll kindly wait, Miss Lord. Step in here, will you, please? Will ye be seated, ladies? Miss Chrissy's been asking for you the whole evening, Miss Lord."

"Is that so?" Lydia asked, brightening. They waited, with fast− beating hearts, for what seemed a long time. The great entrance to the flower−filled embrasure that led to the dining−room was in full view from where they stood, and when Mrs. Lawrence, elegantly emacinated, wonderfully gowned and jeweled, suddenly came out into the tempered brilliance of the electric lights both girls went to meet her.

Susan's heart burned for Lydia, faltering out her explanation, in the hearing of the butler.

"This is hardly the time to discuss this, Miss Lord," Mrs. Lawrence said impatiently, "but I confess I am surprised that a woman who apparently valued her position in my house should jeopardize it by such an extraordinary indiscretion—"

Susan's heart sank. No hope here!

But at this moment some six or seven young people followed Mrs. Lawrence out of the dining−room and began hurriedly to assume their theater wraps, and Susan, with a leap of her heart, recognized among them Peter Coleman, Peter splendid in evening dress, with a light overcoat over his arm, and a silk hat in his hand. His face brightened when he saw her, he dropped his coat, and came quickly across the hall, hands outstretched.

"Henrietta! say that you remember your Percy!" he said joyously, and Susan, coloring prettily, said "Oh, hush!" as she gave him her hand. A rapid fire of questions followed, he was apparently unconscious of, or indifferent to, the curiously watching group.

"Well, you two seem to be great friends," Mrs. Lawrence said graciously, turning from her conversation with Miss Lord.

"This is our cue to sing 'For you was once My Wife,' Susan!" Peter suggested. Susan did not answer him. She exchanged an amused, indulgent look with Mrs. Lawrence. Perhaps the girl's quiet dignity rather surprised that lady, for she gave her a keen, appraising look before she asked, pleasantly:

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your old friend, Peter?"

"Not old friends," Susan corrected serenely, as they were introduced.

"But vurry, vurry de−ah," supplemented Peter, "aren't we?"

"I hope Mrs. Lawrence knows you well enough to know how foolish you are, Peter!" Susan said composedly.

And Mrs. Lawrence said brightly, "Indeed I do! For we ARE very old friends, aren't we, Peter?"

But the woman's eyes still showed a little puzzlement. The exact position of this girl, with her ready "Peter," her willingness to disclaim an old friendship, her pleasant unresponsiveness, was a little hard to determine. A lady, obviously, a possible beauty, and entirely unknown—

"Well, we must run," Mrs. Lawrence recalled herself to say suddenly. "But why won't you and Miss Lord run up to see Chrissy for a few moments, Miss Brown? The poor kiddy is frightfully dull. And you'll be here in the morning as usual, Miss Lord? That's good. Good− night!"

"You did that, Sue, you darling!" exulted Lydia, as they ran down the stone steps an hour later, and locked arms to walk briskly along the dark street. "Your knowing Mr. Coleman saved the day!" And, in the exuberance of her spirits, she took Susan into a brightly lighted little candy−store, and treated her to ice−cream. They carried some home in a dripping paper box for Mary, who was duly horrified, agitated and rejoiced over the history of the

day.

Through Susan's mind, as she lay wakeful in bed that night, one scene after another flitted and faded. She saw Mrs. Lawrence, glittering and supercilious, saw Peter, glowing and gay, saw the butler, with his attempt to be rude, and the little daughter of the house, tossing about in the luxurious pillows of her big bed. She thought of Lydia Lord's worn gloves, fumbling in her purse for money, of Mary Lord, so gratefully eating melting ice−cream from a pink saucer, with a silver souvenir spoon!

Two different worlds, and she, Susan, torn between them! How far she was from Peter's world, she felt that she had never realized until to−night. How little gifts and pleasures signified from a man whose life was crowded with nothing else! How helpless she was, standing by while his life whirled him further and further away from the dull groove in which her own feet were set!

Yet Susan's evening had not been without its little cause for satisfaction. She had treated Peter coolly, with dignity, with reserve, and she had seen it not only spur him to a sudden eagerness to prove his claim to her friendship, but also have its effect upon his hostess. This was the clue, at last.

"If ever I have another chance," decided Susan, "he won't have such easy sailing! He will have to work for my friendship as if I were the heiress, and he a clerk in Front Office."

August was the happiest month Susan had ever known, September even better, and by October everybody at Mrs. Lancaster's boarding−house was confidently awaiting the news of Susan Brown's engagement to the rich Mr. Peter Coleman. Susan herself was fairly dazed with joy. She felt herself the most extraordinarily fortunate girl in the world.

Other matters also prospered. Alfred Lancaster had obtained a position in the Mission, and seemed mysteriously inclined to hold it, and to conquer his besetting weakness. And Georgie's affair was at a peaceful standstill. Georgie had her old place in the house, was changed in nothing tangible, and, if she cried a good deal, and went about less than before, she was not actively unhappy. Dr. O'Connor came once a week to see her, an uncomfortable event, during which Georgie's mother was with difficulty restrained from going up to the parlor to tell Joe what she thought of a man who put his mother before his wife. Virginia was bravely enduring the horrors of approaching darkness. Susan reproached herself for her old impatience with Jinny's saintliness; there was no question of her cousin's courage and faith during this test. Mary Lou was agitatedly preparing for a visit to the stricken Eastmans, in Nevada, deciding one day that Ma could, and the next that Ma couldn't, spare her for the trip.

Susan walked in a golden cloud. No need to hunt through Peter's letters, to weigh his words,—she had the man himself now unequivocally in the attitude of lover.

Or if, in all honesty, she knew him to be a little less than that, at least he was placing himself in that light, before their little world. In that world theatre−trips, candy and flowers have their definite significance, the mere frequency with which they were seen together committed him, surely, to something! They paid dinner−calls together, they went together to week−end visits to Emily Saunders, at least two evenings out of every week were spent together. At any moment he might turn to her with the little, little phrase that would settle this uncertainty once and for all! Indeed it occurred to Susan sometimes that he might think it already settled, without words. At least once a day she flushed, half−delighted, half− distressed,—under teasing questions on the subject from the office force, or from the boarders at home; all her world, apparently, knew.

One day, in her bureau drawer, she found the little card that had accompanied his first Christmas gift, nearly two years before. Why did a keen pain stir her heart, as she stood idly twisting it in her fingers? Had not the promise of that happy day been a thousand times fulfilled?

But the bright, enchanting hope that card had brought had been so sickeningly deferred! Two years!—she was twenty−three now.

Mrs. Lancaster, opening the bedroom door a few minutes later, found Susan in tears, kneeling by the bed.

"Why, lovey! lovey!" Her aunt patted the bowed head. "What is it, dear?"

"Nothing!" gulped Susan, sitting back on her heels, and drying her eyes.

"Not a quarrel with Peter?"

"Oh, auntie, no!"

"Well," her aunt sighed comfortably, "of course it's an emotional time, dear! Leaving the home nest—" Mrs. Lancaster eyed her keenly, but Susan did not speak. "Remember, Auntie is to know the first of all!" she said

playfully. Adding, after a moment's somber thought, "If Georgie had told Mama, things would be very different now!"

"Poor Georgie!" Susan smiled, and still kneeling, leaned on her aunt's knees, as Mrs. Lancaster sat back in the rocking chair.

"Poor Georgie indeed!" said her mother vexedly. "It's more serious than you think, dear. Joe was here last night. It seems that he's going to that doctor's convention, at Del Monte a week from next Saturday, and he was talking to Georgie about her going, too."

Susan was thunderstruck.

"But, Auntie, aren't they going to be divorced?"

Mrs. Lancaster rubbed her nose violently.

"They are if *I* have anything to say!" she said, angrily. "But, of course, Georgie has gotten herself into this thing, and now Mama isn't going to get any help in trying to get her out! Joe was extremely rude and inconsiderate about it, and got the poor child crying—!"

"But, Auntie, she certainly doesn't want to go!"

"Certainly she doesn't. And to come home to that dreadful WOMAN, his mother? Use your senses, Susan!"

"Why don't you forbid Joe O'Connor the house, Auntie?"

"Because I don't want any little whipper−snapper of a medical graduate from the Mission to DARE to think he can come here, in my own home, and threaten me with a lawsuit, for alienating his wife's affections!" Mrs. Lancaster said forcibly. "I never in my life heard such impudence!"

"Is he mad!" exclaimed Susan, in a low, horrified tone.

"Well, I honestly think he is!" Mrs. Lancaster, gratified by this show of indignation, softened. "But I didn't mean to distress you with this, dear," said she. "It will all work out, somehow. We mustn't have any scandal in the family just now, whatever happens, for your sake!"

Pursuant to her new−formed resolutions, Susan was maintaining what dignity she could in her friendship with Peter nowadays. And when, in November, Peter stopped her on the "deck" one day to ask her, "How about Sunday, Sue? I have a date, but I think I can get out of it?" she disgusted him by answering briskly, "Not for me, Peter. I'm positively engaged for Sunday."

"Oh, no, you're not!" he assured her, firmly.

"Oh, truly I am!" Susan nodded a good−by, and went humming into the office, and that night made William Oliver promise to take her to the Carrolls' in Sausalito for the holiday.

So on a hazy, soft November morning they found themselves on the cable−car that in those days slipped down the steep streets of Nob Hill, through the odorous, filthy gaiety of the Chinese quarter, through the warehouse district, and out across the great crescent of the water−front. Billy, well−brushed and clean−shaven, looked his best to−day, and Susan, in a wide, dashing hat, with fresh linen at wrists and collar, enjoyed the innocent tribute of many a passing glance from the ceaseless current of men crossing and recrossing the ferry place.

"If they try to keep us for dinner, we'll bashfully remain," said Billy, openly enchanted by the prospect of a day with his adored Josephine.

But first they were to have a late second breakfast at Sardi's, the little ramshackle Sausalito restaurant, whose tables, visible through green arches, hung almost directly over the water. It was a cheap meal, oily and fried, but Susan was quite happy, hanging over the rail to watch the shining surface of the water that was so near. The reflection of the sun shifted in a ceaselessly moving bright pattern on the white−washed ceiling, the wash of the outgoing steamer surged through the piles, and set to rocking all the nearby boats at anchor.

After luncheon, they climbed the long flights of steps that lead straight through the village, which hangs on the cliff like a cluster of sea−birds' nests. The gardens were bare and brown now, the trees sober and shabby.

When the steps stopped, they followed a road that ran like a shelf above the bay and waterfront far below, and that gave a wonderful aspect of the wide sweep of hills and sky beyond, all steeped in the thin, clear autumn haze. Billy pushed open a high gate that had scraped the path beyond in a deep circular groove, and they were in a fine, old−fashioned garden, filled with trees. Willow and pepper and eucalyptus towered over the smaller growth of orange and lemon− verbena trees; there were acacia and mock−orange and standard roses, and hollyhock stalks, bare and dry. Only the cosmos bushes, tall and wavering, were in bloom, with a few chrysanthemums and late asters, the air was colder here than it had been out under the bright November sun, and the path under the trees

was green and slippery.

On a rise of ground stood the plain, comfortable old house, with a white curtain blowing here and there at an open window and its front door set hospitably ajar. But not a soul was in sight.

Billy and Susan were at home here, however, and went through the hallway to open a back door that gave on the kitchen. It was an immaculate kitchen, with a fire glowing sleepily behind the shining iron grating of the stove, and sunshine lying on the well−scrubbed floor. A tall woman was busy with plants in the bright window.

"Well, you nice child!" she exclaimed, her face brightening as Susan came into her arms for her motherly kiss. "I was just thinking about you! We've been hearing things about you, Sue, and wondering—and wondering—! And Billy, too! The girls will be delighted!"

This was the mother of the five Carrolls, a mother to whom it was easy to trace some of their beauty, and some of their courage. In the twelve long years of her widowhood, from a useless, idle, untrained member of a society to which all three adjectives apply, this woman had grown to be the broad and brave and smiling creature who was now studying Susan's face with the insatiable motherliness that even her household's constant claims failed to exhaust. Manager and cook and houseworker, seamstress and confidante to her restless, growing brood, still there was a certain pure radiance that was never quite missing from her smile, and Susan felt a mad impulse to− day to have a long comforting cry on the broad shoulder. She thoroughly loved Mrs. Carroll, even if she thought the older woman's interest in soups and darning and the filling of lamps a masterly affectation, and pitied her for the bitter fate that had robbed her of home and husband, wealth and position, at the very time when her children needed these things the most.

They two went into the sitting−room now, while Billy raced after the young people who had taken their luncheon, it appeared, and were walking over the hills to a favorite spot known as "Gioli's" beach.

Susan liked this room, low−ceiled and wide, which ran the length of the house. It seemed particularly pleasant to−day, with the uncertain sunlight falling through the well−darned, snowy window− curtains, the circle of friendly, shabby chairs, the worn old carpet, scrupulously brushed, the reading−table with a green−shaded lamp, and the old square piano loaded with music. The room was in Sunday order to−day, books, shabby with much handling, were ranged neatly on their shelves, not a fallen leaf lay under the bowl of late roses on the piano.

Susan had had many a happy hour in this room, for if the Carrolls were poor to the point of absurdity, their mother had made a sort of science of poverty, and concentrated her splendid mind on the questions of meals, clothes, and the amusements of their home evenings. That it had been a hard fight, was still a hard fight, Susan knew. Philip, the handsome first−born, had the tendencies and temptations natural to his six−and−twenty years; Anna, her mother's especial companion, was taking a hard course of nursing in a city hospital; Josephine, the family beauty, at twenty, was soberly undertaking a course in architecture, in addition to her daily work in the offices of Huxley and Huxley; even little Betsey was busy, and Jimmy still in school; so that the brunt of the planning, of the actual labor, indeed, fell upon their mother. But she had carried a so much heavier burden, that these days seemed bright and easeful to Mrs. Carroll, and the face she turned to Susan now was absolutely unclouded.

"What's all the news, Sue? Auntie's well, and Mary Lou? And what do they say now of Jinny? Don't tell me about Georgie until the girls are here! And what's this I hear of your throwing down Phil completely, and setting up a new young man?"

"Please'm, you never said I wasn'ter," Susan laughed.

"No, indeed I never did! You couldn't do a more sensible thing!"

"Oh, Aunt Jo!" The title was only by courtesy. "I thought you felt that every woman ought to have a profession!"

"A means of livelihood, my dear, not a profession necessarily! Yes, to be used in case she didn't marry, or when anything went wrong if she did," the older woman amended briskly. "But, Sue, marriage first for all girls! I won't say," she went on thoughtfully, "that any marriage is better than none at all, but I could ALMOST say that I thought that! That is, given the average start, I think a sensible woman has nine chances out of ten of making a marriage successful, whereas there never was a really complete life rounded out by a single woman."

"My young man has what you'll consider one serious fault," said Susan, dimpling.

"Dear, dear! And what's that?"

"He's rich."

"Peter Coleman, yes, of course he is!" Mrs. Carroll frowned thoughtfully. "Well, that isn't NECESSARILY bad, Susan!"

"Aunt Josephine," Susan said, really shaken out of her nonsense by the serious tone, "do you honestly think it's a drawback? Wouldn't you honestly rather have Jo, say, marry a rich man than a poor man, other things being equal?"

"Honestly no, Sue," said Mrs. Carroll.

"But if the rich man was just as good and brave and honest and true as the poor one?" persisted the girl.

"But he couldn't be, Sue, he never is. The fibers of his moral and mental nature are too soft. He's had no hardening. No," Mrs. Carroll shook her head. "No, I've been rich, and I've been poor. If a man earns his money honestly himself, he grows old during the process, and he may or may not be a strong and good man. But if he merely inherits it, he is pretty sure not to be one."

"But aren't there some exceptions?" asked Susan. Mrs. Carroll laughed at her tone.

"There are exceptions to everything! And I really believe Peter Coleman is one," she conceded smilingly. "Hark!" for feet were running down the path outside.

"There you are, Sue!" said Anna Carroll, putting a glowing face in the sitting−room door. "I came back for you! The others said they would go slowly, and we can catch them if we hurry!"

She came in, a brilliant, handsome young creature, in rough, well− worn walking attire, and a gipsyish hat. Talking steadily, as they always did when together, she and Susan went upstairs, and Susan was loaned a short skirt, and a cap that made her prettier than ever.

The house was old, there was a hint of sagging here and there, in the worn floors, the bedrooms were plainly furnished, almost bare. In the atmosphere there lingered, despite the open windows, the faint undefinable odor common to old houses in which years of frugal and self−denying living have set their mark, an odor vaguely compounded of clean linen and old woodwork, hot soapsuds and ammonia. The children's old books were preserved in old walnut cases, nothing had been renewed, recarpeted, repapered for many years.

Still talking, the girls presently ran downstairs, and briskly followed the road that wound up, above the village, to the top of the hill. Anna chattered of the hospital, of the superintendent of nurses, who was a trial to all the young nurses, "all superintendents are tyrants, I think," said Anna, "and we just have to shut our teeth and bear it! But it's all so unnecessarily hard, and it's wrong, too, for nursing the sick is one thing, and being teased by an irritable woman like that is another! However," she concluded cheerfully, "I'll graduate some day, and forget her! And meantime, I don't want to worry mother, for Phil's just taken a real start, and Bett's doctor's bills are paid, and the landlord, by some miracle, has agreed to plaster the kitchen!"

They joined the others just below the top of the hill, and were presently fighting the stiff wind that blew straight across the ridge. Once over it, however, the wind dropped, the air was deliciously soft and fresh and their rapid walking made the day seem warm. There was no road; their straggling line followed the little shelving paths beaten out of the hillside by the cows.

Far below lay the ocean, only a tone deeper than the pale sky. The line of the Cliff House beach was opposite, a vessel under full sail was moving in through the Golden Gate. The hills fell sharply away to the beach, Gioli's ranch−house, down in the valley, was only one deeper brown note among all the browns. Here and there cows were grazing, cotton−tails whisked behind the tall, dried thistles.

The Carrolls loved this particular walk, and took it in all weathers. Sometimes they had a guest or two,—a stray friend of Philip's, or two or three of Anna's girl friends from the hospital. It did not matter, for there was no pairing off at the Carroll picnics. Oftener they were all alone, or, as to−day, with Susan and Billy, who were like members of the family.

To−day Billy, Jimmy and Betsey were racing ahead like frolicking puppies; up banks, down banks, shrieking, singing and shouting. Phil and Josephine walked together, they were inseparable chums, and Susan thought them a pretty study to−day; Josephine so demurely beautiful in her middy jacket and tam−o−shanter cap, and Philip so obviously proud of her.

She and Anna, their hands sunk in their coat−pockets, their hair loosening under the breezes, followed the others rather silently.

And swiftly, subtly, the healing influences of the hour crept into Susan's heart. What of these petty little hopes and joys and fears that fretted her like a cloud of midges day and night? How small they seemed in the wide

silence of these brooding hills, with the sunlight lying warm on the murmuring ocean below, and the sweet kindly earth underfoot!

"I wish I could live out here, Nance, and never go near to people and things again!"

"Oh, DON'T you, Sue!"

There was a delay at the farmhouse for cream. The ranchers' damp dooryard had been churned into deep mud by the cows, strong odors, delicious to Susan, because they were associated with these happy days, drifted about, the dairy reeked of damp earth, wet wood, and scoured tinware. The cream, topping the pan like a circle of leather, was loosened by a small, sharp stick, and pushed, thick and lumpy, into the empty jam jar that Josephine neatly presented. A woman came to the ranch−house door with a grinning Portuguese greeting, the air from the kitchen behind her was close, and reeked of garlic and onions and other odors. Susan and Anna went in to look at the fat baby, a brown cherub whose silky black lashes curved back half an inch from his cheeks. There were half a dozen small children in the kitchen, cats, even a sickly chicken or two.

"Very different from the home life of our dear Queen!" said Susan, when they were out in the air again.

The road now ran between marshy places full of whispering reeds, occasional crazy fences must be crossed, occasional pools carefully skirted. And then they were really crossing the difficult strip of sandy dead grasses, and cocoanut shells, and long−dried seaweeds that had been tossed up by the sea in a long ridge on the beach, and were racing on the smooth sand, where the dangerous looking breakers were rolling so harmlessly. They shouted to each other now, above the roar of the water, as they gathered drift−wood for their fire, and when the blaze was well started, indulged in the fascinating pastime of running in long curves so near to the incoming level rush of the waves that they were all soon wet enough to feel that no further harm could be done by frankly wading in the shallows, posing for Philip's camera on half−submerged rocks, and chasing each other through a frantic game of beach tag. It was the prudent Josephine,— for Anna was too dreamy and unpractical to bring her attention to detail,—who suggested a general drying of shoes, as they gathered about the fire for the lunch—toasted sandwiches, and roasted potatoes, and large wedges of apple−pie, and the tin mugs of delicious coffee that crowned all these feasts. Only sea−air accounted for the quantities in which the edibles disappeared; the pasteboard boxes and the basket were emptied to the last crumb, and the coffee−pot refilled and emptied again.

The meal was not long over, and the stiffened boots were being buttoned with the aid of bent hairpins, when the usual horrifying discovery of the time was made. Frantic hurrying ensued, the tin cups, dripping salt water, were strung on a cord, the cardboard boxes fed the last flicker of the fire, the coffee−pot was emptied into the waves.

And they were off again, climbing up—up—up the long rise of the hills. The way home always seemed twice the way out, but Susan found it a soothing, comforting experience to−day. The sun went behind a cloud; cows filed into the ranch gates for milking; a fine fog blew up from the sea.

"Wonderful day, Anna!" Susan said. The two were alone together again.

"These walks do make you over," Anna's bright face clouded a little as she turned to look down the long road they had come. "It's all so beautiful, Sue," she said, slowly, "and the spring is so beautiful, and books and music and fires are so beautiful. Why aren't they enough? Nobody can take those things away from us!"

"I know," Susan said briefly, comprehending.

"But we set our hearts on some silly thing not worth one of these fogs," Anna mused, "and nothing but that one thing seems to count!"

"I know," Susan said again. She thought of Peter Coleman.

"There's a doctor at the hospital," Anna said suddenly. "A German, Doctor Hoffman. Of course I'm only one of twenty girls to him, now. But I've often thought that if I had pretty gowns, and the sort of home,—you know what I mean, Sue! to which one could ask that type of really distinguished man—−"

"Well, look at my case—−" began Susan.

It was almost dark when the seven stormed the home kitchen, tired, chilly, happy, ravenous. Here they found Mrs. Carroll, ready to serve the big pot−roast and the squares of yellow cornbread, and to have Betsey and Billy burn their fingers trying to get baked sweet potatoes out of the oven. And here, straddling a kitchen chair, and noisily joyous as usual, was Peter Coleman. Susan knew in a happy instant that he had gone to find her at her aunt's, and had followed her here, and during the meal that followed, she was the maddest of all the mad crowd. After dinner they had Josephine's violin, and coaxed Betsey to recite, but more appreciated than either was Miss

Brown's rendition of selections from German and Italian opera, and her impersonation of an inexperienced servant from Erin's green isle. Mrs. Carroll laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks, as indeed they all did.

The evening ended with songs about the old piano, "Loch Lomond," "Love's Old Sweet Song," and "Asthore." Then Susan and Peter and Billy must run for their hats and wraps.

"And Peter thinks there's MONEY in my window−washer!" said Mrs. Carroll, when they were all loitering in the doorway, while Betts hunted for the new time−table.

"Mother's invention" was a standing joke with the young Carrolls, but their mother had a serene belief that some day SOMETHING might be done with the little contrivance she had thought of some years ago, by which the largest of windows might be washed outside as easily as inside. "I believe I really thought of it by seeing poor maids washing fifth−story windows by sitting on the sill and tipping out!" she confessed one day to Susan. Now she had been deeply pleased by Peter's casual interest in it.

"Peter says that there's NO reason—−" she began.

"Oh, Mother!" Josephine laughed indulgently, as she stood with her arm about her mother's waist, and her bright cheek against her mother's shoulder, "you've NOT been taking Peter seriously!"

"Jo, when I ask you to take me seriously, it'll be time for you to get so fresh!" said Peter neatly.

"Your mother is the Lady Edison of the Pacific Coast, and don't you forget it! I'm going to talk to some men at the shop about this thing—−"

"Say, if you do, I'll make some blue prints," Billy volunteered.

"You're on!" agreed Mr. Coleman.

"You wouldn't want to market this yourself, Mrs. Carroll?"

"Well—no, I don't think so. No, I'm sure I wouldn't! I'd rather sell it for a lump sum—−"

"To be not less than three dollars," laughed Phil.

"Less than three hundred, you mean!" said the interested Peter.

"Three hundred!" Mrs. Carroll exclaimed. "Do you SUPPOSE so?"

"Why, I don't know—but I can find out"

The trio, running for their boat, left the little family rather excited, for the first time, over the window−cleaner.

"But, Peter, is there really something in it?" asked Susan, on the boat.

"Well,—there might be. Anyway, it seemed a good chance to give them a lift, don't you know?" he said, with his ingenuous blush. Susan loved him for the generous impulse. She had sometimes fancied him a little indifferent to the sufferings of the less fortunate, proof of the contrary warmed her to the very heart! She had been distressed one day to hear him gaily telling George Banks, the salesman who was coughing himself to death despite the frantic care of his wife, a story of a consumptive, and, on another occasion, when a shawled, shabby woman had come up to them in the street, with the whined story of five little hungry children, Susan had been shocked to hear Peter say, with his irrepressible gaiety, "Well, here! Here's five cents; that's a cent apiece! Now mind you don't waste it!"

She told herself to−night that these things proved no more than want of thought. There was nothing wrong with the heart that could plan so tactfully for Mrs. Carroll.

On the following Saturday Susan had the unexpected experience of shopping with Mrs. Lancaster and Georgie for the latter's trousseau. It was unlike any shopping that they had ever done before, inasmuch as the doctor's unclaimed bride had received from her lord the sum of three hundred dollars for the purpose. Georgie denied firmly that she was going to start with her husband for the convention at Del Monte that evening, but she went shopping nevertheless. Perhaps she could not really resist the lure of the shining heap of gold pieces. She became deeply excited and charmed over the buying of the pretty tailor−made, the silk house dresses, the hat and shoes and linen. Georgie began to play the bride, was prettily indignant with clerks, pouted at silks and velvets. Susan did not miss her cousin's bright blush when certain things, a linen suit, underlinen, a waist or two, were taken from the mass of things to be sent, and put into Georgie's suitcase.

"And you're to have a silk waist, Ma, I INSIST."

"Now, Baby love, this is YOUR shopping. And, more than that, I really need a pair of good corsets before I try on waists!"

"Then you'll have both!" Mrs. Lancaster laughed helplessly as the bride carried her point.

At six o'clock the three met the doctor at the Vienna Bakery, for tea, and Georgie, quite lofty in her attitude

when only her mother and cousin were to be impressed, seemed suddenly to lose her powers of speech. She answered the doctor's outline of his plans only by monosyllables. "Yes," "All right," "That's nice, Joe." Her face was burning red.

"But Ma—Ma and I—and Sue, too, don't you, Sue?" she stammered presently. "We think—and don't you think it would be as well, yourself, Joe, if I went back with Ma to−night—−"

Susan, anxiously looking toward the doctor, at this, felt a little thrill run over her whole body at the sudden glimpse of the confident male she had in his reply,—or rather, lack of reply. For, after a vague, absent glance at Georgie, he took a time−table out of his pocket, and addressed his mother−in−law.

"We'll be back next Sunday, Mrs. Lancaster. But don't worry if you don't hear from Georgie that day, for we may be late, and Mother won't naturally want us to run off the moment we get home. But on Monday Georgie can go over, if she wants to. Perhaps I'll drive her over, if I can."

"He was the coolest—−!" Susan said, half−annoyed, half−admiring, to Mary Lou, late that night. The boarding−house had been pleasantly fluttered by the departure of the bride, Mrs. Lancaster, in spite of herself, had enjoyed the little distinction of being that personage's mother.

"Well, she'll be back again in a week!" Virginia, missing her sister, sighed.

"Back, yes," Mrs. Lancaster admitted, "but not quite the same, dear!" Georgie, whatever her husband, whatever the circumstances of her marriage, was nearer her mother than any of the others now. As a wife, she was admitted to the company of wives.

Susan spent the evening in innocently amorous dreams, over her game of patience. What a wonderful thing, if one loved a man, to fare forth into the world with him as his wife!——

"I have about as much chance with Joe Carroll as a dead rat," said Billy suddenly. He was busied with his draughting board and the little box of draughts−man's instruments that Susan always found fascinating, and had been scowling and puffing over his work.

"Why?" Susan asked, laughing outright. "Oh, she's so darn busy!" Billy said, and returned to his work.

Susan pondered it. She wished she were so "darned" busy that Peter Coleman might have to scheme and plan to see her.

"That's why men's love affairs are considered so comparatively unimportant, I suppose," she submitted presently. "Men are so busy!"

Billy paid no attention to the generality, and Susan pursued it no further.

But after awhile she interrupted him again, this time in rather an odd tone.

"Billy, I want to ask you something—−"

"Ask away," said Billy, giving her one somewhat startled glance.

Susan did not speak immediately, and he did not hurry her. A few silent minutes passed before she laid a card carefully in place, studied it with her head on one side, and said casually, in rather a husky voice:

"Billy, if a man takes a girl everywhere, and gives her things, and seems to want to be with her all the time, he's in love with her, isn't he?"

Billy, apparently absorbed in what he was doing, cleared his throat before he answered carelessly:

"Well, it might depend, Sue. When a man in my position does it, a girl knows gosh darn well that if I spend my good hard money on her I mean business!"

"But—it mightn't be so—with a rich man?" hazarded Susan bravely.

"Why, I don't know, Sue." An embarrassed red had crept into William's cheeks. "Of course, if a fellow kissed her—−"

"Oh, heavens!" cried Susan, scarlet in turn, "he never did anything like THAT!"

"Didn't, hey?" William looked blank.

"Oh, never!" Susan said, meeting his look bravely. "He's—he's too much of a gentleman, Bill!"

"Perhaps that's being a gentleman, and perhaps it's not," said Billy, scowling. "He—but he—he makes love to you, doesn't he?" The crude phrase was the best he could master in this delicate matter.

"I don't—I don't know!" said Susan, laughing, but with flaming cheeks. "That's it! He—he isn't sentimental. I don't believe he ever would be, it's not his nature. He doesn't take anything very seriously, you know. We talk all the time, but not about really serious things." It sounded a little lame. Susan halted.

"Of course, Coleman's a perfectly decent fellow—−" Billy began, with brotherly uneasiness.

"Oh, absolutely!" Susan could laugh, in her perfect confidence. "He acts exactly as if I were his sister, or another boy. He never even− −put his arm about me," she explained, "and I—I don't know just what he DOES mean—−"

"Sure," said Billy, thoughtfully.

"Of course, there's no reason why a man and a girl can't be good friends just as two men would," Susan said, more lightly, after a pause.

"Oh, yes there is! Don't you fool yourself!" Billy said, gloomily. "That's all rot!"

"Well, a girl can't stay moping in the house until a man comes along and says, 'If I take you to the theater it means I want to marry you!'" Susan declared with spirit. "I—I can't very well turn to Peter now and say, 'This ends everything, unless you are in earnest!'"

Her distress, her earnestness, her eagerness for his opinion, had carried her quite out of herself. She rested her face in her hands, and fixed her anxious eyes upon him.

"Well, here's the way I figure it out," Billy said, deliberately, drawing his pencil slowly along the edge of his T−square, and squinting at it absorbedly, "Coleman has a crush on you, all right, and he'd rather be with you than anyone else—−"

Yes," nodded Susan. "I know that, because—−"

"Well. But you see you're so fixed that you can't entertain him here, Sue, and you don't run in his crowd, so when he wants to see you he has to go out of his way to do it. So his rushing you doesn't mean as much as it otherwise would."

"I suppose that's true," Susan said, with a sinking heart.

"The chances are that he doesn't want to get married at all yet," pursued Billy, mercilessly, "and he thinks that if he gives you a good time, and doesn't—doesn't go any further, that he's playing fair."

"That's what I think," Susan said, fighting a sensation of sickness. Her heart was a cold weight, she hoped that she was not going to cry.

"But all the same, Sue," Billy resumed more briskly, "You can see that it wouldn't take much to bring an affair like that to a finish. Coleman's rich, he can marry if he pleases, and he wants what he wants—−You couldn't just stop short, I suppose? You couldn't simply turn down all his invitations, and refuse everything?" he broke off to ask.

"Billy, how could I? Right in the next office!"

"Well, that's an advantage, in a way. It keeps the things in his mind. Either way, you're no worse off for stopping everything now, Sue. If he's in earnest, he'll not be put off by that, and if he's not, you save yourself from—from perhaps beginning to care."

Susan could have kissed the top of Billy's rumpled head for the tactful close. She had thrown her pride to the winds to−night, but she loved him for remembering it.

"But he would think that I cared!" she objected.

"Let him! That won't hurt you. Simply say that your aunt disapproves of your being so much with him, and stop short."

Billy went on working, and Susan shuffled her pack for a new game.

"Thank you, Bill," she said at last, gratefully. "I'm glad I told you."

"Oh, that's all right!" said William, gruffly.

There was a silence until Mary Lou came in, to rip up her old velvet hat, and speculate upon the clangers of a trip to Virginia City.

CHAPTER VII

Life presented itself in a new aspect to Susan Brown. A hundred little events and influences combining had made it seem to her less a grab−bag, from which one drew good or bad at haphazard, and more a rational problem, to be worked out with arbitrarily supplied materials. She might not make herself either rich or famous, but she COULD,—she began dimly to perceive,—eliminate certain things from her life and put others in their places. The race was not to the swift, but to the faithful. What other people had done, she, by following the old copybook rules of the honest policy, the early rising, the power of knowledge, the infinite capacity of taking pains that was genius, could do, too. She had been the toy of chance too long. She would grasp chance, now, and make it serve her. The perseverance that Anna brought to her hospital work, that Josephine exercised in her studies, Susan, lacking a gift, lacking special training, would seriously devote to the business of getting married. Girls DID marry. She would presumably marry some day, and Peter Coleman would marry. Why not, having advanced a long way in this direction, to each other?

There was, in fact, no alternative in her case. She knew no other eligible man half as well. If Peter Coleman went out of her life, what remained? A somewhat insecure position in a wholesale drug− house, at forty dollars a month, and half a third−story bedroom in a boarding−house.

Susan was not a calculating person. She knew that Peter Coleman liked her immensely, and that he could love her deeply, too. She knew that her feeling for him was only held from an extreme by an inherited feminine instinct of self−preservation. Marriage, and especially this marriage, meant to her a great many pleasant things, a splendid, lovable man with whom to share life, a big home to manage and delight in, a conspicuous place in society, and one that she knew that she could fill gracefully and well. Marriage meant children, dear little white−clad sons, with sturdy bare knees, and tiny daughters half−smothered in lace and ribbons; it meant power, power to do good, to develop her own gifts; it meant, above all, a solution of the problems of her youth. No more speculations, no more vagaries, safely anchored, happily absorbed in normal cares and pleasures, Susan could rest on her laurels, and look about her in placid content!

No more serious thought assailed her. Other thoughts than these were not "nice." Susan safe−guarded her wandering fancies as sternly as she did herself, would as quickly have let Peter, or any other man, kiss her, as to have dreamed of the fundamental and essential elements of marriage. These, said Auntie, "came later." Susan was quite content to ignore them. That the questions that "came later" might ruin her life or unmake her compact, she did not know. At this point it might have made no difference in her attitude. Her affection for Peter was quite as fresh and pure as her feeling for a particularly beloved brother would have been.

"You're dated three−deep for Thursday night, I presume?"

"Peter—how you do creep up behind one!" Susan turned, on the deck, to face him laughingly. "What did you say?"

"I said—but where are you going?"

"Upstairs to lunch. Where did you think?" Susan exhibited the little package in her hand. "Do I look like a person about to go to a Browning Cotillion, or to take a dip in the Pacific?"

"No," gurgled Peter, "but I was wishing we could lunch together. However, I'm dated with Hunter. But what about Thursday night?"

"Thursday." Susan reflected. "Peter, I can't!"

"All foolishness. You can."

"No, honestly! Georgie and Joe are coming. The first time."

"Oh, but you don't have to be there!"

"Oh, but yes I do!"

"Well—−" Mr. Coleman picked a limp rubber bathing cap from the top of a case, and distended it on two well−groomed hands. "Well, Evangeline, how's Sat.? The great American pay−day!"

"Busy Saturday, too. Too bad. I'm sorry, Peter."

"Woman, you lie!"

"Of course you can insult me, sir. I'm only a working girl!"

"No, but who have you got a date with?" Peter said curiously. "You're blushing like mad! You're not engaged at all!"

"Yes, I am. Truly. Lydia Lord is taking the civil service examinations; she wants to get a position in the public library. And I promised that I'd take Mary's dinner up and sit with her."

"Oh, shucks! You could get out of that! However——I'll tell you what, Susan. I was going off with Russ on Sunday, but I'll get out of it, and we'll go see guard mount at the Presidio, and have tea with Aunt Clara, what?"

"I don't believe they have guard mount on Sundays."

"Well, then we'll go feed the gold−fish in the Japanese gardens,— they eat on Sundays, the poor things! Nobody ever converted them."

"Honestly, Peter—−"

"Look here, Susan!" he exclaimed, suddenly aroused. "Are you trying to throw me down? Well, of all gall!"

Susan's heart began to thump.

"No, of course I'm not!"

"Well, then, shall I get tickets for Monday night?"

"Not Monday."

"Look here, Susan! Somebody's been stuffing you, I can see it! Was it Auntie? Come on, now, what's the matter, all of a sudden?"

"There's nothing sudden about it," Susan said, with dignity, "but Auntie does think that I go about with you a good deal—−"

Peter was silent. Susan, stealing a glance at his face, saw that it was very red.

"Oh, I love that! I'm crazy about it!" he said, grinning. Then, with sudden masterfulness, "That's all ROT! I'm coming for you on Sunday, and we'll go feed the fishes!"

And he was gone. Susan ate her lunch very thoughtfully, satisfied on the whole with the first application of the new plan.

On Sunday afternoon Mr. Coleman duly presented himself at the boarding−house, but he was accompanied by Miss Fox, to whom Susan, who saw her occasionally at the Saunders', had taken a vague dislike, and by a Mr. Horace Carter, fat, sleepy, and slightly bald at twenty−six.

"I brought 'em along to pacify Auntie," said Peter on the car.

Susan made a little grimace.

"You don't like Con? Oh, she's loads of sport!" he assured her. "And you'll like Carter, too, he's loads of fun!"

But Susan liked nobody and nothing that day. It was a failure from beginning to end. The sky was overcast, gloomy. Not a leaf stirred on the dripping trees, in the silent Park, fog filled all the little canons. There were very few children on the merry−go−rounds, or in the swings, and very few pleasure−seekers in the museum and the conservatories. Miss Fox was quite comfortable in white furs, but Susan felt chilly. She tried to strike a human spark from Mr. Carter, but failed. Attempts at a general conversation also fell flat.

They listened to the band for a little while, but it was too cold to sit still very long, and when Peter proposed tea at the Occidental, Susan visibly brightened. But the shamed color rose in her face when Miss Fox languidly assured him that if he wanted her mother to scalp her, well and good; if not, he would please not mention tea downtown.

She added that Mama was having a tea herself to−day, or she would ask them all to come home with her. This put Susan in an uncomfortable position of which she had to make the best.

"If it wasn't for an assorted bunch of boarders," said Susan, "I would ask you all to our house."

Miss Fox eyed her curiously a moment, then spoke to Peter.

"Well, do let's do something, Peter! Let's go to the Japanese garden."

To the Japanese garden they went, for a most unsatisfactory tea. Miss Fox, it appeared, had been to Japan,—"with Dolly Ripley, Peter," said she, carelessly mentioning the greatest of California's heiresses, and she delighted the little bowing, smiling tea−woman with a few words in her native tongue. Susan admired this accomplishment, with the others, as she drank the tasteless fluid from tiny bowls.

Only four o'clock! What an endless afternoon it had been!

Peter took her home, and they chatted on the steps gaily enough, in the winter twilight. But Susan cried herself to sleep that night. This first departure from her rule had proven humiliating and disastrous; she determined not to

depart from it again.

Georgie and the doctor came to the house for the one o'clock Christmas dinner, the doctor instantly antagonizing his wife's family by the remark that his mother always had her Christmas dinner at night, and had "consented" to their coming, on condition that they come home again early in the afternoon. However, it was delightful to have Georgie back again, and the cousins talked and laughed together for an hour, in Mary Lou's room. Almost the first question from the bride was of Susan's love−affair, and what Peter's Christmas gift had been.

"It hasn't come yet, so I don't know myself!" Susan said readily. But that evening, when Georgie was gone and her aunt and cousins were at church, she sat down to write to Peter.

MY DEAR PETER (wrote Susan):

This is a perfectly exquisite pin, and you are a dear to have remembered my admiring a pearl crescent months ago. I never saw a pin that I liked better, but it's far too handsome a gift for me to keep. I haven't even dared show it to Auntie and the girls! I am sending it back to you, though I hate to let it go, and thank you a thousand times.

Always affectionately yours,
SUSAN BROWN.

Peter answered immediately from the country house where he was spending the holidays. Susan read his letter in the office, two days after Christmas.

DEAR PANSY IRENE:

I see Auntie's fine Italian hand in this! You wait till your father gets home, I'll learn you to sass back! Tell Mrs. Lancaster that it's an imitation and came in a box of lemon drops, and put it on this instant! The more you wear the better, this cold weather!

I've got the bulliest terrier ever, from George. Show him to you next week. PETER.

Frowning thoughtfully, her eyes still on the scribbled half−sheet, Susan sat down at her desk, and reached for paper and pen. She wrote readily, and sent the letter out at once by the office boy.

DEAR PETER:

Please don't make any more fuss about the pin. I can't accept it, and that's all there is to it. The candy was quite enough—I thought you were going to send me books. Hadn't you better change your mind and send me a book? As ever,

S. B.

To which Peter, after a week's interval, answered briefly:

DEAR SUSAN:

This fuss about the pin gives me a pain. I gave a dozen gifts handsomer than that, and nobody else seems to be kicking.

Be a good girl, and Love the Giver. PETER.

This ended the correspondence. Susan put the pin away in the back of her bureau−drawer, and tried not to think about the matter.

January was cold and dark. Life seemed to be made to match. Susan caught cold from a worn−out overshoe, and spent an afternoon and a day in bed, enjoying the rest from her aching head to her tired feet, but protesting against each one of the twenty trips that Mary Lou made up and downstairs for her comfort. She went back to the office on the third day, but felt sick and miserable for a long time and gained strength slowly.

One rainy day, when Peter Coleman was alone in Mr. Brauer's office, she took the little jeweler's box in and laid it beside him on the desk.

"This is all darn foolishness!" Peter said, really annoyed.

"Well—−" Susan shrugged wearily, "it's the way I feel about it."

"I thought you were more of a sport!" he said impatiently, holding the box as if he did not quite know what to do with it.

"Perhaps I'm not," Susan said quietly. She felt as if the world were slowly, dismally coming to an end, but she stood her ground.

An awkward silence ensued. Peter slipped the little box into his pocket. They were both standing at his high desk, resting their elbows upon it, and half−turned, so that they faced each other.

"Well," he said, discontentedly, "I've got to give you something or other for Christmas. What'll it be?"

"Nothing at all, Peter," Susan protested, "just don't say anything more about it!"

He meditated, scowling.

"Are you dated for to−morrow night?" he asked.

"Yes," Susan said simply. The absence of explanation was extremely significant.

"So you're not going out with me any more?" he asked, after a pause.

"Not—for awhile," Susan agreed, with a little difficulty. She felt a horrible inclination to cry.

"Well, gosh, I hope somebody is pleased at the trouble she has made!" Peter burst out angrily.

"If you mean Auntie, Peter," indignation dried Susan's tears, "you are quite mistaken! Anyway, she would be quite right not to want me to accept expensive gifts from a man whose position is so different from my own—−"

"Rot!" said Peter, flushing, "that sounds like servants' talk!"

"Well, of course I know it is nonsense—−" Susan began. And, despite her utmost effort, two tears slipped down her cheeks.

"And if we were engaged it would be all right, is that it?" Peter said, after an embarrassed pause.

"Yes, but I don't want you to think for one instant—−" Susan began, with flaming cheeks.

"I wish to the Lord people would mind their own business," Peter said vexedly. There was a pause. Then he added, cheerfully, "Tell 'em we're engaged then, that'll shut 'em up!"

The world rocked for Susan.

"Oh, but Peter, we can't—it wouldn't be true!"

"Why wouldn't it be true?" he demanded, perversely.

"Because we aren't!" persisted Susan, rubbing an old blot on the desk with a damp forefinger.

"I thought one day we said that when I was forty−five and you were forty−one we were going to get married?" Peter presently reminded her, half in earnest, half irritated.

"D−d−did we?" stammered Susan, smiling up at him through a mist of tears.

"Sure we did. We said we were going to start a stock−ranch, and raise racers, don't you remember?"

A faint recollection of the old joke came to her.

"Well, then, are we to let people know that in twenty years we intend to be married?" she asked, laughing uncertainly.

Peter gave his delighted shout of amusement. The conversation had returned to familiar channels.

"Lord, don't tell anyone! WE'LL know it, that's enough!" he said.

That was all. There was no chance for sentiment, they could not even clasp hands, here in the office. Susan, back at her desk, tried to remember exactly what HAD been said and implied.

"Peter, I'll have to tell Auntie!" she had exclaimed.

Peter had not objected, had not answered indeed.

"I'll have to take my time about telling MY aunt," he had said, "but there's time enough! See here, Susan, I'm dated with Barney White in Berkeley to−night—is that all right?"

"Surely!" Susan had assured him laughingly.

"You see," Peter had explained, "it'll be a very deuce of a time before we'll want everyone to know. There's any number of things to do. So perhaps it's just as well if people don't suspect—−"

"Peter, how extremely like you not to care what people think as long as we're not engaged, and not to want them to suspect it when we are!" Susan could say, smiling above the deep hurt in her heart.

And Peter laughed cheerfully again.

Then Mr. Brauer came in, and Susan went back to her desk, brain and heart in a whirl. But presently one fact disengaged itself from a mist of doubts and misgivings, hopes and terrors. She and Peter were engaged to be

married! What if vows and protestations, plans and confidences were still all to come, what if the very first kiss was still to come? The essential thing remained; they were engaged, the question was settled at last.

Peter was not, at this time, quite the ideal lover. But in what was he ever conventional; when did he ever do the expected thing? No; she would gain so much more than any other woman ever had gained by her marriage, she would so soon enter on a life that would make these days seem only a troubled dream, that she could well afford to dispense with some of the things her romantic nature half expected now. It might not be quite comprehensible in him, but it was certainly a convenience for her that he seemed to so dread an announcement just now. She must have some gowns for the entertainments that would be given them; she must have some money saved for trousseau; she must arrange a little tea at home, when, the boarders being eliminated, Peter could come to meet a few of the very special old friends. These things took time. Susan spent the dreamy, happy afternoon in desultory planning.

Peter went out at three o'clock with Barney White, looking in to nod Susan a smiling good−by. Susan returned to her dreams, determined that she would find the new bond as easy or as heavy as he chose to make it. She had only to wait, and fate would bring this wonderful thing her way; it would be quite like Peter to want to do the thing suddenly, before long, summon his aunt and uncle, her aunt and cousins, and announce the wedding and engagement to the world at once.

Lost in happy dreams, she did not see Thorny watching her, or catch the intense, wistful look with which Mr. Brauer so often followed her.

Susan had a large share of the young German's own dreams just now, a demure little Susan in a checked gingham apron, tasting jelly on a vine−shaded porch, or basting a chicken in a sunny kitchen, or pouring her lord's coffee from a shining pot. The dream Susan's hair was irreproachably neat, she wore shining little house−slippers, and she always laughed out,—the ringing peal of bells that Henry Brauer had once heard in the real Susan's laugh,—when her husband teased her about her old fancy for Peter Coleman. And the dream Susan was the happy mother of at least five little girls—all girls!—a little Susan that was called "Sanna," and an Adelaide for the gross−mutter in the old country, and a Henrietta for himself—−

Clean and strong and good, well−born and ambitious, gentle, and full of the love of books and music and flowers and children, here was a mate at whose side Susan might have climbed to the very summit of her dreams. But she never fairly looked at Mr. Brauer, and after a few years his plump dark little dumpling of a Cousin Linda came from Bremen to teach music in the Western city, and to adore clever Cousin Heinrich, and then it was time to hunt for the sunny kitchen and buy the shining coffee−pot and change little Sanna's name to Linchen.

For Susan was engaged to Peter Coleman! She went home on this particular evening to find a great box of American Beauty roses waiting for her, and a smaller box with them—the pearl crescent again! What could the happy Susan do but pin on a rose with the crescent, her own cheeks two roses, and go singing down to dinner?

"Lovey, Auntie doesn't like to see you wearing a pin like that!" Mrs. Lancaster said, noticing it with troubled eyes. "Didn't Peter send it to you?"

"Yes'm," said Susan, dimpling, as she kissed the older woman.

"Don't you know that a man has no respect for a girl who doesn't keep him a little at a distance, dear?"

"Oh,—is—that—so!" Susan spun her aunt about, in a mad reel.

"Susan!" gasped Mrs. Lancaster. Her voice changed, she caught the girl by the shoulders, and looked into the radiant face. "Susan?" she asked. "My child—−!"

And Susan strangled her with a hug, and whispered, "Yes—yes—yes! But don't you dare tell anyone!"

Poor Mrs. Lancaster was quite unable to tell anyone anything for a few moments. She sat down in her place, mechanically returning the evening greetings of her guests. Her handsome, florid face was quite pale. The soup came on and she roused herself to serve it; dinner went its usual way.

But going upstairs after dinner, Mary Lou, informed of the great event in some mysterious way, gave Susan's waist a girlish squeeze and said joyously, "Ma had to tell me, Sue! I AM so glad!" and Virginia, sitting with bandaged eyes in a darkened room, held out both hands to her cousin, later in the evening, and said, "God bless our dear little girl!" Billy knew it too, for the next morning he gave Susan one of his shattering hand−grasps and muttered that he was "darned glad, and Coleman was darned lucky," and Georgie, who was feeling a little better than usual, though still pale and limp, came in to rejoice and exclaim later in the day, a Sunday.

All of this made Susan vaguely uneasy. It was true, of course, and yet somehow it was all too new, too strange

to be taken quite happily as a matter of course. She could only smile when Mary Lou assured her that she must keep a little carriage; when Virginia sighed, "To think of the good that you can do"; when Georgie warned her against living with the old people.

"It's awful, take my word for it!" said Georgie, her hat laid aside, her coat loosened, very much enjoying a cup of tea in the dining− room. Young Mrs. O'Connor did not grow any closer to her husband's mother. But it was to be noticed that toward her husband himself her attitude was changed. Joe was altogether too smart to be cooped up there in the Mission, it appeared; Joe was working much too hard, and yet he carried her breakfast upstairs to her every morning; Joe was an angel with his mother.

"I wish—of course you can explain to Peter now—but I wish that I could give you a little engagement tea," said Georgie, very much the matron.

"Oh, surely!" Susan hastened to reassure her. Nothing could have been less to her liking than any festivity involving the O'Connors just now. Susan had dined at the gloomy Mission Street house once, and retained a depressing memory of the dark, long parlor, with only one shutter opened in the bay window, the grim elderly hostess, in mourning, who watched Georgie incessantly, the hard−faced elderly maid, so obviously in league with her mistress against the new− comer, and the dinner that progressed from a thick, sad−looking soup to a firm, cold apple pie. There had been an altercation between the doctor and his mother on the occasion of Susan's visit because there had been no fire laid in Georgie's big, cold, upstairs bedroom. Susan, remembering all this, could very readily excuse Georgie from the exercise of any hospitality whatever.

"Don't give it another thought, Georgie!" said she.

"There'll be entertaining enough, soon!" said Mary Lou.

"But we aren't going to announce it for ever so long!" Susan said.

"Please, PLEASE don't tell anyone else, Auntie!" she besought over and over again.

"My darling, not for the world! I can perfectly appreciate the delicacy of feeling that makes you wish to leave all that to Peter! And who knows? Only ourselves, and Billy, who is as close to you as a dear brother could be, and Joe—−"

"Oh, is Georgie going to tell Joe?" Susan asked, dismayed.

"Well, now, perhaps she won't," Mrs. Lancaster said soothingly. "And I think you will find that a certain young gentleman is only too anxious to tell his friends what a lovely girl he has won!" finished Auntie archly.

Susan was somehow wretchedly certain that she would find nothing of the kind. As a matter of fact, it chanced to be a week when she had no engagements made with Peter, and two days went by—three—and still she did not hear from him.

By Thursday she was acutely miserable. He was evidently purposely avoiding her. Susan had been sleeping badly for several nights, she felt feverish with anxiety and uncertainty. On Thursday, when the girls filed out of the office at noon, she kept her seat, for Peter was in the small office and she felt as if she must have a talk with him or die. She heard him come into Front Office the moment she was alone, and began to fuss with her desk without raising her eyes.

"Hello!" said Peter, sitting on a corner of the desk. "I've been terribly busy with the Gerald theatricals, and that's why you haven't seen me. I promised Mary Gerald two months ago that I'd be in 'em, but by George! she's leaving the whole darn thing to me! How are you?"

So gay, so big, so infinitely dear! Susan's doubts melted like mist. She only wanted not to make him angry.

"I've been wondering where you were," she said mildly.

"And a little bit mad in spots?" queried Peter.

"Well—−" Susan took firm grip of her courage. "After our little talk on Saturday," she reminded him, smilingly.

"Sure," said Peter. And after a moment, thoughtfully staring down at the desk, he added again rather heavily, "Sure."

"I told my aunt—I had to," said Susan then.

"Well, that's all right," Peter responded, after a perceptible pause. "Nobody else knows?"

"Oh, nobody!" Susan answered, her heart fluttering nervously at his tone, and her courage suddenly failing.

"And Auntie will keep mum, of course," he said thoughtfully. "It would be so deuced awkward, Susan," he began.

"Oh, I know it!" she said eagerly. It seemed so much, after the unhappy apprehensions of the few days past, to have him acknowledge the engagement, to have him only concerned that it should not be prematurely made known!

"Can't we have dinner together this evening, Sue? And go see that man at the Orpheum,—they say he's a wonder!"

"Why, yes, we could. Peter,—−" Susan made a brave resolution. "Peter, couldn't you dine with us, at Auntie's, I mean?"

"Why, yes, I could," he said hesitatingly. But the moment had given Susan time to reconsider the impulsively given invitation. For a dozen reasons she did not want to take Peter home with her to−night. The single one that the girls and Auntie would be quite unable to conceal the fact that they knew of her engagement was enough. So when Peter said regretfully, "But I thought we'd have more fun alone! Telephone your aunt and ask her if we can't have a pious little dinner at the Palace, or at the Occidental—we'll not see anybody there!" Susan was only too glad to agree.

Auntie of course consented, a little lenience was permissible now.

"... But not supper afterwards, dear," said Auntie. "If Peter teases, tell him that he will have you to himself soon enough! And Sue," she added, with a hint of reproach in her voice, "remember that we expect to see Peter out here very soon. Of course it's not as if your mother was alive, dear, I know that! Still, even an old auntie has some claim!"

"Well, Auntie, darling," said Susan, very low, "I asked him to dinner to−night. And then it occurred to me, don't you know?—−that it might be better—−"

"Gracious me, don't think of bringing him out here that way!" ejaculated Mrs. Lancaster. "No, indeed. You're quite right. But arrange it for very soon, Sue."

"Oh, surely I will!" Susan said, relievedly.

After an afternoon of happy anticipation it was a little disappointing to find that she and Peter were not to be alone, a gentle, pretty Miss Hall and her very charming brother were added to the party when Peter met Susan at six o'clock.

"Friends of Aunt Clara's," Peter explained to Susan. "I had to!"

Susan, liking the Halls, sensibly made the best of them. She let Miss Katharine monopolize Peter, and did her best to amuse Sam. She was in high spirits at dinner, laughed, and kept the others laughing, during the play,—for the plan had been changed for these guests, and afterwards was so amusing and gay at the little supper party that Peter was his most admiring self all the way home. But Susan went to bed with a baffled aching in her heart. This was not being engaged,—something was wrong.

She did not see Peter on Friday; caught only a glimpse of him on Saturday, and on Sunday learned, from one of the newspapers, that "Mr. Peter Coleman, who was to have a prominent part in the theatricals to take place at Mrs. Newton Gerald's home next week, would probably accompany Mr. Forrest Gerald on a trip to the Orient in February, to be gone for some months."

Susan folded the paper, and sat staring blankly ahead of her for a long time. Then she went to the telephone, and, half stunned by the violent beating of her heart, called for the Baxter residence.

Burns answered. Mr. Coleman had gone out about an hour ago with Mr. White. Burns did not know where. Mr. Coleman would be back for a seven o'clock dinner. Certainly, Burns would ask him to telephone at once to Miss Brown.

Excited, troubled, and yet not definitely apprehensive, Susan dressed herself very prettily, and went out into the clear, crisp sunshine. She decided suddenly to go and see Georgie. She would come home early, hear from Peter, perhaps dine with him and his uncle and aunt. And, when she saw him, she would tell him, in the jolliest and sweetest way, that he must make his plans to have their engagement announced at once. Any other course was unfair to her, to him, to his friends.

If Peter objected, Susan would assume an offended air. That would subdue him instantly. Or, if it did not, they might quarrel, and Susan liked the definiteness of a quarrel. She must force this thing to a conclusion one way or the other now, her own dignity demanded it. As for Peter, his own choice was as limited as hers. He must agree to the announcement,—and after all, why shouldn't he agree to it?—or he must give Susan up, once and for all. Susan smiled. He wouldn't do that!

It was a delightful day. The cars were filled with holiday−makers, and through the pleasant sunshine of the streets young parents were guiding white−coated toddlers, and beautifully dressed little girls were wheeling dolls.

Susan found Georgie moping alone in the big, dark, ugly house; Aggie was out, and Dr. O'Connor and his mother were making their annual pilgrimage to the grave of their husband and father. The cousins prepared supper together, in Aggie's exquisitely neat kitchen, not that this was really necessary, but because the kitchen was so warm and pleasant. The kettle was ticking on the back of the range, a scoured empty milk−pan awaited the milk−man. Susan contrasted her bright prospects with her cousin's dull lot, even while she cheerfully scolded Georgie for being so depressed and lachrymose.

They fell to talking of marriage, Georgie's recent one, Susan's approaching one. The wife gave delicate hints, the wife−to−be revealed far more of her secret soul than she had ever dreamed of revealing. Georgie sat, idly clasping the hands on which the wedding−ring had grown loose, Susan turned and reversed the wheels of a Dover egg−beater.

"Marriage is such a mystery, before you're into it," Georgie said. "But once you're married, why, you feel as if you could attract any man in the world. No more bashfulness, Sue, no more uncertainty. You treat men exactly as you would girls, and of course they like it!"

Susan pondered this going home. She thought she knew how to apply it to her attitude toward Peter.

Peter had not telephoned. Susan, quietly determined to treat him, or attempt to treat him, with at least the frank protest she would have shown to another girl, telephoned to the Baxter house at once. Mr. Coleman was not yet at home.

Some of her resolution crumbled. It was very hard to settle down, after supper, to an evening of solitaire. In these quiet hours, Susan felt less confident of Peter's attitude when she announced her ultimatum; felt that she must not jeopardize their friendship now, must run no risks.

She had worked herself into a despondent and discouraged frame of mind when the telephone rang, at ten o'clock. It was Peter.

"Hello, Sue!" said Peter gaily. "I'm just in. Burns said that you telephoned."

"Burns said no more than the truth," said Susan. It was the old note of levity, anything but natural to to−night's mood and the matter in hand. But it was what Peter expected and liked. She heard him laugh with his usual gaiety.

"Yes, he's a truthful little soul. He takes after me. What was it?"

Susan made a wry mouth in the dark.

"Nothing at all," she said, "I just telephoned—I thought we might go out somewhere together."

"GREAT HEAVEN, WE'RE ENGAGED!" she reminded her sinking heart, fiercely.

"Oh, too bad! I was at the Gerald's, at one of those darn rehearsals."

A silence.

"Oh, all right!" said Susan. A writhing sickness of spirit threatened to engulf her, but her voice was quiet.

"I'm sorry, Sue," Peter said quickly in a lower tone, "I couldn't very well get out of it without having them all suspect. You can see that!"

Susan knew him so well! He had never had to do anything against his will. He couldn't understand that his engagement entailed any obligations. He merely wanted always to be happy and popular, and have everyone else happy and popular, too.

"And what about this trip to Japan with Mr. Gerald?" she asked.

There was another silence. Then Peter said, in an annoyed tone:

"Oh, Lord, that would probably be for a MONTH, or six weeks at the outside!"

"I see," said Susan tonelessly.

"I've got Forrest here with me to−night," said Peter, apropos of nothing.

"Oh, then I won't keep you!" Susan said.

"Well," he laughed, "don't be so polite about it!—I'll see you to− morrow?"

"Surely," Susan said. "Good−night."

"Over the reservoir!" he said, and she hung up her receiver.

She did not sleep that night. Excitement, anger, shame kept her wakeful and tossing, hour after hour. Susan's head ached, her face burned, her thoughts were in a mad whirl. What to do—what to do— what to do——! How to get out of this tangle; where to go to begin again, away from these people who knew her and loved her, and

would drive her mad with their sympathy and curiosity!

The clock struck three—four—five. At five o'clock Susan, suddenly realizing her own loneliness and loss, burst into bitter crying and after that she slept.

The next day, from the office, she wrote to Peter Coleman:

MY DEAR PETER:

I am beginning to think that our little talk in the office a week ago was a mistake, and that you think so. I don't say anything of my own feelings; you know them. I want to ask you honestly to tell me of yours. Things cannot go on this way. Affectionately,

SUSAN.

This was on Monday. On Tuesday the papers recorded everywhere Mr. Peter Coleman's remarkable success in Mrs. Newton Gerald's private theatricals. On Wednesday Susan found a letter from him on her desk, in the early afternoon, scribbled on the handsome stationery of his club.

MY DEAR SUSAN:

I shall always think that you are the bulliest girl I ever knew, and if you throw me down on that arrangement for our old age I shall certainly slap you on the wrist. But I know you will think better of it before you are forty−one! What you mean by "things" I don't know. I hope you're not calling ME a thing!

Forrest is pulling my arm off. See you soon.

Yours as ever,

PETER.

The reading of it gave Susan a sensation of physical illness. She felt chilled and weak. How false and selfish and shallow it seemed; had Peter always been that? And what was she to do now, to−morrow and the next day and the next? What was she to do this moment, indeed? She felt as if thundering agonies had trampled the very life out of her heart; yet somehow she must look up, somehow face the office, and the curious eyes of the girls.

"Love−letter, Sue?" said Thorny, sauntering up with a bill in her hand. "Valentine's Day, you know!"

"No, darling; a bill," answered Susan, shutting it in a drawer.

She snapped up her light, opened her ledger, and dipped a pen in the ink.

PART TWO. Wealth

CHAPTER I

The days that followed were so many separate agonies, composed of an infinite number of lesser agonies, for Susan. Her only consolation, which weakened or strengthened with her moods, was that, inasmuch as this state of affairs was unbearable she would not be expected to bear it. Something must happen. Or, if nothing happened, she would simply disappear,—go on the stage, accept a position as a traveling governess or companion, run away to one of the big eastern cities where, under an assumed name, she might begin life all over again.

Hour after hour shame and hurt had their way with her. Susan had to face the office, to hide her heart from Thorny and the other girls, to be reminded by the empty desk in Mr. Brauer's office, and by every glimpse she had of old Mr. Baxter, of the happy dreams she had once dreamed here in this same place.

But it was harder far at home. Mrs. Lancaster alternated between tender moods, when she discussed the whole matter mournfully from beginning to end, and moods of violent rebellion, when everyone but Susan was blamed for the bitter disappointment of all their hopes. Mary Lou compared Peter to Ferd Eastman, to Peter's disadvantage. Virginia recommended quiet, patient endurance of whatever might be the will of Providence. Susan hardly knew which attitude humiliated and distressed her most. All her thoughts led her into bitterness now, and she could be distracted only for a brief moment or two from the memories that pressed so close about her heart. Ah, if she only had a little money, enough to make possible her running away, or a profession into which she could plunge, and in which she could distinguish herself, or a great talent, or a father who would stand by her and take care of her—−

And the bright head would go down on her hands, and the tears have their way.

"Headache?" Thorny would ask, full of sympathy.

"Oh, splitting!" And Susan would openly dry her eyes, and manage to smile.

Sometimes, in a softer mood, her busy brain straightened the whole matter out. Peter, returning from Japan, would rush to her with a full explanation. Of course he cared for her—he had never thought of anything else—of course he considered that they were engaged! And Susan, after keeping him in suspense for a period that even Auntie thought too long, would find herself talking to him, scolding, softening, finally laughing, and at last—and for the first time!—in his arms.

Only a lovers' quarrel; one heard of them continually. Something to laugh about and to forget!

She took up the old feminine occupation of watching the post, weak with sudden hope when Mary Lou called up to her, "Letter for you on the mantel, Sue!" and sick with disappointment over and over again. Peter did not write.

Outwardly the girl went her usual round, perhaps a little thinner and with less laughter, but not noticeably changed. She basted cuffs into her office suit, and cleaned it with benzine, caught up her lunch and umbrella and ran for her car. She lunched and gossiped with Thorny and the others, walked uptown at noon to pay a gas−bill, took Virginia to the Park on Sundays to hear the music, or visited the Carrolls in Sausalito.

But inwardly her thoughts were like whirling web. And in its very center was Peter Coleman. Everything that Susan did began and ended with the thought of him. She never entered the office without the hope that a fat envelope, covered with his dashing scrawl, lay on the desk. She never thought herself looking well without wishing that she might meet Peter that day, or looking ill that she did not fear it. She answered the telephone with a thrilling heart; it might be he! And she browsed over the social columns of the Sunday papers, longing and fearing to find his name. All day long and far into the night, her brain was busy with a reconciliation,—excuses, explanations, forgiveness. "Perhaps to−day," she said in the foggy mornings. "To−morrow," said her undaunted heart at night.

The hope was all that sustained her, and how bitterly it failed her at times only Susan knew. Before the world she kept a brave face, evading discussion of Peter when she could, quietly enduring it when Mrs. Lancaster's wrath boiled over. But as the weeks went by, and the full wretchedness of the situation impressed itself upon her with quiet force, she sank under an overwhelming sense of wrong and loss. Nothing amazing was going to happen. She—who had seemed so free, so independent!—was really as fettered and as helpless as Virginia and Mary Lou. Susan felt sometimes as if she should go mad with suppressed feeling. She grew thin, dyspeptic,

irritable, working hard, and finding her only relief in work, and reading in bed in the evening.

The days slowly pushed her further and further from those happy times when she and Peter had been such good friends, had gone about so joyfully together. It was a shock to Susan to realize that she had not seen him nor heard from him for a month—for two months—for three. Emily Saunders was in the hospital for some serious operation, would be there for weeks; Ella was abroad. Susan felt as if her little glimpse of their world and Peter's had been a curious dream.

Billy played a brother's part toward her now, always ready to take her about with him when he was free, and quite the only person who could spur her to anything like her old vigorous interest in life. They went very often to the Carrolls, and there, in the shabby old sitting−room, Susan felt happier than she did anywhere else. Everybody loved her, loved to have her there, and although they knew, and she knew that they knew, that something had gone very wrong with her, nobody asked questions, and Susan felt herself safe and sheltered. There was a shout of joy when she came in with Phil and Jo from the ferryboat. "Mother! here's Sue!" Betsey would follow the older girls upstairs to chatter while they washed their hands and brushed their hair, and, going down again, Susan would get the motherly kiss that followed Jo's. Later, when the lamp was lit, while Betsey and Jim wrangled amicably over their game, and Philip and Jo toiled with piano and violin, Susan sat next to Mrs. Carroll, and while they sewed, or between snatches of reading, they had long, and to the girl at least, memorable talks.

It was all sweet and wholesome and happy. Susan used to wonder just what made this house different from all other houses, and why she liked to come here so much, to eat the simplest of meals, to wash dishes and brush floors, to rise in the early morning and cross the bay before the time she usually came downstairs at home. Of course, they loved her, they laughed at her jokes, they wanted this thing repeated and that repeated, they never said good−by to her without begging her to come again and thought no special occasion complete without her. That affected her, perhaps. Or perhaps the Carrolls were a little nicer than most people; when Susan reached this point in her thoughts she never failed to regret the loss of their money and position. If they had done this in spite of poverty and obscurity, what MIGHTN'T they have done with half a chance!

In one of the lamplight talks Peter was mentioned, in connection with the patent window−washer, and Susan learned for the first time that he really had been instrumental in selling the patent for Mrs. Carroll for the astonishing sum of five hundred dollars!

"I BEGGED him to tell me if that wasn't partly from the washer and partly from Peter Coleman," smiled Mrs. Carroll, "and he gave me his word of honor that he had really sold it for that! So—there went my doctor's bill, and a comfortable margin in the bank!"

She admitted Susan into the secret of all her little economies; the roast that, cleverly alternated with one or two small meats, was served from Sunday until Saturday night, and no one any the worse! Susan began to watch the game that Mrs. Carroll made of her cooking; filling soups for the night that the meat was short, no sweet when the garden supplied a salad, or when Susan herself brought over a box of candy. She grew to love the labor that lay behind the touch of the thin, darned linen, the windows that shone with soapsuds, the crisp snowy ruffles of curtains and beds. She and Betts liked to keep the house vases filled with what they could find in the storm−battered garden, lifted the flattened chrysanthemums with reverent fingers, hunted out the wet violets. Susan abandoned her old idea of the enviable life of a lonely orphan, and began to long for a sister, a tumble−headed brother, for a mother above all. She loved to be included by the young Carrolls when they protested, "Just ourselves, Mother, nobody but the family!" and if Phil or Jimmy came to her when a coat−button was loose or a sleeve−lining needed a stitch, she was quite pathetically touched. She loved the constant happy noise and confusion in the house, Phil and Billy Oliver tussling in the stair−closet among the overshoes, Betts trilling over her bed−making, Mrs. Carroll and Jim replanting primroses with great calling and conference, and she and Josephine talking, as they swept the porches, as if they had never had a chance to talk before.

Sometimes, walking at Anna's side to the beach on Sunday, a certain peace and content crept into Susan's heart, and the deep ache lifted like a curtain, and seemed to show a saner, wider, sweeter region beyond. Sometimes, tramping the wet hills, her whole being thrilled to some new note, Susan could think serenely of the future, could even be glad of all the past. It was as if Life, into whose cold, stern face she had been staring wistfully, had softened to the glimmer of a smile, had laid a hand, so lately used to strike, upon her shoulder in token of good−fellowship.

With the good salt air in their faces, and the gray March sky pressing close above the silent circle of the hills

about them, she and Anna walked many a bracing, tiring mile. Now and then they turned and smiled at each other, both young faces brightening.

"Noisy, aren't we, Sue?"

"Well, the others are making noise enough!"

Poverty stopped them at every turn, these Carrolls. Susan saw it perhaps more clearly than they did. A hundred delightful and hospitable plans came into Mrs. Carroll's mind, only to be dismissed because of the expense involved. She would have liked to entertain, to keep her pretty daughters becomingly and richly dressed; she confided to Susan rather wistfully, that she was sorry not to be able to end the evenings with little chafing−dish suppers; "that sort of thing makes home so attractive to growing boys." Susan knew what Anna's own personal grievance was. "These are the best years of my life," Anna said, bitterly, one night, "and every cent of spending money I have is the fifty dollars a year the hospital pays. And even out of that they take breakage, in the laboratory or the wards!" Josephine made no secret of her detestation of their necessary economies.

"Did you know I was asked to the Juniors this year?" she said to Susan one night.

"The Juniors! You weren't!" Susan echoed incredulously. For the "Junior Cotillion" was quite the most exclusive and desirable of the city's winter dances for the younger set.

"Oh, yes, I was. Mrs. Wallace probably did it," Josephine assured her, sighing. "They asked Anna last year," she said bitterly, "and I suppose next year they'll ask Betts, and then perhaps they'll stop."

"Oh, but Jo−why couldn't you go! When so many girls are just CRAZY to be asked!"

"Money," Josephine answered briefly.

"But not much!" Susan lamented. The "Juniors" were not to be estimated in mere money.

"Twenty−five for the ticket, and ten for the chaperone, and a gown, of course, and slippers and a wrap—Mother felt badly about it," Josephine said composedly. And suddenly she burst into tears, and threw herself down on the bed. "Don't let Mother hear, and don't think I'm an idiot!" she sobbed, as Susan came to kneel beside her and comfort her, "but—but I hate so to drudge away day after day, when I know I could be having GORGEOUS times, and making friends—−!"

Betts' troubles were more simple in that they were indefinite. Betts wanted to do everything, regardless of cost, suitability or season, and was quite as cross over the fact that they could not go camping in the Humboldt woods in midwinter, as she was at having to give up her ideas of a new hat or a theater trip. And the boys never complained specifically of poverty. Philip, won by deep plotting that he could not see to settle down quietly at home after dinner, was the gayest and best of company, and Jim's only allusions to a golden future were made when he rubbed his affectionate little rough head against his mother, pony−fashion, and promised her every luxury in the world as soon as he "got started."

When Peter Coleman returned from the Orient, early in April, all the newspapers chronicled the fact that a large number of intimate friends met him at the dock. He was instantly swept into the social currents again; dinners everywhere were given for Mr. Coleman, box− parties and house−parties followed one another, the club claimed him, and the approaching opening of the season found him giving special attention to his yacht. Small wonder that Hunter, Baxter Hunter's caught only occasional glimpses of him. Susan, somberly pursuing his name from paper to paper, felt that she was beginning to dislike him. She managed never to catch his eye, when he was in Mr. Brauer's office, and took great pains not to meet him.

However, in the lingering sweet twilight of a certain soft spring evening, when she had left the office, and was beginning the long walk home, she heard sudden steps behind her, and turned to see Peter.

"Aren't you the little seven−leagued booter! Wait a minute, Susan! C'est moi! How are you?"

"How do you do, Peter?" Susan said pleasantly and evenly. She put her hand in the big gloved hand, and raised her eyes to the smiling eyes.

"What car are you making for?" he asked, falling in step.

"I'm walking," Susan said. "Too nice to ride this evening."

"You're right," he said, laughing. "I wish I hadn't a date, I'd like nothing better than to walk it, too! However, I can go a block or two."

He walked with her to Montgomery Street, and they talked of Japan and the Carrolls and of Emily Saunders. Then Peter said he must catch a California Street car, and they shook hands again and parted.

It all seemed rather flat. Susan felt as if the little episode did not belong in the stormy history of their

friendship at all, or as if she were long dead and were watching her earthly self from a distance with wise and weary eyes. What should she be feeling now? What would a stronger woman have done? Given him the cut direct, perhaps, or forced the situation to a point when something dramatic− −satisfying—must follow.

"I am weak," said Susan ashamedly to herself; "I was afraid he would think I cared,—would see that I cared!" And she walked on busy with self−contemptuous and humiliated thoughts. She had made it easy for him to take advantage of her. She had assumed for his convenience that she had suffered no more than he through their parting, and that all was again serene and pleasant between them. After to− night's casual, friendly conversation, no radical attitude would be possible on her part; he could congratulate himself that he still retained Susan's friendship, and could be careful—she knew he would be careful!—never to go too far again.

Susan's estimate of Peter Coleman was no longer a particularly idealized one. But she had long ago come to the conclusion that his faults were the faults of his type and his class, excusable and understandable now, and to be easily conquered when a great emotion should sweep him once and for all away from the thought of himself. As he was absorbed in the thought of his own comfort, so, she knew, he could become absorbed in the thought of what was due his wife, the wider viewpoint would quickly become second nature with him; young Mrs. Peter Coleman would be among the most indulged and carefully considered of women. He would be as anxious that the relationship between his wife and himself should be harmonious and happy, as he was now to feel when he met her that he had no reason to avoid or to dread meeting Miss Susan Brown.

If Susan would have preferred a little different attitude on his part, she could find no fault with this one. She had for so many months thought of Peter as the personification of all that she desired in life that she could not readily dismiss him as unworthy. Was he not still sweet and big and clean, rich and handsome and popular, socially prominent and suitable in age and faith and nationality?

Susan had often heard her aunt and her aunt's friends remark that life was more dramatic than any book, and that their own lives on the stage would eclipse in sensational quality any play ever presented. But, for herself, life seemed deplorably, maddeningly undramatic. In any book, in any play, the situation between her and Peter must have been heightened to a definite crisis long before this. The mildest of little ingenues, as she came across a dimly lighted stage, in demure white and silver, could have handled this situation far more skillfully than Susan did; the most youthful of heroines would have met Peter to some purpose,—while surrounded by other admirers at a dance, or while galloping across a moor on her spirited pony.

What would either of these ladies have done, she wondered, at meeting the offender when he appeared particularly well−groomed, prosperous and happy, while she herself was tired from a long office day, conscious of shabby gloves, of a shapeless winter hat? What could she do, except appear friendly and responsive? Susan consoled herself with the thought that her only alternative, an icy repulse of his friendly advances, would have either convinced him that she was too entirely common and childish to be worth another thought, or would have amused him hugely. She could fancy him telling his friends of his experience of the cut direct from a little girl in Front Office,—no names named—and hear him saying that "he loved it—he was crazy about it!"

"You believe in the law of compensation, don't you, Aunt Jo?" asked Susan, on a wonderful April afternoon, when she had gone straight from the office to Sausalito. The two women were in the Carroll kitchen, Susan sitting at one end of the table, her thoughtful face propped in her hands, Mrs. Carroll busy making ginger cakes,—cutting out the flat little circles with an inverted wine−glass, transferring them to the pans with the tip of her flat knife, rolling the smooth dough, and spilling the hot cakes, as they came back from the oven, into a deep tin strainer to cool. Susan liked to watch her doing this, liked the pretty precision of every movement, the brisk yet unhurried repetition of events, her strong clever hands, the absorbed expression of her face, her fine, broad figure hidden by a stiffly−starched gown of faded blue cotton and a stiff white apron.

Beyond the open window an exquisite day dropped to its close. It was the time of fruit−blossoms and feathery acacia, languid, perfumed breezes, lengthening twilights, opening roses and swaying plumes of lilac. Sausalito was like a little park, every garden ran over with sweetness and color, every walk was fringed with flowers, and hedged with the new green of young trees and blossoming hedges. Susan felt a delicious relaxation run through her blood; winter seemed really routed; to−day for the first time one could confidently prophesy that there would be summer presently, thin gowns and ocean bathing and splendid moons.

"Yes, I believe in the law of compensation, to a great extent," the older woman answered thoughtfully, "or perhaps I should call it the law of solution. I truly believe that to every one of us on this earth is given the

materials for a useful and a happy life; some people use them and some don't. But the chance is given alike."

"Useful, yes," Susan conceded, "but usefulness isn't happiness."

"Isn't it? I really think it is."

"Oh, Aunt Jo," the girl burst out impatiently, "I don't mean for saints! I dare say there ARE some girls who wouldn't mind being poor and shabby and lonesome and living in a boarding−house, and who would be glad they weren't hump−backed, or blind, or Siberian prisoners! But you CAN'T say you think that a girl in my position has had a fair start with a girl who is just as young, and rich and pretty and clever, and has a father and mother and everything else in the world! And if you do say so," pursued Susan, with feeling, "you certainly can't MEAN so—−"

"But wait a minute, Sue! What girl, for instance?"

"Oh, thousands of girls!" Susan said, vaguely. "Emily Saunders, Alice Chauncey—−"

"Emily Saunders! SUSAN! In the hospital for an operation every other month or two!" Mrs. Carroll reminded her.

"Well, but—−" Susan said eagerly. "She isn't really ill. She just likes the excitement and having them fuss over her. She loves the hospital."

"Still, I wouldn't envy anyone whose home life wasn't preferable to the hospital, Sue."

"Well, Emily is queer, Aunt Jo. But in her place I wouldn't necessarily be queer."

"At the same time, considering her brother Kenneth's rather checkered career, and the fact that her big sister neglects and ignores her, and that her health is really very delicate, I don't consider Emily a happy choice for your argument, Sue."

"Well, there's Peggy Brock. She's a perfect beauty—−"

"She's a Wellington, Sue. You know that stock. How many of them are already in institutions?"

"Oh, but Aunt Jo!" Susan said impatiently, "there are dozens of girls in society whose health is good, and whose family ISN'T insane,—I don't know why I chose those two! There are the Chickerings—−"

"Whose father took his own life, Sue."

"Well, they couldn't help THAT. They're lovely girls. It was some money trouble, it wasn't insanity or drink."

"But think a moment, Sue. Wouldn't it haunt you for a long, long time, if you felt that your own father, coming home to that gorgeous house night after night, had been slowly driven to the taking of his own life?"

Susan looked thoughtful.

"I never thought of that," she admitted. Presently she added brightly, "There are the Ward girls, Aunt Jo, and Isabel Wallace. You couldn't find three prettier or richer or nicer girls! Say what you will," Susan returned undauntedly to her first argument, "life IS easier for those girls than for the rest of us!"

"Well, I want to call your attention to those three," Mrs. Carroll said, after a moment. "Both Mr. Wallace and Mr. Ward made their own money, started in with nothing and built up their own fortunes. Phil may do that, or Billy may do that—we can't tell. Mrs. Ward and Mrs. Wallace are both nice, simple women, not spoiled yet by money, not inflated on the subject of family and position, bringing up their families as they were brought up. I don't know Mrs. Ward personally, but Mrs. Wallace came from my own town, and she likes to remember the time when her husband was only a mining engineer, and she did her own work. You may not see it, Sue, but there's a great difference there. Such people are happy and useful, and they hand happiness on. Peter Coleman's another, he's so exceptionally nice because he's only one generation removed from working people. If Isabel Wallace,—and she's very young; life may be unhappy enough for her yet, poor child!—marries a man like her father, well and good. But if she marries a man like—well, say Kenneth Saunders or young Gerald, she simply enters into the ranks of the idle and useless and unhappy, that's all."

"She's beautiful, and she's smart too," Susan pursued, disconsolately, "Emily and I lunched there one day and she was simply sweet to the maids, and to her mother. And German! I wish you could hear her. She may not be of any very remarkable family but she certainly is an exceptional girl!"

"Exceptional, just because she ISN'T descended from some dead, old, useless stock," amended Mrs. Carroll. "There is red blood in her veins, ambition and effort and self−denial, all handed down to her. But marry that pampered little girl to some young millionaire, Sue, and what will her children inherit? And what will theirs, in time?— Peel these, will you?" went on Mrs. Carroll, interrupting her work to put a bowl of apples in Susan's hands. "No," she went on presently, "I married a millionaire, Sue. I was one of the 'lucky' ones!"

"I never knew it was as much as that!" Susan said impressed.

"Yes," Mrs. Carroll laughed wholesomely at some memory. "Yes; I began my married life in the very handsomest home in our little town with the prettiest presents and the most elaborate wardrobe—the papers were full of Miss Josie van Trent's extravagances. I had four house servants, and when Anna came everybody in town knew that her little layette had come all the way from Paris!"

"But,—good heavens, what happened?"

"Nothing, for awhile. Mr. Carroll, who was very young, had inherited a half−interest in what was then the biggest shoe−factory in that part of the world. My father was his partner. Philip—dear me! it seems like a lifetime ago!—came to visit us, and I came home from an Eastern finishing school. Sue, those were silly, happy, heavenly days! Well! we were married, as I said. Little Phil came, Anna came. Still we went on spending money. Phil and I took the children to Paris,—Italy. Then my father died, and things began to go badly at the works. Phil discharged his foreman, borrowed money to tide over a bad winter, and said that he would be his own superintendent. Of course he knew nothing about it. We borrowed more money. Jo was the baby then, and I remember one ugly episode was that the workmen, who wanted more money, accused Phil of getting his children's clothes abroad because his wife didn't think American things were good enough for them."

"YOU!" Susan said, incredulously.

"It doesn't sound like me now, does it? Well; Phil put another foreman in, and he was a bad man—in league with some rival factory, in fact. Money was lost that way, contracts broken—−"

"BEAST!" said Susan.

"Wicked enough," the other woman conceded, "but not at all an uncommon thing, Sue, where people don't know their own business. So we borrowed more money, borrowed enough for a last, desperate fight, and lost it. The day that Jim was three years old, we signed the business away to the other people, and Phil took a position under them, in his own factory."

"Oo−oo!" Susan winced.

"Yes, it was hard. I did what I could for my poor old boy, but it was very hard. We lived very quietly; I had begun to come to my senses then; we had but one maid. But, even then, Sue, Philip wasn't capable of holding a job of that sort. How could he manage what he didn't understand? Poor Phil—−" Mrs. Carroll's bright eyes brimmed with tears, and her mouth quivered. "However, we had some happy times together with the babies," she said cheerfully, "and when he went away from us, four years later, with his better salary we were just beginning to see our way clear. So that left me, with my five, Sue, without a cent in the world. An old cousin of my father owned this house, and she wrote that she would give us all a home, and out we came,—Aunt Betty's little income was barely enough for her, so I sold books and taught music and French, and finally taught in a little school, and put up preserves for people, and packed their houses up for the winter—−"

"How did you DO it!"

"Sue, I don't know! Anna stood by me,—my darling!" The last two words came in a passionate undertone. "But of course there were bad times. Sometimes we lived on porridges and milk for days, and many a night Anna and Phil and I have gone out, after dark, to hunt for dead branches in the woods for my kitchen stove!" And Mrs. Carroll, unexpectedly stirred by the pitiful memory, broke suddenly into tears, the more terrible to Susan because she had never seen her falter before.

It was only for a moment. Then Mrs. Carroll dried her eyes and said cheerfully:

"Well, those times only make these seem brighter! Anna is well started now, we've paid off the last of the mortgage, Phil is more of a comfort than he's ever been—no mother could ask a better boy!− −and Jo is beginning to take a real interest in her work. So everything is coming out better than even my prayers."

"Still," smiled Susan, "lots of people have things comfortable, WITHOUT such a terrible struggle!"

"And lots of people haven't five fine children, Sue, and a home in a big garden. And lots of mothers don't have the joy and the comfort and the intimacy with their children in a year that I have every day. No, I'm only too happy now, Sue. I don't ask anything better than this. And if, in time, they go to homes of their own, and we have some more babies in the family—it's all LIVING, Sue, it's being a part of the world!"

Mrs. Carroll carried away her cakes to the big stone jar in the pantry. Susan, pensively nibbling a peeled slice of apple, had a question ready for her when she came back.

"But suppose you're one of those persons who get into a groove, and simply can't live? I want to work, and do

heroic things, and grow to BE something, and how can I? Unless—−" her color rose, but her glance did not fall, "unless somebody marries me, of course."

"Choose what you want to do, Sue, and do it. That's all."

"Oh, that SOUNDS simple! But I don't want to do any of the things you mean. I want to work into an interesting life, somehow. I'll— I'll never marry," said Susan.

"You won't? Well; of course that makes it easier, because you can go into your work with heart and soul. But perhaps you'll change your mind, Sue. I hope you will, just as I hope all the girls will marry. I'm not sure," said Mrs. Carroll, suddenly smiling, "but what the very quickest way for a woman to marry off her girls is to put them into business. In the first place, a man who wants them has to be in earnest, and in the second, they meet the very men whose interests are the same as theirs. So don't be too sure you won't. However, I'm not laughing at you, Sue. I think you ought to seriously select some work for yourself, unless of course you are quite satisfied where you are."

"I'm not," said Susan. "I'll never get more than forty where I am. And more than that, Thorny heard that Front Office is going to be closed up any day."

"But you could get another position, dear."

"Well, I don't know. You see, it's a special sort of bookkeeping. It wouldn't help any of us much elsewhere."

"True. And what would you like best to do, Sue?"

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think the stage. Or something with lots of traveling in it." Susan laughed, a little ashamed of her vagueness.

"Why not take a magazine agency, then? There's a lot of money—−"

"Oh, no!" Susan shuddered. "You're joking!"

"Indeed I'm not. You're just the sort of person who would make a fine living selling things. The stage—I don't know. But if you really mean it, I don't see why you shouldn't get a little start somewhere."

"Aunt Jo, they say that Broadway in New York is simply LINED with girls trying—−"

"New York! Well, very likely. But you try here. Go to the manager of the Alcazar, recite for him—−"

"He wouldn't let me," Susan asserted, "and besides, I don't really know anything."

"Well, learn something. Ask him, when next some manager wants to make up a little road company—−"

"A road company! Two nights in Stockton, two nights in Marysville— horrors!" said Susan.

"But that wouldn't be for long, Sue. Perhaps two years. Then five or six years in stock somewhere—−"

"Aunt Jo, I'd be past thirty!" Susan laughed and colored charmingly. "I—honestly, I couldn't give up my whole life for ten years on the chance of making a hit," she confessed.

"Well, but what then, Sue?"

"Now, I'll tell you what I've often wanted to do," Susan said, after a thoughtful interval.

"Ah, now we're coming to it!" Mrs. Carroll said, with satisfaction. They had left the kitchen now, and were sitting on the top step of the side porch, reveling in the lovely panorama of hillside and waterfront, and the smooth and shining stretch of bay below them.

"I've often thought I'd like to be the matron of some very smart school for girls," said Susan, "and live either in or near some big Eastern city, and take the girls to concerts and lectures and walking in the parks, and have a lovely room full of books and pictures, where they would come and tell me things, and go to Europe now and then for a vacation!"

"That would be a lovely life, Sue. Why not work for that?"

"Why, I don't know how. I don't know of any such school."

"Well, now let us suppose the head of such a school wants a matron," Mrs. Carroll said, "she naturally looks for a lady and a linguist, and a person of experience—−"

"There you are! I've had no experience!" Susan said, instantly depressed. "I could rub up on French and German, and read up the treatment for toothache and burns—but experience!"

"But see how things work together, Sue!" Mrs. Carroll exclaimed, with a suddenly bright face.

"Here's Miss Berrat, who has the little school over here, simply CRAZY to find someone to help her out. She has eight—or nine, I forget—day scholars, and four or five boarders. And such a dear little cottage! Miss Pitcher is leaving her, to go to Miss North's school in Berkeley, and she wants someone at once!"

"But, Aunt Jo, what does she pay?"

"Let me see—−" Mrs. Carroll wrinkled a thoughtful brow. "Not much, I know. You live at the school, of course. Five or ten dollars a month, I think."

"But I COULDN'T live on that!" Susan exclaimed.

"You'd be near us, Sue, for one thing. And you'd have a nice bright sunny room. And Miss Berrat would help you with your French and German. It would be a good beginning."

"But I simply COULDN'T—" Susan stopped short. "Would you advise it, Aunt Jo?" she asked simply.

Mrs. Carroll studied the bright face soberly for a moment.

"Yes, I'd advise it, Sue," she said then gravely. "I don't think that the atmosphere where you are is the best in the world for you just now. It would be a fine change. It would be good for those worries of yours."

"Then I'll do it!" Susan said suddenly, the unexplained tears springing to her eyes.

"I think I would. I'll go and see Miss Berrat next week," Mrs. Carroll said. "There's the boat making the slip, Sue," she added, "let's get the table set out here on the porch while they're climbing the hill!"

Up the hill came Philip and Josephine, just home from the city, escorted by Betsey and Jim who had met them at the boat. Susan received a strangling welcome from Betts, and Josephine, who looked a little pale and tired after this first enervating, warm spring day, really brightened perceptibly when she went upstairs with Susan to slip into a dress that was comfortably low−necked and short− sleeved.

Presently they all gathered on the porch for dinner, with the sweet twilighted garden just below them and anchor lights beginning to prick, one by one, through the soft dusky gloom of the bay.

"Well, 'mid pleasures and palaces—−" Philip smiled at his mother.

"Charades to−night!" shrilled Betts, from the kitchen where she was drying lettuce.

"Oh, but a walk first!" Susan protested. For their aimless strolls through the dark, flower−scented lanes were a delight to her.

"And Billy's coming over to−morrow to walk to Gioli's," Josephine added contentedly.

That evening and the next day Susan always remembered as terminating a certain phase of her life, although for perhaps a week the days went on just as usual. But one morning she found confusion reigning, when she arrived at Hunter, Baxter Hunter's. Front Office was to be immediately abolished, its work was over, its staff already dispersing.

Workmen, when she arrived, were moving out cases and chairs, and Mr. Brauer, eagerly falling upon her, begged her to clean out her desk, and to help him assort the papers in some of the other desks and cabinets. Susan, filled with pleasant excitement, pinned on her paper cuffs, and put her heart and soul into the work. No bills this morning! The office−boy did not even bring them up.

"Now, here's a soap order that must have been specially priced," said Susan, at her own desk, "I couldn't make anything of it yesterday—−"

"Let it go—let it go!" Mr. Brauer said. "It iss all ofer!"

As the other girls came in they were pressed into service, papers and papers and papers, the drift of years, were tossed out of drawers and cubby−holes. Much excited laughter and chatter went on. Probably not one girl among them felt anything but pleasure and relief at the unexpected holiday, and a sense of utter confidence in the future.

Mr. Philip, fussily entering the disordered room at ten o'clock, announced his regret at the suddenness of the change; the young ladies would be paid their salaries for the uncompleted month—a murmur of satisfaction arose—and, in short, the firm hoped that their association had been as pleasant to them as it had been to his partners and himself.

"They had a directors' meeting on Saturday," Thorny said, later, "and if you ask me my frank opinion, I think Henry Brauer is at the bottom of all this. What do you know about his having been at that meeting on Saturday, and his going to have the office right next to J. G.'s—isn't that the extension of the limit? He's as good as in the firm now."

"I've always said that he knew something that made it very well worth while for this firm to keep his mouth shut," said Miss Cashell, darkly.

"I'll bet you there's something in that," Miss Cottle agreed.

"H. B. H. is losing money hand over fist," Thorny stated, gloomily, with that intimate knowledge of an employer's affairs always displayed by an obscure clerk.

"Brauer asked me if I would like to go into the big office, but I don't believe I could do the work," Susan said.

"Yes; I'm going into the main office, too," Thorny stated. "Don't you be afraid, Susan. It's as easy as pie."

"Mr. Brauer said I could try it," Miss Sherman shyly contributed. But no other girl had been thus complimented. Miss Kelly and Miss Garvey, both engaged to be married now, Miss Kelly to Miss Garvey's brother, Miss Garvey to Miss Kelly's cousin, were rather congratulating themselves upon the turn of events; the other girls speculated as to the wisest step to take next, some talking vaguely of post−office or hospital work; Miss Cashell, as Miss Thornton later said to Susan, hopelessly proving herself no lady by announcing that she could get better money as a coat model, and meant to get into that line of work if she could.

"Are we going to have lunch to−day?" somebody asked. Miss Thornton thoughtfully drew a piece of paper toward her, and wet her pencil in her mouth.

"Best thing we can do, I guess," she said.

"Let's put ten cents each in," Susan suggested, "and make it a real party."

Thorny accordingly expanded her list to include sausages and a pie, cheese and rolls, besides the usual tea and stewed tomatoes. The girls ate the little meal with their hats and wraps on, a sense of change filled the air, and they were all a little pensive, even with an unexpected half−holiday before them.

Then came good−bys. The girls separated with many affectionate promises. All but the selected three were not to return. Susan and Miss Sherman and Thorny would come back to find their desks waiting for them in the main office next day.

Susan walked thoughtfully uptown, and when she got home, wrote a formal application for the position open in her school to little Miss Berrat in Sausalito.

It was a delightful, sunshiny afternoon. Mary Lou, Mrs. Lancaster and Virginia were making a mournful trip to the great institution for the blind in Berkeley, where Virginia's physician wanted to place her for special watching and treatment. Susan found two or three empty hours on her hands, and started out for a round of calls.

She called on her aunt's old friends, the Langs, and upon the bony, cold Throckmorton sisters, rich, nervous, maiden ladies, shivering themselves slowly to death in their barn of a house, and finally, and unexpectedly, upon Mrs. Baxter.

Susan had planned a call on Georgie, to finish the afternoon, for her cousin, slowly dragging her way up the last of the long road that ends in motherhood, was really in need of cheering society.

But the Throckmorton house chanced to be directly opposite the old Baxter mansion, and Susan, seeing Peter's home, suddenly decided to spend a few moments with the old lady.

After all, why should she not call? She had had no open break with Peter, and on every occasion his aunt had begged her to take pity on an old woman's loneliness. Susan was always longing, in her secret heart, for that accident that should reopen the old friendship; knowing Peter, she knew that the merest chance would suddenly bring him to her side again; his whole life was spent in following the inclination of the moment. And today, in her pretty new hat and spring suit, she was looking her best.

Peter would not be at home, of course. But his aunt would tell him that that pretty, happy Miss Brown was here, and that she was going to leave Hunter, Baxter Hunter's for something not specified. And then Peter, realizing that Susan had entirely risen above any foolish old memory—−

Susan crossed the street and rang the bell. When the butler told her, with an impassive face, that he would find out if Mrs. Baxter were in, Susan hoped, in a panic, that she was not. The big, gloomy, handsome hall rather awed her. She watched Burns's retreating back fearfully, hoping that Mrs. Baxter really was out, or that Burns would be instructed to say so.

But he came back, expressionless, placid, noiseless of step, to say in a hushed, confidential tone that Mrs. Baxter would be down in a moment. He lighted the reception room brilliantly for Susan, and retired decorously. Susan sat nervously on the edge of a chair. Suddenly her call seemed a very bold and intrusive thing to do, even an indelicate thing, everything considered. Suppose Peter should come in; what could he think but that she was clinging to the association with which he had so clearly indicated that he was done?

What if she got up and went silently, swiftly out? Burns was not in sight, the great hall was empty. She had really nothing to say to Mrs. Baxter, and she could assume that she had misunderstood his message if the butler followed her—−

Mrs. Baxter, a little figure in rustling silk, came quickly down the stairway. Susan met her in the doorway of

the reception room, with a smile.

"How do you do, how do you do?" Mrs. Baxter said nervously. She did not sit down, but stood close to Susan, peering up at her shortsightedly, and crumpling the card she held in her hand. "It's about the office, isn't it?" she said quickly. "Yes, I see. Mr. Baxter told me that it was to be closed. I'm sorry, but I never interfere in those things,—never. I really don't know ANYTHING about it! I'm sorry. But it would hardly be my place to interfere in business, when I don't know anything about it, would it? Mr. Baxter always prides himself on the fact that I don't interfere. So I don't really see what I could do."

A wave of some supreme emotion, not all anger, nor all contempt, nor all shame, but a composite of the three, rose in Susan's heart. She had not come to ask a favor of this more fortunate woman, but—the thought flashed through her mind—suppose she had? She looked down at the little silk−dressed figure, the blinking eyes, the veiny little hand, and the small mouth, that, after sixty years, was composed of nothing but conservative and close−shut lines. Pity won the day over her hurt girlish feeling and the pride that claimed vindication, and Susan smiled kindly.

"Oh, I didn't come about Front Office, Mrs. Baxter! I just happened to be in the neighborhood—−" Two burning spots came into the older woman's face, not of shame, but of anger that she had misunderstood, had placed herself for an instant at a disadvantage.

"Oh," she said vaguely. "Won't you sit down? Peter—−" she paused.

"Peter is in Santa Barbara, isn't he?" asked Susan, who knew he was not.

"I declare I don't know where he is half the time," Mrs. Baxter said, with her little, cracked laugh. They both sat down. "He has SUCH a good time!" pursued his aunt, complacently.

"Doesn't he?" Susan said pleasantly.

"Only I tell the girls they mustn't take Peter too seriously," cackled the sweet, old voice. "Dreadful boy!"

"I think they understand him." Susan looked at her hostess solicitously. "You look well," she said resolutely. "No more neuritis, Mrs. Baxter?"

Mrs. Baxter was instantly diverted. She told Susan of her new treatment, her new doctor, the devotion of her old maid; Emma, the servant of her early married life, was her close companion now, and although Mrs. Baxter always thought of her as a servant, Emma was really the one intimate friend she had.

Susan remained a brief quarter of an hour, chatting easily, but burning with inward shame. Never, never, never in her life would she pay another call like this one! Tea was not suggested, and when the girl said good−by, Mrs. Baxter did not leave the reception room. But just as Burns opened the street−door for her Susan saw a beautiful little coupe stop at the curb, and Miss Ella Saunders, beautifully gowned, got out of it and came up the steps with a slowness that became her enormous size.

"Hello, Susan Brown!" said Miss Saunders, imprisoning Susan's hand between two snowy gloves. "Where've you been?"

"Where've YOU been?" Susan laughed. "Italy and Russia and Holland!"

"Don't be an utter little hypocrite, child, and try to make talk with a woman of my years I I've been home two weeks, anyway."

"Emily home?"

Miss Saunders nodded slowly, bit her lip, and stared at Susan in a rather mystifying and very pronounced way.

"Emily is home, indeed," she said absently. Then abruptly she added: "Can you lunch with me to−morrow—no, Wednesday—at the Town and Country, infant?"

"Why, I'd love to!" Susan answered, dimpling.

"Well; at one? Then we can talk. Tell me," Miss Saunders lowered her voice, "is Mrs. Baxter in? Oh, damn!" she added cheerfully, as Susan nodded. Susan glanced back, before the door closed, and saw her meet the old lady in the hall and give her an impulsive kiss.

CHAPTER II

The little Town and Country Club, occupying two charmingly− furnished, crowded floors of what had once been a small apartment house on Post Street, next door to the old library, was a small but remarkable institution, whose members were the wealthiest and most prominent women of the fashionable colonies of Burlingame and San Mateo, Ross Valley and San Rafael. Presumably only the simplest and least formal of associations, it was really the most important of all the city's social institutions, and no woman was many weeks in San Francisco society without realizing that the various country clubs, and the Junior Cotillions were as dust and ashes, and that her chances of achieving a card to the Browning dances were very slim if she could not somehow push her name at least as far as the waiting list of the Town and Country Club.

The members pretended, to a woman, to be entirely unconscious of their social altitude. They couldn't understand how such ideas ever got about, it was "delicious"; it was "too absurd!" Why, the club was just the quietest place in the world, a place where a woman could run in to brush her hair and wash her hands, and change her library book, and have a cup of tea. A few of them had formed it years ago, just half a dozen of them, at a luncheon; it was like a little family circle, one knew everybody there, and one felt at home there. But, as for being exclusive and conservative, that was all nonsense! And besides, what did other women see in it to make them want to come in! Let them form another club, exactly like it, wouldn't that be the wiser thing?

Other women, thus advised and reassured, smiled, instead of gnashing their teeth, and said gallantly that after all they themselves were too busy to join any club just now, merely happened to speak of the Town and Country. And after that they said hateful and lofty and insulting things about the club whenever they found listeners.

But the Town and Country Club flourished on unconcernedly, buzzing six days a week with well−dressed women, echoing to Christian names and intimate chatter, sheltering the smartest of pigskin suitcases and gold−headed umbrellas and rustling raincoats in its tiny closets, resisting the constant demand of the younger element for modern club conveniences and more room.

No; the old members clung to its very inconveniences, to the gas− lights over the dressing−tables, and the narrow halls, and the view of ugly roofs and buildings from its back windows. They liked to see the notices written in the secretary's angular hand and pinned on the library door with a white−headed pin. The catalogue numbers of books were written by hand, too—the ink blurred into the shiny linen bands. At tea−time a little maid quite openly cut and buttered bread in a corner of the dining−room; it was permissible to call gaily, "More bread here, Rosie! I'm afraid we're a very hungry crowd to−day!"

Susan enormously enjoyed the club; she had been there more than once with Miss Saunders, and found her way without trouble to−day to a big chair in a window arch, where she could enjoy the passing show without being herself conspicuous. A constant little stream of women came and went, handsome, awkward school−girls, in town for the dentist or to be fitted to shoes, or for the matinee; debutantes, in their exquisite linens and summer silks, all joyous chatter and laughter; and plainly−gowned, well−groomed, middle−aged women, escorting or chaperoning, and pausing here for greetings and the interchange of news.

Miss Saunders, magnificent, handsome, wonderfully gowned, was surrounded by friends the moment she came majestically upstairs. Susan thought her very attractive, with her ready flow of conversation, her familiar, big−sisterly attitude with the young girls, her positiveness when there was the slightest excuse for her advice or opinions being expressed. She had a rich, full voice, and a drawling speech. She had to decline ten pressing invitations in as many minutes.

"Ella, why can't you come home with me this afternoon?—I'm not speaking to you, Ella Saunders, you've not been near us since you got back!—Mama's so anxious to see you, Miss Ella!—Listen, Ella, you've got to go with us to Tahoe; Perry will have a fit if you don't!"

"Mama's not well, and the kid is just home," Miss Saunders told them all good−naturedly, in excuse. She carried Susan off to the lunch− room, announcing herself to be starving, and ordered a lavish luncheon. Ella Saunders really liked this pretty, jolly, little book−keeper from Hunter, Baxter Hunter's. Susan amused her, and she liked still better the evidence that she amused Susan. Her indifferent, not to say irreverent, air toward the sacred traditions and institutions of her class made Susan want to laugh and gasp at once.

"But this is a business matter," said Miss Saunders, when they had reached the salad, "and here we are talking! Mama and Baby and I have talked this thing all over, Susan," she added casually, "and we want to know what you'd think of coming to live with us?"

Susan fixed her eyes upon her as one astounded, not a muscle of her face moved. She never was quite natural with Ella; above the sudden rush of elation and excitement came the quick intuition that Ella would like a sensational reception of her offer. Her look expressed the stunned amazement of one who cannot credit her ears. Ella's laugh showed an amused pleasure.

"Don't look so aghast, child. You don't have to do it!" she said.

Again Susan did the dramatic and acceptable thing, typical of what she must give the Saunders throughout their relationship. Instead of the natural "What on earth are you talking about?" she said slowly, dazedly, her bewildered eyes on Ella's face:

"You're joking—−"

"Joking! You'll find the Saunders family no joke, I can promise you that!" Ella said, humorously. And again Susan laughed.

"No, but you see Emily's come home from Fowler's a perfect nervous wreck," explained Miss Ella, "and; she can't be left alone for awhile,—partly because her heart's not good, partly because she gets blue, and partly because, if she hasn't anyone to drive and walk and play tennis with, and so on, she simply mopes from morning until night. She hates Mama's nurse; Mama needs Miss Baker herself anyway, and we've been wondering and wondering how we could get hold of the right person to fill the bill. You'd have a pretty easy time in one way, of course, and do everything the Kid does, and I'll stand right behind you. But don't think it's any snap!"

"Snap!" echoed Susan, starry−eyed, crimson−cheeked. "—−But you don't mean that you want ME?"

"I wish you could have seen her; she turned quite pale," Miss Saunders told her mother and sister later. "Really, she was overcome. She said she'd speak to her aunt to−night; I don't imagine there'll be any trouble. She's a nice child. I don't see the use of delay, so I said Monday."

"You were a sweet to think of it," Emily said, gratefully, from the downy wide couch where she was spending the evening.

"Not at all, Kid," Ella answered politely. She yawned, and stared at the alabaster globe of the lamp above Emily's head. A silence fell. The two sisters never had much to talk about, and Mrs. Saunders, dutifully sitting with the invalid, was heavy from dinner, and nearly asleep. Ella yawned again.

"Want some chocolates?" she finally asked.

"Oh, thank you, Ella!"

"I'll send Fannie in with 'em!" Miss Ella stood up, bent her head to study at close range an engraving on the wall, loitered off to her own room. She was rarely at home in the evening and did not know quite what to do with herself.

Susan, meanwhile, walked upon air. She tasted complete happiness for almost the first time in her life; awakened in the morning to blissful reality, instead of the old dreary round, and went to sleep at night smiling at her own happy thoughts. It was all like a pleasant dream!

She resigned from her new position at Hunter, Baxter Hunter's exactly as she resigned in imagination a hundred times. No more drudgery over bills, no more mornings spent in icy, wet shoes, and afternoons heavy with headache. Susan was almost too excited to thank Mr. Brauer for his compliments and regrets.

Parting with Thorny was harder; Susan and she had been through many a hard hour together, had shared a thousand likes and dislikes, had loved and quarreled and been reconciled.

"You're doing an awfully foolish thing, Susan. You'll wish you were back here inside of a month," Thorny prophesied when the last moment came. "Aw, don't you do it, Susan!" she pleaded, with a little real emotion. "Come on into Main Office, and sit next to me. We'll have loads of sport."

"Oh, I've promised!" Susan held out her hand. "Don't forget me!" she said, trying to laugh. Miss Thornton's handsome eyes glistened with tears. With a sudden little impulse they kissed each other for the first time.

Then Susan, a full hour before closing, went down from the lunch− room, and past all the familiar offices; the sadness of change tugging at her heart−strings. She had been here a long time, she had smelled this same odor of scorching rubber, and oils and powders through so many slow afternoons, in gay moods and sad, in moods of rebellion and distaste. She left a part of her girlhood here. The cashier, to whom she went for her check, was all

kindly interest, and the young clerks and salesmen stopped to offer her their good wishes. Susan passed the time−clock without punching her number for the first time in three years, and out into the sunny, unfamiliar emptiness of the streets.

At the corner her heart suddenly failed her. She felt as if she could not really go away from these familiar places and people. The warehouses and wholesale houses, the wholesale liquor house with a live eagle magnificently caged in one window, the big stove establishment, with its window full of ranges in shining steel and nickel−plate; these had been her world for so long!

But she kept on her way uptown, and by the time she reached the old library, where Mary Lou, very handsome in her well−brushed suit and dotted veil, with white gloves still odorous of benzine, was waiting, she was almost sure that she was not making a mistake.

Mary Lou was a famous shopper, capable of exhausting any saleswoman for a ten−cent purchase, and proportionately effective when, as to− day, a really considerable sum was to be spent. She regretfully would decline a dozen varieties in handkerchiefs or ribbons, saying with pleasant plaintiveness to the saleswoman: "Perhaps I am hard to please. My mother is an old Southern lady—the Ralstons, you know?— and her linen is, of course, like nothing one can get nowadays! No; I wouldn't care to show my mother this.

"My cousin, of course, only wants this for a little hack hat," she added to Susan's modest suggestion of price to the milliner, and in the White House she consented to Susan's selections with a consoling reminder, "It isn't as if you didn't have your lovely French underwear at home, Sue! These will do very nicely for your rough camping trip!"

Compared to Mary Lou, Susan was a very poor shopper. She was always anxious to please the saleswoman, to buy after a certain amount of looking had been done, for no other reason than that she had caused most of the stock to be displayed.

"I like this, Mary Lou," Susan would murmur nervously. And, as the pompadoured saleswoman turned to take down still another heap of petticoats, Susan would repeat noiselessly, with an urgent nod, "This will do!"

"Wait, now, dear," Mary Lou would return, unperturbed, arresting Susan's hand with a white, well−filled glove. "Wait, dear. If we can't get it here we can get it somewhere else. Yes, let me see those you have there—−"

"Thank you, just the same," Susan always murmured uncomfortably, averting her eyes from the saleswoman, as they went away. But the saleswoman, busily rearranging her stock, rarely responded.

To−day they bought, besides the fascinating white things, some tan shoes, and a rough straw hat covered with roses, and two linen skirts, and three linen blouses, and a little dress of dotted lavender lawn. Everything was of the simplest, but Susan had never had so many new things in the course of her life before, and was elated beyond words as one purchase was made after another.

She carried home nearly ten dollars, planning to keep it until the first month's salary should be paid, but Auntie was found, upon their return in the very act of dissuading the dark powers known as the "sewing−machine men" from removing that convenience, and Susan, only too thankful to be in time, gladly let seven dollars fall into the oily palm of the carrier in charge.

"Mary Lou," said she, over her fascinating packages, just before dinner, "here's a funny thing! If I had gone bad, you know, so that I could keep buying nice, pretty, simple things like this, as fast as I needed them, I'd feel better—I mean truly cleaner and more moral—than when I was good!"

"Susan! Why, SUSAN!" Her cousin turned a shocked face from the window where she was carefully pasting newly−washed handkerchiefs, to dry in the night. "Do you remember who you ARE, dear, and don't say dreadful things like that!"

In the next few days Susan pressed her one suit, laundered a score of little ruffles and collars, cleaned her gloves, sewed on buttons and strings generally, and washed her hair. Late on Sunday came the joyful necessity of packing. Mary Lou folded and refolded patiently, Georgie came in with a little hand−embroidered handkerchief−case for Susan's bureau, Susan herself rushed about like a mad−woman, doing almost nothing.

"You'll be back inside the month," said Billy that evening, looking up from Carlyle's "Revolution," to where Susan and Mary Lou were busy with last stitches, at the other side of the dining−room table. "You can't live with the rotten rich any more than I could!"

"Billy, you don't know how awfully conceited you sound when you say a thing like that!"

"Conceited? Oh, all right!" Mr. Oliver accompanied the words with a sound only to be described as a snort,

and returned, offended, to his book.

"Conceited, well, maybe I am," he resumed with deadly calm, a moment later. "But there's no conceit in my saying that people like the Saunders can't buffalo ME!"

"You may not see it, but there IS!" persisted Susan.

"You give me a pain, Sue! Do you honestly think they are any better than you are?"

"Of course they're not better," Susan said, heatedly, "if it comes right down to morals and the Commandments! But if I prefer to spend my life among people who have had several generations of culture and refinement and travel and education behind them, it's my own affair! I like nice people, and rich people ARE more refined than poor, and nobody denies it! I may feel sorry for a girl who marries a man on forty a week, and brings up four or five little kids on it, but that doesn't mean I want to do it myself! And I think a man has his nerve to expect it!"

"I didn't make you an offer, you know, Susan," said William pleasantly.

"I didn't mean you!" Susan answered angrily. Then with sudden calm and sweetness, she resumed, busily tearing up and assorting old letters the while, "But now you're trying to make me mad, Billy, and you don't care what you say. The trouble with you," she went on, with sisterly kindness and frankness, "is that you think you are the only person who really ought to get on in the world. You know so much, and study so hard, that you DESERVE to be rich, so that you can pension off every old stupid German laborer at the works who still wants a job when they can get a boy of ten to do his work better than he can! You mope away over there at those cottages, Bill, until you think the only important thing in the world is the price of sausages in proportion to wages. And for all that you pretend to despise people who use decent English, and don't think a bath−tub is a place to store potatoes; I notice that you are pretty anxious to study languages and hear good music and keep up in your reading, yourself! And if that's not cultivation—−"

"I never said a word about cultivation!" Billy, who had been apparently deep in his book, looked up to snap angrily. Any allusion to his efforts at self−improvement always touched him in a very sensitive place.

"Why, you did TOO! You said—−"

"Oh, I did not! If you're going to talk so much, Sue, you ought to have some faint idea what you're talking about!"

"Very well," Susan said loftily, "if you can't address me like a gentleman, we won't discuss it. I'm not anxious for your opinion, anyway."

A silence. Mr. Oliver read with passionate attention. Susan sighed, sorted her letters, sighed again.

"Billy, do you love me?" she asked winningly, after a pause.

Another silence. Mr. Oliver turned a page.

"Are you sure you've read every word on that page, Bill,—every little word?"

Silence again.

"You know, you began this, Bill," Susan said presently, with childish sweet reproach. "Don't say anything, Bill; I can't ask that! But if you still love me, just smile!"

By some miracle, Billy preserved his scowl.

"Not even a glimmer!" Susan said, despondently. "I'll tell you, Bill," she added, gushingly. "Just turn a page, and I'll take it for a sign of love!" She clasped her hands, and watched him breathlessly.

Mr. Oliver reached the point where the page must be turned. He moved his eyes stealthily upward.

"Oh, no you don't! No going back!" exulted Susan. She jumped up, grabbed the book, encircled his head with her arms, kissed her own hand vivaciously and made a mad rush for the stairs. Mr. Oliver caught her half−way up the flight, with more energy than dignity, and got his book back by doubling her little finger over with an increasing pressure until Susan managed to drop the volume to the hall below.

"Bill, you beast! You've broken my finger!" Susan, breathless and dishevelled, sat beside him on the narrow stair, and tenderly worked the injured member, "It hurts!"

"Let Papa tiss it!"

"You try it once!"

"Sh−sh! Ma says not so much noise!" hissed Mary Lou, from the floor above, where she had been summoned some hours ago, "Alfie's just dropped off!"

On Monday a new life began for Susan Brown. She stepped from the dingy boarding−house in Fulton Street

straight into one of the most beautiful homes in the state, and, so full were the first weeks, that she had no time for homesickness, no time for letters, no time for anything but the briefest of scribbled notes to the devoted women she left behind her.

Emily Saunders herself met the newcomer at the station, looking very unlike an invalid,—looking indeed particularly well and happy, if rather pale, as she was always pale, and a little too fat after the idle and carefully−fed experience in the hospital. Susan peeped into Miss Ella's big room, as they went upstairs. Ella was stretched comfortably on a wide, flowery couch, reading as her maid rubbed her loosened hair with some fragrant toilet water, and munching chocolates.

"Hello, Susan Brown!" she called out. "Come in and see me some time before dinner,—I'm going out!"

Ella's room was on the second floor, where were also Mrs. Saunders' room, various guest−rooms, an upstairs music−room and a sitting− room. But Emily's apartment, as well as her brother's, were on the third floor, and Susan's delightful room opened from Emily's. The girls had a bathroom as large as a small bedroom, and a splendid deep balcony shaded by gay awnings was accessible only to them. Potted geraniums made this big outdoor room gay, a thick Indian rug was on the floor, there were deep wicker chairs, and two beds, in day−covers of green linen, with thick brightly colored Pueblo blankets folded across them. The girls were to spend all their days in the open air, and sleep out here whenever possible for Emily's sake.

While Emily bathed, before dinner, Susan hung over the balcony rail, feeling deliciously fresh and rested, after her own bath, and eager not to miss a moment of the lovely summer afternoon. Just below her, the garden was full of roses. There were other flowers, too, carnations and velvety Shasta daisies, there were snowballs that tumbled in great heaps of white on the smooth lawn, and syringas and wall−flowers and corn−flowers, far over by the vine−embroidered stone wall, and late Persian lilacs, and hydrangeas, in every lovely tone between pink and lavender, filled a long line of great wooden Japanese tubs, leading, by a walk of sunken stones, to the black wooden gates of the Japanese garden. But the roses reigned supreme— beautiful standard roses, with not a shriveled leaf to mar the perfection of blossoms and foliage; San Rafael roses, flinging out wherever they could find a support, great sprays of pinkish−yellow and yellowish−pink, and gold and cream and apricot−colored blossoms. There were moss roses, sheathed in dark−green film, glowing Jacqueminot and Papagontier and La France roses, white roses, and yellow roses,—Susan felt as if she could intoxicate herself upon the sweetness and the beauty of them all.

The carriage road swept in a great curve from the gate, its smooth pebbled surface crossed sharply at regular intervals by the clean− cut shadows of the elm trees. Here and there on the lawns a sprinkler flung out its whirling circles of spray, and while Susan watched a gardener came into view, picked up a few fallen leaves from the roadway and crushed them together in his hand.

On the newly−watered stretch of road that showed beyond the wide gates, carriages and carts, and an occasional motor−car were passing, flinging wheeling shadows beside them on the road, and driven by girls in light gowns and wide hats or by grooms in livery. Presently one very smart, high English cart stopped, and Mr. Kenneth Saunders got down from it, and stood whipping his riding−boot with his crap and chatting with the young woman who had driven him home. Susan thought him a very attractive young man, with his quiet, almost melancholy expression, and his air of knowing exactly the correct thing to do, whenever he cared to exert himself at all.

She watched him now with interest, not afraid of detection, for a small head, on a third story balcony, would be quite lost among the details of the immense facade of the house. He walked toward the stable, and whistled what was evidently a signal, for three romping collies came running to meet him, and were leaping and tumbling about him as he went around the curve of the drive and out of sight. Then Susan went back to her watching and dreaming, finding something new to admire and delight in every moment. The details confused her, but she found the whole charming.

Indeed, she had been in San Rafael for several weeks before she found the view of the big house from the garden anything but bewildering. With its wings and ells, its flowered balconies and French windows, its tiled pergola and flower−lined Spanish court, it stood a monument to the extraordinary powers of the modern architect; nothing was incongruous, nothing offended. Susan liked to decide into which room this casement window fitted, or why she never noticed that particular angle of wall from the inside. It was always a disappointment to discover that some of the quaintest of the windows lighted only linen−closets or perhaps useless little spaces under a sharp

angle of roof, and that many of the most attractive lines outside were so cut and divided as to be unrecognizable within.

It was a modern house, with beautifully−appointed closets tucked in wherever there was an inch to spare, with sheets of mirror set in the bedroom doors, with every conceivable convenience in nickel− plate glittering in its bathrooms, and wall−telephones everywhere.

The girl's adjectives were exhausted long before she had seen half of it. She tried to make her own personal choice between the dull, soft, dark colors and carved Circassian walnut furniture in the dining−room, and the sharp contrast of the reception hall, where the sunlight flooded a rosy−latticed paper, an old white Colonial mantel and fiddle−backed chairs, and struck dazzling gleams from the brass fire−dogs and irons. The drawing−room had its own charm; the largest room in the house, it had French windows on three sides, each one giving a separate and exquisite glimpse of lawns and garden beyond. Upon its dark and shining floor were stretched a score of silky Persian rugs, roses mirrored themselves in polished mahogany, and here and there were priceless bits of carved ivory, wonderful strips of embroidered Chinese silks, miniatures, and exquisite books. Four or five great lamps glowing under mosaic shades made the place lovely at night, but in the heat of a summer day, shaded, empty, deliciously airy and cool, Susan thought it at its loveliest. At night heavy brocaded curtains were drawn across the windows, and a wood fire crackled in the fireplace, in a setting of creamy tiles. There was a small grand−piano in this room, a larger piano in the big, empty reception room on the other side of the house, Susan and Emily had a small upright for their own use, and there were one or two more in other parts of the house.

Everywhere was exquisite order, exquisite peace. Lightfooted maids came and went noiselessly, to brush up a fallen daisy petal, or straighten a rug. Not the faintest streak of dust ever lay across the shining surface of the piano, not the tiniest cloud ever filmed the clear depths of the mirrors. A slim Chinese houseboy, in plum− color and pale blue, with his queue neatly coiled, and his handsome, smooth young face always smiling, padded softly to and fro all day long, in his thick−soled straw slippers, with letters and magazines, parcels and messages and telegrams.

"Lizzie−Carrie—one of you girls take some sweet−peas up to my room," Ella would say at breakfasttime, hardly glancing up from her mail. And an hour later Susan, looking into Miss Saunders' apartment to see if she still expected Emily to accompany her to the Holmes wedding, or to say that Mrs. Saunders wanted to see her eldest daughter, would notice a bowl of the delicately−tinted blossoms on the desk, and another on the table.

The girls' beds were always made, when they went upstairs to freshen themselves for luncheon; tumbled linen and used towels had been spirited away, fresh blotters were on the desk, fresh flowers everywhere, windows open, books back on their shelves, clothes stretched on hangers in the closets; everything immaculately clean and crisp.

It was apparently impossible to interrupt the quiet running of the domestic machinery. If Susan and Emily left wet skirts and umbrellas and muddy overshoes in one of the side hallways, on returning from a walk, it was only a question of a few hours, before the skirts, dried and brushed and pressed, the umbrellas neatly furled, and the overshoes, as shining as ever, were back in their places. If the girls wanted tea at five o'clock, sandwiches of every known, and frequently of new types, little cakes and big, hot bouillons, or a salad, or even a broiled bird were to be had for the asking. It was no trouble, the tray simply appeared and Chow Yew or Carrie served them as if it were a real pleasure to do so.

Whoever ordered for the Saunders kitchen—Susan suspected that it was a large amiable person in black whom she sometimes met in the halls, a person easily mistaken for a caller or a visiting aunt, but respectful in manner, and with a habit of running her tongue over her teeth when not speaking that vaguely suggested immense capability—did it on a very large scale indeed. It was not, as in poor Auntie's case, a question of selecting stewed tomatoes as a suitable vegetable for dinner, and penciling on a list, under "five pounds round steak," "three cans tomatoes." In the Saunders' house there was always to be had whatever choicest was in season,—crabs or ducks, broilers or trout, asparagus an inch in diameter, forced strawberries and peaches, even pomegranates and alligator pears and icy, enormous grapefruit—new in those days—and melons and nectarines. There were crocks and boxes of cakes, a whole ice−chest just for cream and milk, another for cheeses and olives and pickles and salad−dressings. Susan had seen the cook's great store−room, lined with jars and pots and crocks, tins and glasses and boxes of delicious things to eat, brought from all over the world for the moment when some member of the Saunders family fancied Russian caviar, or Chinese ginger, or Italian cheese.

Other people's brains and bodies were constantly and pleasantly at work to spare the Saunders any effort

whatever, and as Susan, taken in by the family, and made to feel absolutely one of them, soon found herself taking hourly service quite as a matter of course, as though it was nothing new to her luxury−loving little person. If she hunted for a book, in a dark corner of the library, she did not turn her head to see which maid touched the button that caused a group of lights, just above her, to spring suddenly into soft bloom, although her "Thank you!" never failed; and when she and Emily came in late for tea in the drawing−room, she piled her wraps into some attendant's arms without so much as a glance. Yet Susan personally knew and liked all the maids, and they liked her, perhaps because her unaffected enjoyment of this new life and her constant allusions to the deprivations of the old days made them feel her a little akin to themselves.

With Emily and her mother Susan was soon quite at home; with Ella her shyness lasted longer; and toward a friendship with Kenneth Saunders she seemed to make no progress whatever. Kenneth addressed a few kindly, unsmiling remarks to his mother during the course of the few meals he had at home; he was always gentle with her, and deeply resented anything like a lack of respect toward her on the others' parts. He entirely ignored Emily, and if he held any conversation at all with the spirited Ella, it was very apt to take the form of a controversy, Ella trying to persuade him to attend some dance or dinner, or Kenneth holding up some especial friend of hers for scornful criticism. Sometimes he spoke to Miss Baker, but not often. Kenneth's friendships were mysteries; his family had not the most remote idea where he went when he went out every evening, or where he was when he did not come home. Sometimes he spoke out in sudden, half−amused praise of some debutante, she was a "funny little devil," or "she was the decentest kid in this year's crop," and perhaps he would follow up this remark with a call or two upon the admired young girl, and Ella would begin to tease him about her. But the debutante and her mother immediately lost their heads at this point, called on the Saunders, gushed at Ella and Emily, and tried to lure Kenneth into coming to little home dinners or small theater parties. This always ended matters abruptly, and Kenneth returned to his old ways.

His valet, a mournful, silent fellow named Mycroft, led rather a curious life, reporting at his master's room in the morning not before ten, and usually not in bed before two or three o'clock the next morning. About once a fortnight, sometimes oftener, as Susan had known for a long time, a subtle change came over Kenneth. His mother saw it and grieved; Ella saw it and scolded everyone but him. It cast a darkness over the whole house. Kenneth, always influenced more or less by what he drank, was going down, down, down, through one dark stage after another, into the terrible state whose horrors he dreaded with the rest of them. He was moping for a day or two, absent from meals, understood to be "not well, and in bed." Then Mycroft would agitatedly report that Mr. Kenneth was gone; there would be tears and Ella's sharpest voice in Mrs. Saunders' room, pallor and ill−temper on Emily's part, hushed distress all about until Kenneth was brought home from some place unknown by Mycroft, in a cab, and gotten noisily upstairs and visited three times a day by the doctor. The doctor would come downstairs to reassure Mrs. Saunders; Mycroft would run up and down a hundred times a day to wait upon the invalid. Perhaps once during his convalescence his mother would go up to see him for a little while, to sit, constrained and tender and unhappy, beside his bed, wishing perhaps that there was one thing in the wide world in which she and her son had a common interest.

She was a lonesome, nervous little lady, and at these times only a little more fidgety than ever. Sometimes she cried because of Kenneth, in her room at night, and Ella braced her with kindly, unsympathetic, well−meant, uncomprehending remarks, and made very light of his weakness; but Emily walked her own room nervously, raging at Ken for being such a beast, and Mama for being such a fool.

Susan, coming downstairs in the morning sunlight, after an evening of horror and strain, when the lamps had burned for four hours in an empty drawing−room, and she and Emily, early in their rooms, had listened alternately to the shouting and thumping that went on in Kenneth's room and the consoling murmur of Ella's voice downstairs, could hardly believe that life was being so placidly continued; that silence and sweetness still held sway downstairs; that Ella, in a foamy robe of lace and ribbon, at the head of the table, could be so cheerfully absorbed in the day's news and the Maryland biscuit, and that Mrs. Saunders, pottering over her begonias, could show so radiant a face over the blossoming of the double white, that Emily, at the telephone could laugh and joke.

She was a great favorite with them all now, this sunny, pretty Susan; even Miss Baker, the mouse−like little trained nurse, beamed for her, and congratulated her upon her influence over every separate member of the family. Miss Baker had held her place for ten years and cherished no illusions concerning the Saunders.

Susan had lost some few illusions herself, but not many. She was too happy to be critical, and it was her

nature to like people for no better reason than that they liked her.

Emily Saunders, with whom she had most to do, who was indeed her daily and hourly companion, was at this time about twenty−six years old, and so two years older than Susan, although hers was a smooth− skinned, baby−like type, and she looked quite as young as her companion. She had had a very lonely, if extraordinarily luxurious childhood, and a sickly girlhood, whose principal events were minor operations on eyes or ears, and experiments in diets and treatments, miserable sieges with oculists and dentists and stomach−pumps. She had been sent to several schools, but ill−health made her progress a great mortification, and finally she had been given a governess, Miss Roche, a fussily−dressed, effusive Frenchwoman, who later traveled with her. Emily's only accounts of her European experience dealt with Miss Roche's masterly treatment of ungracious officials, her faculty for making Emily comfortable at short notice and at any cost or place, and her ability to bring certain small possessions through the custom−house without unnecessary revelations. And at eighteen the younger Miss Saunders had been given a large coming−out tea, had joined the two most exclusive Cotillions,—the Junior and the Browning—had lunched and dined and gone to the play with the other debutantes, and had had, according to the admiring and attentive press, a glorious first season.

As a matter of fact, however, it had been a most unhappy time for the person most concerned. Emily was not a social success. Not more than one debutante in ten is; Emily was one of the nine. Before every dance her hopes rose irrepressibly, as she gazed at her dainty little person in the mirror, studied her exquisite frock and her pearls, and the smooth perfection of the hair so demurely coiled under its wreath of rosebuds, or band of shining satin. To−night, she would be a success, to−night she would wipe out old scores. This mood lasted until she was actually in the dressing−room, in a whirl of arriving girls. Then her courage began to ebb. She would watch them, as the maid took off her carriage shoes; pleasantly take her turn at the mirror, exchange a shy, half−absent greeting with the few she knew; wish, with all her heart, that she dared put herself under their protection. Just a few were cool enough to enter the big ballroom in a gale of mirth, surrender themselves for a few moments of gallant dispute to the clustered young men at the door, and be ready to dance without a care, the first dozen dances promised, and nothing to do but be happy.

But Emily drifted out shyly, fussed carefully with fans or glove− clasps while looking furtively about for possible partners, returned in a panic to the dressing−room on a pretense of exploring a slipper−bag for a handkerchief, and made a fresh start. Perhaps this time some group of chattering and laughing girls and men would be too close to the door for her comfort; not invited to join them, Emily would feel obliged to drift on across the floor to greet some gracious older woman, and sink into a chair, smiling at compliments, and covering a defeat with a regretful:

"I'm really only looking on to−night. Mama worries so if I overdo."

And here she would feel out of the current indeed, hopelessly shelved. Who would come looking for a partner in this quiet corner, next to old Mrs. Chickering whose two granddaughters were in the very center of the merry group at the door? Emily would smilingly rise, and go back to the dressing−room again.

The famous Browning dances, in their beginning, a generation earlier, had been much smaller, less formal and more intimate than they were now. The sixty or seventy young persons who went to those first dances were all close friends, in a simpler social structure, and a less self−conscious day. They had been the most delightful events in Ella's girlhood, and she felt it to be entirely Emily's fault that Emily did not find them equally enchanting.

"But I don't know the people who go to them very well!" Emily would say, half−confidential, half−resentful. Ella always met this argument with high scorn.

"Oh, Baby, if you'd stop whining and fretting, and just get in and enjoy yourself once!" Ella would answer impatiently. "You don't have to know a man intimately to dance with him, I should hope! Just GO, and have a good time! My Lord, the way we all used to laugh and talk and rush about, you'd have thought we were a pack of children!"

Ella and her contemporaries always went to these balls even now, the magnificent matrons of forty showing rounded arms and beautiful bosoms, and gowns far more beautiful than those the girls wore. Jealousy and rivalry and heartaches all forgot, they sat laughing and talking in groups, clustered along the walls, or played six− handed euchre in the adjoining card−room, and had, if the truth had been known, a far better time than the girls they chaperoned.

After a winter or two, however, Emily stopped going, except perhaps once in a season. She began to devote a great deal of her thought and her conversation to her health, and was not long in finding doctors and nurses to whom the subject was equally fascinating. Emily had a favorite hospital, and was frequently ordered there for experiences that touched more deeply the chords of her nature than anything else ever did in her life. No one at home ever paid her such flattering devotion as did the sweet−faced, low−voiced nurses, and the doctor—whose coming, twice a day, was such an event. The doctor was a model husband and father, his beautiful wife a woman whom Ella knew and liked very well, but Emily had her nickname for him, and her little presents for him, and many a small, innocuous joke between herself and the doctor made her feel herself close to him. Emily was always glad when she could turn from her mother's mournful solicitude, Kenneth's snubs and Ella's imperativeness, and the humiliating contact with a society that could get along very well without her, to the universal welcome she had from all her friends in Mrs. Fowler's hospital.

To Susan the thought of hypodermics, anesthetics, antisepsis and clinic thermometers, charts and diets, was utterly mysterious and abhorrent, and her healthy distaste for them amused Emily, and gave Emily a good reason for discussing and defending them.

Susan's part was to listen and agree, listen and agree, listen and agree, on this as on all topics. She had not been long at "High Gardens" before Emily, in a series of impulsive gushes of confidence, had volunteered the information that Ella was so jealous and selfish and heartless that she was just about breaking Mama's heart, never happy unless she was poisoning somebody's mind against Emily, and never willing to let Emily keep a single friend, or do anything she wanted to do.

"So now you see why I am always so dignified and quiet with Ella," said Emily, in the still midnight when all this was revealed. "That's the ONE thing that makes her mad!"

"I can't believe it!" said Susan, aching for sleep, and yawning under cover of the dark.

"I keep up for Mama's sake," Emily said. "But haven't you noticed how Ella tries to get you away from me? You MUST have! Why, the very first night you were here, she called out, 'Come in and see me on your way down!' Don't you remember? And yesterday, when I wasn't dressed and she wanted you to go driving, after dinner! Don't you remember?"

"Yes, but—−" Susan began. She could dismiss this morbid fancy with a few vigorous protests, with a hearty laugh. But she would probably dismiss herself from the Saunders' employ, as well, if she pursued any such bracing policy.

"You poor kid, it's pretty hard on you!" she said, admiringly. And for half an hour she was not allowed to go to sleep.

Susan began to dread these midnight talks. The moon rose, flooded the sleeping porch, mounted higher. The watch under Susan's pillow ticked past one o'clock, past half−past one—

"Emily, you know really Ella is awfully proud of you," she was finally saying, "and, as for trying to influence your mother, you can't blame her. You're your mother's favorite—anyone can see that− −and I do think she feels—"

"Well, that's true!" Emily said, mollified. A silence followed. Susan began to settle her head by imperceptible degrees into the pillow; perhaps Emily was dropping off! Silence—silence—heavenly delicious silence. What a wonderful thing this sleeping porch was, Susan thought drowsily, and how delicious the country night—

"Susan, why do you suppose I am Mama's favorite?" Emily's clear, wide−awake voice would pursue, with pensive interest.

Or, "Susan, when did you begin to like me?" she would question, on their drives. "Susan, when I was looking straight up into Mrs. Carter's face,—you know the way I always do!—she laughed at me, and said I was a madcap monkey? Why did she say that?" Emily would pout, and wrinkle her brows in pretty, childish doubt. "I'm not a monkey, and *I* don't think I'm a madcap? Do you?"

"You're different, you see, Emily. You're not in the least like anybody else!" Susan would say.

"But WHY am I different?" And if it was possible, Emily might even come over to sit on the arm of Susan's chair, or drop on her knees and encircle Susan's waist with her arms.

"Well, in the first place you're terribly original, Emily, and you always say right out what you mean—" Susan would begin.

With Ella, when she grew to know her well, Susan was really happier. She was too honest to enjoy the part

she must always play with Emily, yet too practically aware of the advantages of this new position, to risk it by frankness, and eventually follow the other companions, the governesses and trained nurses who had preceded her. Emily characterized these departed ladies as "beasts," and still flushed a deep resentful red when she mentioned certain ones among them.

Susan found in Ella, in the first place, far more to admire than she could in Emily. Ella's very size made for a sort of bigness in character. She looked her two hundred and thirty pounds, but she looked handsome, glowing and comfortable as well. Everything she wore was loose and dashing in effect; she was a fanatic about cleanliness and freshness, and always looked as if freshly bathed and brushed and dressed. Ella never put on a garment, other than a gown or wrap, twice. Sometimes a little heap of snowy, ribboned underwear was carried away from her rooms three or four times a day.

She was dictatorial and impatient and exacting, but she was witty and good−natured, too, and so extremely popular with men and women of her own age that she could have dined out three times a night. Ella was fondly nicknamed "Mike" by her own contemporaries, and was always in demand for dinners and lunch parties and card parties. She was beloved by the younger set, too. Susan thought her big−sisterly interest in the debutantes very charming to see and, when she had time to remember her sister's little companion now and then, she would carry Susan off for a drive, or send for her when she was alone for tea, and the two laughed a great deal together. Susan could honestly admire here, and Ella liked her admiration.

Miss Saunders believed herself to be a member of the most distinguished American family in existence, and her place to be undisputed as queen of the most exclusive little social circle in the world. She knew enough of the social sets of London and Washington and New York society to allude to them casually and intimately, and she told Susan that no other city could boast of more charming persons than those who composed her own particular set in San Francisco. Ella never spoke of "society" without intense gravity; nothing in life interested her so much as the question of belonging or not belonging to it. To her personally, of course, it meant nothing; she had been born inside the charmed ring, and would die there; but the status of other persons filled her with concern. She was very angry when her mother or Emily showed any wavering in this all−important matter.

"Well, what did you have to SEE her for, Mama?" Ella would irritably demand, when her autocratic "Who'd you see to−day? What'd you do?" had drawn from her mother the name of some caller.

"Why, dearie, I happened to be right there. I was just crossing the porch when they drove up!" Mrs. Saunders would timidly submit.

"Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord! Mama, you make me crazy!" Ella would drop her hands, fling her head back, gaze despairingly at her mother. "That was your chance to snub her, Mama! Why didn't you have Chow Yew say that you were out?"

"But, dearie, she seemed a real sweet little thing!"

"Sweet little—! You'll have me CRAZY! Sweet little nothing—just because she married Gordon Jones, and the St. Johns have taken her up, she thinks she can get into society! And anyway, I wouldn't have given Rosie St. John the satisfaction for a thousand dollars! Did you ask her to your bridge lunch?"

"Ella, dear, it is MY lunch," her mother might remind her, with dignity.

"Mama, did you ask that woman here to play cards?"

"Well, dearie, she happened to say—"

"Oh, happened to say—!" A sudden calm would fall upon Miss Ella, the calm of desperate decision. The subject would be dropped for the time, but she would bring a written note to the lunch table.

"Listen to this, Mama; I can change it if you don't like it," Ella would begin, kindly, and proceed to read it.

HIGH GARDENS. MY DEAR MRS. JONES:

Mother has asked me to write you that her little bridge lunch for Friday, the third, must be given up because of the dangerous illness of a close personal friend. She hopes that it is only a pleasure deferred, and will write you herself when less anxious and depressed. Cordially yours,

ELLA CORNWALLIS SAUNDERS.

"But, Ella, dear," the mother would protest, "there are others coming—"

"Leave the others to me! I'll telephone and make it the day before." Ella would seal and dispatch the note, and

be inclined to feel generously tender and considerate of her mother for the rest of the day.

Ella was at home for a few moments, almost every day; but she did not dine at home more than once or twice in a fortnight. But she was always there for the family's occasional formal dinner party in which events Susan refused very sensibly to take part. She and Miss Baker dined early and most harmoniously in the breakfast−room, and were free to make themselves useful to the ladies of the house afterward. Ella would be magnificent in spangled cloth−of−gold; Emily very piquante in demure and drooping white, embroidered exquisitely with tiny French blossoms in color; Mrs. Saunders rustling in black lace and lavender silk, as the three went downstairs at eight o'clock. Across the wide hall below would stream the hooded women and the men in great−coats, silk hats in hand. Ella did not leave the drawing−room to meet them, as on less formal occasions, but a great chattering and laughing would break out as they went in.

Susan, sitting back on her knees in the upper hall, to peer through the railing at the scene below, to Miss Baker's intense amusement, could admire everything but the men guests. They were either more or less attractive and married, thought Susan, or very young, very old, or very uninteresting bachelors. Red−faced, eighteen−year−old boys, laughing nervously, and stumbling over their pumps, shared the honors with cackling little fifty−year−old gallants. It could only be said that they were males, and that Ella would have cheerfully consigned her mother to bed with a bad headache rather than have had one too few of them to evenly balance the number of women. The members of the family knew what patience and effort were required, what writing and telephoning, before the right number was acquired.

The first personal word that Kenneth Saunders ever spoke to his sister's companion was when, running downstairs, on the occasion of one of these dinners, he came upon her, crouched in her outlook, and thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Good God!" said Kenneth, recoiling.

"Sh−sh—it's only me—I'm watching 'em!" Susan whispered, even laying her hand upon the immaculate young gentleman's arm in her anxiety to quiet him.

"Why, Lord; why doesn't Ella count you in on these things?" he demanded, gruffly. "Next time I'll tell her—"

"If you do, I'll never speak to you again!" Susan threatened, her merry face close to his in the dark. "I wouldn't be down there for a farm!"

"What do you do, just watch 'em?" Kenneth asked sociably, hanging over the railing beside her.

"It's lots of fun!" Susan said, in a whisper. "Who's that?"

"That's that Bacon girl—isn't she the limit!" Kenneth whispered back. "Lord," he added regretfully, "I'd much rather stay up here than go down! What Ella wants to round up a gang like this for—"

And, sadly speculating, the son of the house ran downstairs, and Susan, congratulating herself, returned to her watching.

Indeed, after a month or two in her new position, she thought an evening to herself a luxury to be enormously enjoyed. It was on such an occasion that Susan got the full benefit of the bathroom, the luxuriously lighted and appointed dressing−table, the porch with its view of a dozen gardens drenched in heavenly moonlight. At other times Emily's conversation distracted her and interrupted her at her toilet. Emily gave her no instant alone.

Emily came up very late after the dinners to yawn and gossip with Susan while Gerda, her mother's staid middle−aged maid, drew off her slippers and stockings, and reverently lifted the dainty gown safely to its closet. Susan always got up, rolled herself in a wrap, and listened to the account of the dinner; Emily was rather critical of the women, but viewed the men more romantically. She repeated their compliments, exulting that they had been paid her "under Ella's very nose," or while "Mama was staring right at us." It pleased Emily to imagine a great many love−affairs for herself, and to feel that they must all be made as mysterious and kept as secret as possible.

It was the old story, thought Susan, listening sympathetically, and in utter disbelief, to these recitals. Mary Lou and Georgie were not alone in claiming vague and mythical love−affairs; Emily even carried them to the point of indicating old bundles of letters in her desk as "from Bob Brock—tell you all about that some time!" or alluding to some youth who had gone away, left that part of the country entirely for her sake, some years ago. And even Georgie would not have taken as seriously as Emily did the least accidental exchange of courtesies with the eligible male. If the two girls, wasting a morning in the shops in town, happened to meet some hurrying young man in the street, the color rushed into Emily's face, and she alluded to the incident a dozen times during the

course of the day. Like most girls, she had a special manner for men, a rather audacious and attractive manner, Susan thought. The conversation was never anything but gay and frivolous and casual. It always pleased Emily when such a meeting occurred.

"Did you notice that Peyton Hamilton leaned over and said something to me very quickly, in a low voice, this morning?" Emily would ask, later, suddenly looking mischievous and penitent at once.

"Oh, ho! That's what you do when I'm not noticing!" Susan would upbraid her.

"He asked me if he could call," Emily would say, yawning, "but I told him I didn't like him well enough for that!"

Susan was astonished to find herself generally accepted because of her association with Emily Saunders. She had always appreciated the difficulty of entering the inner circle of society with insufficient credentials. Now she learned how simple the whole thing was when the right person or persons assumed the responsibility. Girls whom years ago she had rather fancied to be "snobs" and "stuck−up" proved very gracious, very informal and jolly, at closer view; even the most prominent matrons began to call her "child" and "you little Susan Brown, you!" and show her small kindnesses.

Susan took them at exactly their own valuation, revered those women who, like Ella, were supreme; watched curiously others a little less sure of their standing; and pitied and smiled at the struggles of the third group, who took rebuffs and humiliations smilingly, and fell only to rise and climb again. Susan knew that the Thayers, the Chickerings and Chaunceys and Coughs, the Saunders and the St. Johns, and Dolly Ripley, the great heiress, were really secure, nothing could shake them from their proud eminence. It gave her a little satisfaction to put the Baxters and Peter Coleman decidedly a step below; even lovely Isabel Wallace and the Carters and the Geralds, while ornamenting the very nicest set, were not quite the social authorities that the first−named families were. And several lower grades passed before one came to Connie Fox and her type, poor, pushing, ambitious, watching every chance to score even the tiniest progress toward the goal of social recognition. Connie Fox and her mother were a curious study to Susan, who, far more secure for the time being than they were, watched them with deep interest. The husband and father was an insurance broker, whose very modest income might have comfortably supported a quiet country home, and one maid, and eventually have been stretched to afford the daughter and only child a college education or a trousseau as circumstances decreed. As it was, a little house on Broadway was maintained with every appearance of luxury, a capped−and−aproned maid backed before guests through the tiny hall; Connie's vivacity covered the long wait for the luncheons that an irate Chinese cook, whose wages were perpetually in arrears, served when it pleased him to do so. Mrs. Fox bought prizes for Connie's gay little card−parties with the rent money, and retired with a headache immediately after tearfully informing the harassed breadwinner of the fact. She ironed Connie's gowns, bullied her little dressmaker, cried and made empty promises to her milliner, cut her old friends, telephoned her husband at six o'clock that, as "the girls" had not gone yet, perhaps he had better have a bite of dinner downtown. She gushed and beamed on Connie's friends, cultivated those she could reach assiduously, and never dreamed that a great many people were watching her with amusement when she worked her way about a room to squeeze herself in next to some social potentate.

She had her reward when the mail brought Constance the coveted dance−cards; when she saw her name in the society columns of the newspapers, and was able to announce carelessly that that lucky girlie of hers was really going to Honolulu with the Cyrus Holmes. Dolly Ripley, the heiress, had taken a sudden fancy to Connie, some two years before Susan met her, and this alone was enough to reward Mrs. Fox for all the privations, snubs and humiliations she had suffered since the years when she curled Connie's straight hair on a stick, nearly blinded herself tucking and embroidering her little dresses, and finished up the week's ironing herself so that her one maid could escort Connie to an exclusive little dancing−class.

Susan saw Connie now and then, and met the mother and daughter on a certain autumn Sunday when Ella had chaperoned the two younger girls to a luncheon at the Burlingame club−house. They had spent the night before with a friend of Ella's, whose lovely country home was but a few minutes' walk from the club, and Susan was elated with the glorious conviction that she had added to the gaiety of the party, and that through her even Emily was having a really enjoyable time. She met a great many distinguished persons to−day, the golf and polo players, the great Eastern actress who was the center of a group of adoring males, and was being entertained by the oldest and most capable of dowagers, and Dolly Ripley, a lean, eager, round− shouldered, rowdyish little person, talking as a professional breeder might talk of her dogs and horses, and shadowed by Connie Fox. Susan was so filled

with the excitement of the occasion, the beauty of the day, the delightful club and its delightful guests, that she was able to speak to Miss Dolly Ripley quite as if she also had inherited some ten millions of dollars, and owned the most expensive, if not the handsomest, home in the state.

"That was so like dear Dolly!" said Mrs. Fox later, coming up behind Susan on the porch, and slipping an arm girlishly about her waist.

"What was?" asked Susan, after greetings.

"Why, to ask what your first name was, and say that as she hated the name of Brown, she was going to call you Susan!" said Mrs. Fox sweetly. "Don't you find her very dear and simple?"

"Why, I just met her—" Susan said, disliking the arm about her waist, and finding Mrs. Fox's interest in her opinion of Dolly Ripley quite transparent.

"Ah, I know her so well!" Mrs. Fox added, with a happy sigh. "Always bright and interested when she meets people. But I scold her—yes, I do!—for giving people a false impression. I say, 'Dolly,'—I've known her so long, you know!—'Dolly, dear, people might easily think you meant some of these impulsive things you say, dear, whereas your friends, who know you really well, know that it's just your little manner, and that you'll have forgotten all about it to− morrow!' I don't mean YOU, Miss Brown," Mrs. Fox interrupted herself to say hastily. "Far from it!——Now, my dear, tell me that you know I didn't mean you!"

"I understand perfectly," Susan said graciously. And she knew that at last she really did. Mrs. Fox was fluttering like some poor bird that sees danger near its young. She couldn't have anyone else, especially this insignificant little Miss Brown, who seemed to be making rather an impression everywhere, jeopardize Connie's intimacy with Dolly Ripley, without using such poor and obvious little weapons as lay at her command to prevent it.

Standing on the porch of the Burlingame Club, and staring out across the gracious slopes of the landscape, Susan had an exhilarated sense of being among the players of this fascinating game at last. She must play it alone, to be sure, but far better alone than assisted as Connie Fox was assisted. It was an immense advantage to be expected to accompany Emily everywhere; it made a snub practically impossible, while heightening the compliment when she was asked anywhere without Emily. Susan was always willing to entertain a difficult guest, to play cards or not to play with apparently equal enjoyment—more desirable than either, she was "fun," and the more she was laughed at, the funnier she grew.

"And you'll be there with Emily, of course, Miss Brown," said the different hostess graciously. "Emily, you're going to bring Susan Brown, you know!—I'm telephoning, Miss Brown, because I'm afraid my note didn't make it clear that we want you, too!"

Emily's well−known eccentricity did not make Susan the less popular; even though she was personally involved in it.

"Oh, I wrote you a note for Emily this morning, Mrs. Willis," Susan would say, at the club, "she's feeling wretchedly to−day, and she wants to be excused from your luncheon to−morrow!"

"Oh?" The matron addressed would eye the messenger with kindly sharpness. "What's the matter—very sick?"

"We−ell, not dying!" A dimple would betray the companion's demureness.

"Not dying? No, I suppose not! Well, you tell Emily that she's a silly, selfish little cat, or words to that effect!"

"I'll choose words to that effect," Susan would assure the speaker, smilingly.

"You couldn't come, anyway, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Willis! Thank you so much!"

"No, of course not." The matron would bite her lips in momentary irritation, and, when they parted, the cause of that pretty, appreciative, amusing little companion of Emily Saunders would be appreciably strengthened.

One winter morning Emily tossed a square, large envelope across the breakfast table toward her companion.

"Sue, that looks like a Browning invitation! What do you bet that he's sent you a card for the dances!"

"He couldn't!" gasped Susan, snatching it up, while her eyes danced, and the radiant color flooded her face. Her hand actually shook when she tore the envelope open, and as the engraved card made its appearance, Susan's expression might have been that of Cinderella eyeing her coach−and−four.

For Browning—founder of the cotillion club, and still manager of the four or five winter dances—was the one unquestioned, irrefutable, omnipotent social authority of San Francisco. To go to the "Brownings" was to have arrived socially; no other distinction was equivalent, because there was absolutely no other standard of judgment.

Very high up, indeed, in the social scale must be the woman who could resist the temptation to stick her card to the Brownings in her mirror frame, where the eyes of her women friends must inevitably fall upon it, and yearly hundreds of matrons tossed through sleepless nights, all through the late summer and the fall, hoping against hope, despairing, hoping again, that the magic card might really be delivered some day in early December, and her debutante daughter's social position be placed beyond criticism once more. Only perhaps one hundred persons out of "Brownie's" four hundred guests could be sure of the privilege. The others must suffer and wait.

Browning himself, a harassed, overworked, kindly gentleman, whose management of the big dances brought him nothing but responsibility and annoyance, threatened yearly to resign from his post, and yearly was dragged back into the work, fussing for hours with his secretary over the list, before he could personally give it to the hungrily waiting reporters with the weary statement that it was absolutely correct, that no more names were to be added this year, that he did not propose to defend, through the columns of the press, his omission of certain names and his acceptance of others, and that, finally, he was off for a week's vacation in the southern part of the state, and thanked them all for their kindly interest in himself and his efforts for San Francisco society.

It was the next morning's paper that was so anxiously awaited, and so eagerly perused in hundreds of luxurious boudoirs—exulted over, or wept over and reviled,—but read by nearly every woman in the city.

And now he had sent Susan a late card, and Susan knew why. She had met the great man at the Hotel Rafael a few days before, at tea− time, and he had asked Susan most affectionately of her aunt, Mrs. Lancaster, and recalled, with a little emotion, the dances of two generations before, when he was a small boy, and the lovely Georgianna Ralston was a beauty and a belle. Susan could have kissed the magic bit of pasteboard!

But she knew too well just what Emily wanted to think of Browning's courtesy, to mention his old admiration for her aunt. And Emily immediately justified her diplomatic silence by saying:

"Isn't that AWFULLY decent of Brownie! He did that just for Ella and me—that's like him! He'll do anything for some people!"

"Well, of course I can't go," Susan said briskly. "But I do call it awfully decent! And no little remarks about sending a check, either, and no chaperone's card! The old duck! However, I haven't a gown, and I haven't a beau, and you don't go, and so I'll write a tearful regret. I hope it won't be the cause of his giving the whole thing up. I hate to discourage the dear boy!"

Emily laughed approvingly.

"No, but honestly, Sue," she said, in eager assent, "don't you know how people would misunderstand—you know how people are! You and I know that you don't care a whoop about society, and that you'd be the last person in the world to use your position here—but you know what other people might say! And Brownie hates talk—"

Susan had to swallow hard, and remain smiling. It was part of the price that she paid for being here in this beautiful environment, for being, in every material sense, a member of one of the state's richest families. She could not say, as she longed to say, "Oh, Emily, don't talk ROT! You know that before your own grandfather made his money as a common miner, and when Isabel Wallace's grandfather was making shoes, mine was a rich planter in Virginia!" But she knew that she could safely have treated Emily's own mother with rudeness, she could have hopelessly mixed up the letters she wrote for Ella, she could have set the house on fire or appropriated to her own use the large sums of money she occasionally was entrusted by the family to draw for one purpose or another from the bank, and been quickly forgiven, if forgivness was a convenience to the Saunders family at the moment. But to fail to realize that between the daughter of the house of Saunders and the daughter of the house of Brown an unspanned social chasm must forever stretch would have been, indeed, the unforgivable offense.

It was all very different from Susan's old ideals of a paid companion's duties. She had drawn these ideals from the English novels she consumed with much enjoyment in early youth—from "Queenie's Whim" and "Uncle Max" and the novels of Charlotte Yonge. She had imagined herself, before her arrival at "High Gardens," as playing piano duets with Emily, reading French for an hour, German for an hour, gardening, tramping, driving, perhaps making a call on some sick old woman with soup and jelly in her basket, or carrying armfuls of blossoms to the church for decoration. If one of Emily's sick headaches came on, it would be Susan's duty to care for her tenderly, and to read to her in a clear, low, restful voice when she was recovering; to write her notes, to keep her vases filled with flowers, to "preside" at the tea−table, efficient, unobtrusive, and indispensable. She would make herself useful to Ella, too; arrange her collections of coins, carry her telephone messages, write her notes. She

would accompany the little old mother on her round through the greenhouses, read to her and be ready to fly for her book or her shawl. And if Susan's visionary activities also embraced a little missionary work in the direction of the son of the house, it was of a very sisterly and blameless nature. Surely the most demure of companions, reading to Mrs. Saunders in the library, might notice an attentive listener lounging in a dark corner, or might color shyly when Ken's sisters commented on the fact that he seemed to be at home a good deal these days.

It was a little disillusioning to discover, as during her first weeks in the new work she did discover, that almost no duties whatever would be required of her. It seemed to make more irksome the indefinite thing that was required of her; her constant interested participation in just whatever happened to interest Emily at the moment. Susan loved tennis and driving, loved shopping and lunching in town, loved to stroll over to the hotel for tea in the pleasant afternoons, or was satisfied to lie down and read for an hour or two.

But it was very trying to a person of her definite impulsive briskness never to know, from one hour or one day to the next, just what occupation was in prospect. Emily would order the carriage for four o'clock, only to decide, when it came around, that she would rather drag the collies out into the side−garden, to waste three dozen camera plates and three hours in trying to get good pictures of them. Sometimes Emily herself posed before the camera, and Susan took picture after picture of her.

"Sue, don't you think it would be fun to try some of me in my Mandarin coat? Come up while I get into it. Oh, and go get Chow Yew to get that Chinese violin he plays, and I'll hold it! We'll take 'em in the Japanese garden!" Emily would be quite fired with enthusiasm, but before the girls were upstairs she might change in favor of her riding habit and silk hat, and Susan would telephone the stable that Miss Emily's riding horse was wanted in the side− garden. "You're a darling!" she would say to Susan, after an exhausting hour or two. "Now, next time I'll take you!"

But Susan's pictures never were taken. Emily's interest rarely touched twice in the same place.

"Em, it's twenty minutes past four! Aren't we going to tea with Isabel Wallace?" Susan would ask, coming in to find Emily comfortably stretched out with a book.

"Oh, Lord, so we were! Well, let's not!" Emily would yawn.

"But, Em, they expect us!"

"Well, go telephone, Sue, there's a dear! And tell them I've got a terrible headache. And you and I'll have tea up here. Tell Carrie I want to see her about it; I'm hungry; I want to order it specially."

Sometimes, when the girls came downstairs, dressed for some outing, it was Miss Ella who upset their plans. Approving of her little sister's appearance, she would lure Emily off for a round of formal calls.

"Be decent now, Baby! You'll never have a good time, if you don't go and do the correct thing now and then. Come on. I'm going to town on the two, and we can get a carriage right at the ferry—"

But Susan rarely managed to save the afternoon. Going noiselessly upstairs, she was almost always captured by the lonely old mistress of the house.

"Girls gone?" Mrs. Saunders would pipe, in her cracked little voice, from the doorway of her rooms. "Don't the house seem still? Come in, Susan, you and I'll console each other over a cup of tea."

Susan, smilingly following her, would be at a loss to account for her own distaste and disappointment. But she was so tired of people! She wanted so desperately to be alone!

The precious chance would drift by, a rich tea would presently be served; the little over−dressed, over−fed old lady was really very lonely; she went to a luncheon or card−party not oftener than two or three times a month, and she loved company. There was almost no close human need or interest in her life; she was as far from her children as was any other old lady of their acquaintance.

Susan knew that she had been very proud of her sons and daughters, as a happy young mother. The girl was continually discovering, among old Mrs. Saunders' treasures, large pictures of Ella, at five, at seven, at nine, with straight long bangs and rosetted hats that tied under her chin, and French dresses tied with sashes about her knees, and pictures of Kenneth leaning against stone benches, or sitting in swings, a thin and sickly−looking little boy, in a velvet suit and ribboned straw hat. There were pictures of the dead children, too, and a picture of Emily, at three months, sitting in an immense shell, and clad only in the folds of her own fat little person. On the backs of these pictures, Mrs. Saunders had written "Kennie, six years old," and the date, or "Totty, aged nine"—she never tired of looking at them now, and of telling Susan that the buttons on Ella's dress had been of sterling silver, "made right from Papa's mine," and that the little ship Kenneth held had cost twenty−five dollars. All of her conversation

was boastful, in an inoffensive, faded sort of way. She told Susan about her wedding, about her gown and her mother's gown, and the cost of her music, and the number of the musicians.

Mrs. Saunders, Susan used to think, letting her thoughts wander as the old lady rambled on, was an unfortunately misplaced person. She had none of the qualities of the great lady, nothing spiritual or mental with which to fend off the vacuity of old age. As a girl, a bride, a young matron, she had not shown her lack so pitiably. But now, at sixty−five, Mrs. Saunders had no character, no tastes, no opinions worth considering. She liked to read the paper, she liked her flowers, although she took none of the actual care of them, and she liked to listen to music; there was a mechanical piano in her room, and Susan often heard the music downstairs at night, and pictured the old lady, reading in bed, calling to Miss Baker when a record approached its finish, and listening contentedly to selections from "Faust" and "Ernani," and the "Chanson des Alpes." Mrs. Saunders would have been far happier as a member of the fairly well−to−do middle class. She would have loved to shop with married daughters, sharply interrogating clerks as to the durability of shoes, and the weight of little underflannels; she would have been a good angel in the nurseries, as an unfailing authority when the new baby came, or hushing the less recent babies to sleep in tender old arms. She would have been a judge of hot jellies, a critic of pastry. But bound in this little aimless groove of dressmakers' calls, and card−parties, she was quite out of her natural element. It was not astonishing that, like Emily, she occasionally enjoyed an illness, and dispensed with the useless obligation of getting up and dressing herself at all!

Invitations, they were really commands, to the Browning dances were received early in December; Susan, dating her graceful little note of regret, was really shocked to notice the swift flight of the months. December already! And she had seemed to leave Hunter, Baxter Hunter only last week. Susan fell into a reverie over her writing, her eyes roving absently over the stretch of wooded hills below her window. December—! Nearly a year since Peter Coleman had sent her a circle of pearls, and she had precipitated the events that had ended their friendship. It was a sore spot still, the memory; but Susan, more sore at herself for letting him mislead her than with him, burned to reestablish herself in his eyes as a woman of dignity and reserve, rather than to take revenge upon him for what was, she knew now, as much a part of him as his laughing eyes and his indomitable buoyancy.

The room in which she was writing was warm. Furnace heat is not common in California, but, with a thousand other conveniences, the Saunders home had a furnace. There were winter roses, somewhere near her, making the air sweet; the sunlight slanted in brightly across the wide couch where Emily was lying, teasing Susan between casual glances at her magazine. A particularly gay week had left both girls feeling decidedly unwell. Emily complained of headache and neuralgia; Susan had breakfasted on hot soda and water, her eyes felt heavy, her skin hot and dry and prickly.

"We all eat too much in this house!" she said aloud, cheerfully. "And we don't exercise enough!" Emily did not answer, merely smiled, as at a joke. The subject of diet was not popular with either of the Misses Saunders. Emily never admitted that her physical miseries had anything to do with her stomach; and Ella, whose bedroom scales exasperated her afresh every time she got on them, while making dolorous allusions to her own size whenever it pleased her to do so, never allowed anyone else the privilege. But even with her healthy appetite, and splendid constitution, Susan was unable to eat as both the sisters did. Every other day she resolved sternly to diet, and frequently at night she could not sleep for indigestion; but the Saunders home was no atmosphere for Spartan resolutions, and every meal−time saw Susan's courage defeated afresh. She could have remained away from the table with far less effort than was required, when a delicious dish was placed before her, to send it away untouched. There were four regular meals daily in the Saunders home; the girls usually added a fifth when they went down to the pantries to forage before going to bed; and tempting little dishes of candy and candied fruits were set unobtrusively on card−tables, on desks, on the piano where the girls were amusing themselves with the songs of the day.

It was a comfortable, care−free life they led, irresponsible beyond any of Susan's wildest dreams. She and Emily lounged about their bright, warm apartments, these winter mornings, until nine o'clock, lingered over their breakfast—talking, talking and talking, until the dining−room clock struck a silvery, sweet eleven; and perhaps drifted into Miss Ella's room for more talk, or amused themselves with Chow Yew's pidgin English, while he filled vases in one of the pantries. At twelve o'clock they went up to dress for the one o'clock luncheon, an elaborate meal at which Mrs. Saunders plaintively commented on the sauce Bechamel, Ella reviled the cook, and Kenneth, if he was present, drank a great deal of some charged water from a siphon, or perhaps made Lizzie or

Carrie nearly leap out of their skins by a sudden, terrifying inquiry why Miss Brown hadn't been served to salad before he was, or perhaps growled at Emily a question as to what the girls had been talking about all night long.

After luncheon, if Kenneth did not want the new motor−car, which was supposed to be his particular affectation, the girls used it, giggling in the tonneau at the immobility of Flornoy, the French chauffeur; otherwise they drove behind the bays, and stopped at some lovely home, standing back from the road behind a sweep of drive, and an avenue of shady trees, for tea. Susan could take her part in the tea−time gossip now, could add her surmises and comment to the general gossip, and knew what the society weeklies meant when they used initials, or alluded to a "certain prominent debutante recently returned from an Eastern school."

As the season ripened, she and Emily went to four or five luncheons every week, feminine affairs, with cards or matinee to follow. Dinner invitations were more rare; there were men at the dinners, and the risk of boring a partner with Emily's uninteresting little personality was too great to be often taken. Her poor health served both herself and her friends as an excuse. Ella went everywhere, even to the debutante's affairs; but Emily was too entirely self− centered to be popular.

She and Susan were a great deal alone. They chattered and laughed together through shopping trips, luncheons at the clubs, matinees, and trips home on the boat. They bought prizes for Ella's card− parties, or engagement cups and wedding−presents for those fortunate girls who claimed the center of the social stage now and then with the announcement of their personal plans. They bought an endless variety of pretty things for Emily, who prided herself on the fact that she could not bear to have near her anything old or worn or ugly. A thousand little reminders came to Emily wherever she went of things without which she could not exist.

"What a darling chain that woman's wearing; let's go straight up to Shreve's and look at chains," said Emily, on the boat; or "White− bait! Here it is on this menu. I hadn't thought of it for months! Do remind Mrs. Pullet to get some!" or "Can't you remember what it was Isabel said that she was going to get? Don't you remember I said I needed it, too?"

If Susan had purchases of her own to make, Emily could barely wait with patience until they were completed, before adding:

"I think I'll have a pair of slippers, too. Something a little nicer than that, please"; or "That's going to make up into a dear wrapper for you, Sue," she would enthusiastically declare, "I ought to have another wrapper, oughtn't I? Let's go up to Chinatown, and see some of the big wadded ones at Sing Fat's. I really need one!"

Just before Christmas, Emily went to the southern part of the state with a visiting cousin from the East, and Susan gladly seized the opportunity for a little visit at home. She found herself strangely stirred when she went in, from the bright winter sunshine, to the dingy, odorous old house, encountering the atmosphere familiar to her from babyhood, and the unaltered warm embraces of Mary Lou and her aunt. Before she had hung up her hat and coat, she was swept again into the old ways, listening, while she changed her dress, to Mary Lou's patient complaints and wistful questions, slipping out to the bakery just before dinner to bring home a great paper−bag of hot rolls, and ending the evening, after a little shopping expedition to Fillmore Street, with solitaire at the dining−room table. The shabbiness and disorder and a sort of material sordidness were more marked than ever, but Susan was keenly conscious of some subtle, touching charm, unnoticed heretofore, that seemed to flavor the old environment to−night. They were very pure and loving and loyal, her aunt and cousins, very practically considerate and tender toward each other, despite the flimsy fabric of their absurd dreams; very good, in the old−fashioned sense of the term, if not very successful or very clever.

They made much of her coming, rejoiced over her and kissed her as if she never had even in thought neglected them, and exulted innocently in the marvelous delights of her new life. Georgie was driven over from the Mission by her husband, the next day, in Susan's honor, and carried the fat, loppy baby in for so brief a visit that it was felt hardly worth while to unwrap and wrap up again little Myra Estelle. Mrs. Lancaster had previously, with a burst of tears, informed Susan that Georgie was looking very badly, and that, nursing that heavy child, she should have been spared more than she was by the doctor's mother and the old servant. But Susan, although finding the young mother pale and rather excited, thought that Georgie looked well, and admired with the others her heavy, handsome new suit and the over−trimmed hat that quite eclipsed her small face. The baby was unmanageable, and roared throughout the visit, to Georgie's distress.

"She never cries this way at home!" protested young Mrs. O'Connor.

"Give her some ninny," Mrs. Lancaster suggested, eagerly, but Georgie, glancing at the street where Joe was

holding the restless black horse in check, said nervously that Joe didn't like it until the right time. She presently went out to hand Myra to Susan while she climbed into place, and was followed by a scream from Mrs. Lancaster, who remarked later that seeing the black horse start just as Susan handed the child up, she had expected to see them all dashed to pieces.

"Well, Susan, light of my old eyes, had enough of the rotten rich?" asked William Oliver, coming in for a later dinner, on the first night of her visit, and jerking her to him for a resounding kiss before she had any idea of his intention.

"Billy!" Susan said, mildly scandalized, her eyes on her aunt.

"Well, well, what's all this!" Mrs. Lancaster remarked, without alarm. William, shaking out his napkin, drawing his chair up to the table, and falling upon his dinner with vigor, demanded:

"Come on, now! Tell us all, all!"

But Susan, who had been chattering fast enough from the moment of her arrival, could not seem to get started again. It was indeed a little difficult to continue an enthusiastic conversation, unaffected by his running fire of comment. For in these days he was drifting rapidly toward a sort of altruistic socialism, and so listened to her recital with sardonic smiles, snorts of scorn, and caustic annotations.

"The Carters—ha! That whole bunch ought to be hanged," Billy remarked. "All their money comes from the rents of bad houses, and— let me tell you something, when there was a movement made to buy up that Jackson Street block, and turn it into a park, it was old Carter, yes, and his wife, too, who refused to put a price on their property!"

"Oh, Billy, you don't KNOW that!"

"I don't? All right, maybe I don't," Mr. Oliver returned growlingly to his meal, only to break out a moment later, "The Kirkwoods! Yes; that's a rare old bunch! They're still holding the city to the franchise they swindled the Government out of, right after the Civil War! Every time you pay taxes—"

"I don't pay taxes!" Susan interrupted frivolously, and resumed her glowing account. Billy made no further contribution to the conversation until he asked some moments later, "Does old Brock ever tell you about his factories, while he's taking you around his orchid−house? There's a man a week killed there, and the foremen tell the girls when they hire them that they aren't expected to take care of themselves on the wages they get!"

But the night before her return to San Rafael, Mr. Oliver, in his nicest mood, took Susan to the Orpheum, and they had fried oysters and coffee in a little Fillmore Street restaurant afterward, Billy admitting with graceful frankness that funds were rather low, and Susan really eager for the old experience and the old sensations. Susan liked the brotherly, clumsy way in which he tried to ascertain, as they sat loitering and talking over the little meal, just how much of her thoughts still went to Peter Coleman, and laughed outright, as soon as she detected his purpose, as only an absolutely heart−free girl could laugh, and laid her hand over his for a little appreciative squeeze before they dismissed the subject. After that he told her of some of his own troubles, the great burden of the laboring classes that he felt rested on his particular back, and his voice rose and he pounded the table as he talked of the other countries of the world, where even greater outrages, or where experimental solutions were in existence. Susan brought the conversation to Josephine Carroll, and watched his whole face grow tender, and heard his voice soften, as they spoke of her.

"No; but is it really and truly serious this time, Bill?" she asked, with that little thrill of pain that all good sisters know when the news comes.

"Serious? GOSH!" said the lover, simply.

"Engaged?"

"No−o. I couldn't very well. I'm in so deep at the works that I may get fired any minute. More than that, the boys generally want me to act as spokesman, and so I'm a sort of marked card, and I mightn't get in anywhere else, very easily. And I couldn't ask Jo to go with me to some Eastern factory or foundry town, without being pretty sure of a job. No; things are just drifting."

"Well, but Bill," Susan said anxiously, "somebody else will step in if you don't! Jo's such a beauty—"

He turned to her almost with a snarl.

"Well, what do you want me to do? Steal?" he asked angrily. And then softening suddenly he added: "She's young,—the little queen of queens!"

"And yet you say you don't want money," Susan said, drily, with a shrug of her shoulders.

The next day she went back to Emily, and again the lazy, comfortable days began to slip by, one just like the other. At Christmas−time Susan was deluged with gifts, the holidays were an endless chain of good times, the house sweet with violets, and always full of guests and callers; girls in furs who munched candy as they chattered, and young men who laughed and shouted around the punch bowl. Susan and Emily were caught in a gay current that streamed to the club, to talk and drink eggnog before blazing logs, and streamed to one handsome home after another, to talk and drink eggnog before other fires, and to be shown and admire beautiful and expensive presents. They bundled in and out of carriages and motors, laughing as they crowded in, and sitting on each other's laps, and carrying a chorus of chatter and laughter everywhere. Susan would find herself, the inevitable glass in hand, talking hard to some little silk−clad old lady in some softly lighted lovely drawing−room, to be whisked away to some other drawing−room, and to another fireside, where perhaps there was a stocky, bashful girl of fourteen to amuse, or somebody's grandfather to interest and smile upon.

Everywhere were holly wreaths and lights, soft carpets, fires and rich gowns, and everywhere the same display of gold picture frames and silver plates, rock crystal bowls, rugs and cameras and mahogany desks and tables, furs and jeweled chains and rings. Everywhere were candies from all over the world, and fruitcake from London, and marrons and sticky candied fruit, and everywhere unobtrusive maids were silently offering trays covered with small glasses.

Susan was frankly sick when the new year began, and Emily had several heart and nerve attacks, and was very difficult to amuse. But both girls agreed that the holidays had been the "time of their lives."

It was felt by the Saunders family that Susan had shown a very becoming spirit in the matter of the Browning dances. Ella, who had at first slightly resented the fact that "Brownie" had chosen to honor Emily's paid companion in so signal a manner, had gradually shifted to the opinion that, in doing so, he had no more than confirmed the family's opinion of Susan Brown, after all, and shown a very decent discrimination.

"No EARTHLY reason why you shouldn't have accepted!" said Ella.

"Oh, Duchess," said Susan, who sometimes pleased her with this name, "fancy the talk!"

"Well," drawled Ella, resuming her perusal of a scandalous weekly, "I don't know that I'm afraid of talk, myself!"

"At the same time, El," Emily contributed, eagerly, "you know what a fuss they made when Vera Brock brought that Miss De Foe, of New York!"

Ella gave her little sister a very keen look,

"Vera Brock?" she said, dreamily, with politely elevated brows.

"Well, of course, I don't take the Brocks seriously—" Emily began, reddening.

"Well, I should hope you wouldn't, Baby!" answered the older sister, promptly and forcibly. "Don't make an UTTER fool of yourself!"

Emily retired into an enraged silence, and a day or two later, Ella, on a Sunday morning late in February, announced that she was going to chaperone both the girls to the Browning dance on the following Friday night.

Susan was thrown into a most delightful flutter, longing desperately to go, but chilled with nervousness whenever she seriously thought of it. She lay awake every night anxiously computing the number of her possible partners, and came down to breakfast every morning cold with the resolution that she would make a great mistake in exposing herself to possible snubbing and neglect. She thought of nothing but the Browning, listened eagerly to what the other girls said of it, her heart sinking when Louise Chickering observed that there never were men enough at the Brownings, and rising again when Alice Chauncey hardily observed that, if a girl was a good dancer, that was all that mattered, she couldn't help having a good time! Susan knew she danced well—

However, Emily succumbed on Thursday to a heart attack. The whole household went through its usual excitement, the doctor came, the nurse was hurriedly summoned, Susan removed all the smaller articles from Emily's room, and replaced the bed's flowery cover with a sheet, the invalid liking the hospital aspect. Susan was not very much amazed at the suddenness of this affliction; Emily had been notably lacking in enthusiasm about the dance, and on Wednesday afternoon, Ella having issued the casual command, "See if you can't get a man or two to dine with us at the hotel before the dance, Emily; then you girls will be sure of some partners, anyway!" Emily had spent a discouraging hour at the telephone.

"Hello, George!" Susan had heard her say gaily. "This is Emily Saunders. George, I rang up because—you know the Browning is Friday night, and Ella's giving me a little dinner at the Palace before it− −and I

wondered—we're just getting it up hurriedly—" An interval of silence on Emily's part would follow, then she would resume, eagerly, "Oh, certainly! I'm sorry, but of course I understand. Yes, indeed; I'll see you Friday night—" and the conversation would be ended.

And, after a moment of silence, she would call another number, and go through the little conversation again. Susan, filled with apprehensions regarding her own partners, could not blame Emily for the heart attack, and felt a little vague relief on her own account. Better sure at home than sorry in the dreadful brilliance of a Browning ball!

"I'm afraid this means no dance!" murmured Emily, apologetically.

"As if I cared, Emmy Lou!" Susan reassured her cheerfully.

"Well, I don't think you would have had a good time, Sue!" Emily said, and the topic of the dance was presumably exhausted.

But when Ella got home, the next morning, she reopened the question with some heat. Emily could do exactly as Emily pleased, declared Ella, but Susan Brown should and would come to the last Browning.

"Oh, please, Duchess—!" Susan besought her.

"Very well, Sue, if you don't, I'll make that kid so sorry she ever− −"

"Oh, please!—And beside—" said Susan, "I haven't anything to wear! So that DOES settle it!" '

"What were you going to wear?" demanded Ella, scowling.

"Em said she'd lend me her white lace."

"Well, that's all right! Gerda'll fix it for you—"

"But Emily sent it back to Madame Leonard yesterday afternoon. She wanted the sash changed," Susan hastily explained.

"Well, she's got other gowns," Ella said, with a dangerous glint in her eyes. "What about that thing with the Persian embroidery? What about the net one she wore to Isabel's?"

"The net one's really gone to pieces, Duchess. It was a flimsy sort of thing, anyway. And the Persian one she's only had on twice. When we were talking about it Monday she said she'd rather I didn't—"

"Oh, she did? D'ye hear that, Mama?" Ella asked, holding herself in check. "And what about the chiffon?"

"Well, Ella, she telephoned Madame this morning not to hurry with that, because she wasn't going to the dance."

"Was she going to wear it?"

"Well, no. But she telephoned Madame just the same—I don't know why she did," Susan smiled. "But what's the difference?" she ended cheerfully.

"Quite a Flora McFlimsey!" said Mrs. Saunders, with her nervous, shrill little laugh, adding eagerly to the now thoroughly aroused Ella. "You know Baby doesn't really go about much, Totty; she hasn't as many gowns as you, dear!"

"Now, look here, Mama," Ella said, levelly, "if we can manage to get Susan something to wear, well and good; but—if that rotten, selfish, nasty kid has really spoiled this whole thing, she'll be sorry! That's all. I'd try to get a dress in town, if it wasn't so late! As it is I'll telephone Madame about the Persian—"

"Oh, honestly, I couldn't! If Emily didn't want me to!" Susan began, scarlet−cheeked.

"I think you're all in a conspiracy to drive me crazy!" Ella said angrily. "Emily shall ask you just as nicely as she knows how, to wear—"

"Totty, she's SICK!" pleaded Emily's mother.

"Sick! She's chock−full of poison because she never knows when to stop eating," said Kenneth, with fraternal gallantry. He returned to his own thoughts, presently adding, "Why don't you borrow a dress from Isabel?"

"Isabel?" Ella considered it, brightened. "Isabel Wallace," she said, in sudden approval. "That's exactly what I'll do!" And she swept magnificently to the little telephone niche near the dining− room door. "Isabel," said she, a moment later, "this is Mike—"

So Susan went to the dance. Miss Isabel Wallace sent over a great box of gowns from which she might choose the most effective, and Emily, with a sort of timid sullenness, urged her to go. Ella and her charge went into town in the afternoon, and loitered into the club for tea. Susan, whose color was already burning high, and whose eyes were dancing, fretted inwardly at Ella's leisurely enjoyment of a second and a third sup. It was nearly six o'clock, it was after six! Ella seemed willing to delay indefinitely, waiting on the stairs of the club for a long chat with a passing woman, and lingering with various friends in the foyer of the great hotel.

But finally they were in the big bedrooms, with Clemence, Ella's maid, in eager and interested attendance. Clemence had laid Susan's delicious frills and laces out upon the bed; Susan's little wrapper was waiting her; there was nothing to do now but plunge into the joy of dressing. A large, placid person known to Susan vaguely as the Mrs. Keith, who had been twice divorced, had the room next to Ella, and pretty Mary Peacock, her daughter, shared Susan's room. The older ladies, assuming loose wrappers, sat gossiping over cocktails and smoking cigarettes, and Mary and Susan seized the opportunity to monopolize Clemence. Clemence arranged Susan's hair, pulling, twisting, flinging hot masses over the girl's face, inserting pins firmly, loosening strands with her hard little French fingers. Susan had only occasional blinded glimpses of her face, one temple bare and bald, the other eclipsed like a gipsy's.

"Look here, Clemence, if I don't like it, out it comes!" she said.

"Mais, certainement, ca va sans dire!" Clemence agreed serenely. Mary Peacock, full of amused interest, watched as she rubbed her face and throat with cold cream.

"I wish I had your neck and shoulders, Miss Brown," said Miss Peacock. "I get so sick of high−necked gowns that I'd almost rather stay home!"

"Why, you're fatter than I am!" Susan exclaimed. "You've got lovely shoulders!"

"Yes, darling!" Mary said, gushingly. "And I've got the sort of blood that breaks out, in a hot room," she added after a moment, "don't look so scared, it's nothing serious! But I daren't ever take the risk of wearing a low gown!"

"But how did you get it?" ejaculated Susan. "Are you taking something for it?"

"No, love," Mary continued, in the same, amused, ironic strain, "because I've been traveling about, half my life, to get it cured, Germany and France, everywhere! And there ain't no such animal! Isn't it lovely?"

"But how did you get it?" Susan innocently persisted. Mary gave her a look half exasperated and half warning; but, when Clemence had stepped into the next room for a moment, she said:

"Don't be an utter fool! Where do you THINK I got it?

"The worst of it is," she went on pleasantly, as Clemence came back, "that my father's married again, you know, to the sweetest little thing you ever saw. An only girl, with four or five big brothers, and her father a minister! Well—"

"Voici!" exclaimed the maid. And Susan faced herself in the mirror, and could not resist a shamed, admiring smile. But if the smooth rolls and the cunning sweeps and twists of bright hair made her prettier than usual, Susan was hardly recognizable when the maid touched lips and cheeks with color and eyebrows with her clever pencil. She had thought her eyes bright before; now they had a starry glitter that even their owner thought effective; her cheeks glowed softly—

"Here, stop flirting with yourself, and put on your gown, it's after eight!" Mary said, and Clemence slipped the fragrant beauty of silk and lace over Susan's head, and knelt down to hook it, and pushed it down over the hips, and tied the little cord that held the low bodice so charmingly in place. Clemence said nothing when she had finished, nor did Mary, nor did Ella when they presently joined Ella to go downstairs, but Susan was satisfied. It is an unfortunate girl indeed who does not think herself a beauty for one night at least in her life; Susan thought herself beautiful tonight.

They joined the men in the Lounge, and Susan had to go out to dinner, if not quite "on a man's arm," as in her old favorite books, at least with her own partner, feeling very awkward, and conscious of shoulders and hips as she did so. But she presently felt the influence of the lights and music, and of the heating food and wine, and talked and laughed quite at her ease, feeling delightfully like a great lady and a great beauty. Her dinner partner presently asked her for the "second" and the supper dance, and Susan, hoping that she concealed indecent rapture, gladly consented. By just so much was she relieved of the evening's awful responsibility. She did not particularly admire this nice, fat young man, but to be saved from visible unpopularity, she would gladly have danced with the waiter.

It was nearer eleven than ten o'clock when they sauntered through various wide hallways to the palm−decorated flight of stairs that led down to the ballroom. Susan gave one dismayed glance at the brilliant sweep of floor as they descended.

"They're dancing!" she ejaculated,—late, and a stranger, what chance had she!

"Gosh, you're crazy about it, aren't you?" grinned her partner, Mr. Teddy Carpenter. "Don't you care, they've

just begun. Want to finish this with me?"

But Susan was greeting the host, who stood at the foot of the stairs, a fat, good−natured little man, beaming at everyone out of small twinkling blue eyes, and shaking hands with the debutantes while he spoke to their mothers over their shoulders.

"Hello, Brownie!" Ella said, affectionately. "Where's everybody?"

Mr. Browning flung his fat little arms in the air.

"I don't know," he said, in humorous distress. "The girls appear to be holding a meeting over there in the dressing−room, and the men are in the smoker! I'm going to round 'em up! How do you do, Miss Brown? Gad, you look so like your aunt,—and she WAS a beauty, Ella!—that I could kiss you for it, as I did her once!"

"My aunt has black hair and brown eyes, Miss Ella, and weighs one hundred and ninety pounds!" twinkled Susan.

"Kiss her again for that, Brownie, and introduce me," said a tall, young man at the host's side easily. "I'm going to have this, aren't I, Miss Brown? Come on, they're just beginning—"

Off went Susan, swept deliciously into the tide of enchanting music and motion. She wasn't expected to talk, she had no time to worry, she could dance well, and she did.

Kenneth Saunders came up in the pause before the dance was encored, and asked for the "next but one,"—there were no cards at the Brownings; all over the hall girls were nodding over their partners' shoulders, in answer to questions, "Next, Louise?" "Next waltz—one after that, then?" "I'm next, remember!"

Kenneth brought a bashful blonde youth with him, who instantly claimed the next dance. He did not speak to Susan again until it was over, when, remarking simply, "God, that was life!" he asked for the third ensuing, and surrendered Susan to some dark youth unknown, who said, "Ours? Now, don't say no, for there's suicide in my blood, girl, and I'm a man of few words!"

"I am honestly all mixed up!" Susan laughed. "I think this is promised—"

It didn't appear to matter. The dark young man took the next two, and Susan found herself in the enchanting position of a person reproached by disappointed partners. Perhaps there were disappointed and unpopular girls at the dance, perhaps there was heart−burning and disappointment and jealousy; she saw none of it. She was passed from hand to hand, complimented, flirted with, led into the little curtained niches where she could be told with proper gravity of the feelings her wit and beauty awakened in various masculine hearts. By twelve o'clock Susan wished that the ball would last a week, she was borne along like a feather on its glittering and golden surface.

Ella was by this time passionately playing the new and fascinating game of bridge whist, in a nearby room, but Browning was still busy, and presently he came across the floor to Susan, and asked her for a dance—an honor for which she was entirely unprepared, for he seldom danced, and one that she was quick enough to accept at once.

"Perhaps you've promised the next?" said Browning.

"If I have," said the confident Susan, "I hereby call it off."

"Well," he said smilingly, pleased. And although he did not finish the dance, and they presently sat down together, she knew that it had been the evening's most important event.

"There's a man coming over from the club, later," said Mr. Browning, "he's a wonderful fellow! Writer, and a sort of cousin of Ella Saunders by the way, or else his wife is. He's just on from New York, and for a sort of rest, and he may go on to Japan for his next novel. Very remarkable fellow!"

"A writer?" Susan looked interested.

"Yes, you know him, of course. Bocqueraz—that's who it is!"

"Not Stephen Graham Bocqueraz!" ejaculated Susan, round−eyed.

"Yes—yes!" Mr. Browning liked her enthusiasm.

"But is he here?" Susan asked, almost reverently. "Why, I'm perfectly crazy about his books!" she confided. "Why—why—he's about the biggest there IS!"

"Yes, he writes good stuff," the man agreed. "Well, now, don't you miss meeting him! He'll be here directly," his eyes roved to the stairway, a few feet from where they were sitting. "Here he is now!" said he. "Come now, Miss Brown—−"

"Oh, honestly! I'm scared—I don't know what to say!" Susan said in a panic. But Browning's fat little hand was firmly gripped over hers and she went with him to meet the two or three men who were chatting together as

they came slowly, composedly, into the ball−room.

CHAPTER III

From among them she could instantly pick the writer, even though all three were strangers, and although, from the pictures she had seen of him, she had always fancied that Stephen Bocqueraz was a large, athletic type of man, instead of the erect and square−built gentleman who walked between the other two taller men. He was below the average height, certainly, dark, clean−shaven, bright−eyed, with a thin−lipped, wide, and most expressive mouth, and sleek hair so black as to make his evening dress seem another color. He was dressed with exquisite precision, and with one hand he constantly adjusted and played with the round black−rimmed glasses that hung by a silk ribbon about his neck. Susan knew him, at this time, to be about forty−five, perhaps a little less. If her very first impression was that he was both affected and well aware of his attractiveness, her second conceded that here was a man who could make any affectation charming, and not the less attractive because he knew his value.

"And what do I do, Mr. Br−r−rowning," asked Mr. Bocqueraz with pleasant precision, "when I wish to monopolize the company of a very charming young lady, at a dance, and yet, not dancing, cannot ask her to be my partner?"

"The next is the supper dance," suggested Susan, dimpling, "if it isn't too bold to mention it!"

He flashed her an appreciative look, the first they had really exchanged.

"Supper it is," he said gravely, offering her his arm. But Browning delayed him for a few introductions first; and Susan stood watching him, and thinking him very distinguished, and that to study a really great man, so pleasantly at her ease, was very thrilling. Presently he turned to her again, and they went in to supper; to Susan it was all like an exciting dream. They chose a little table in the shallow angle of a closed doorway, and watched the confusion all about them; and Susan, warmed by the appreciative eyes so near her, found herself talking quite naturally, and more than once was rewarded by the writer's unexpected laughter. She asked him if Mrs. Bocqueraz and his daughter were with him, and he said no, not on this particular trip.

"Julie and her mother are in Europe," he said, with just a suggestion of his Spanish grandfather in his clean−clipped speech. "Julie left Miss Bence's School at seventeen, had a coming−out party in our city house the following winter. Now it seems Europe is the thing. Mrs. Bocqueraz likes to do things systematically, and she told me, before Julie was out of the nursery, that she thought it was very nice for a girl to marry in her second winter in society, after a European trip. I have no doubt my daughter will announce her engagement upon her return."

"To whom?" said Susan, laughing at his precise, re−signed tone.

"That I don't know," said Stephen Bocqueraz, with a twinkle in his eye, "nor does Julie, I fancy. But undoubtedly her mother does!"

"Here is somebody coming over for a dance, I suppose!" he said after a few moments, and Susan was flattered by the little hint of regret in his tone. But the newcomer was Peter Coleman, and the emotion of meeting him drove every other thought out of her head. She did not rise, as she gave him her hand; the color flooded her face.

"Susan, you little turkey−buzzard—" It was the old Peter!— "where've you been all evening? The next for me!"

"Mr. Bocqueraz, Mr. Coleman," Susan said, with composure, "Peter, Mr. Stephen Graham Bocqueraz."

Even to Peter the name meant something.

"Why, Susan, you little grab−all!" he accused her vivaciously. "How dare you monopolize a man like Mr. Bocqueraz for the whole supper dance! I'll bet some of those women are ready to tear your eyes out!"

"I've been doing the monopolizing," Mr. Bocqueraz said, turning a rather serious look from Peter, to smile with sudden brightness at Susan. "When I find a young woman at whose christening ALL the fairies came to dance," he added, "I always do all the monopolizing I can! However, if you have a prior claim—"

"But he hasn't!" Susan said, smilingly. "I'm engaged ten deep," she added pleasantly to Peter. "Honestly, I haven't half a dance left! I stole this."

"Why, I won't stand for it," Peter said, turning red.

"Come, it seems to me Mr. Coleman deserves something!" Stephen Bocqueraz smiled. And indeed Peter looked bigger and happier and handsomer than ever.

"Not from me," Susan persisted, quietly pleasant. Peter stood for a moment or two, not quite ready to laugh, not willing to go away. Susan busied herself with her salad, stared dreamily across the room. And presently he departed after exchanging a few commonplaces with Bocqueraz.

"And what's the significance of all that?" asked the author when they were alone again.

Susan had been wishing to make some sort of definite impression upon Mr. Stephen Graham Bocqueraz; wishing to remain in his mind as separated from the other women he had met to−night. Suddenly she saw this as her chance, and she took him somewhat into her confidence. She told him of her old office position, and of her aunt, and of Peter, and that she was now Emily Saunders' paid companion, and here only as a sort of Cinderella.

Never did any girl, flushing, dimpling, shrugging her shoulders over such a recital, have a more appreciative listener. Stephen Bocqueraz's sympathetic look met hers whenever she looked up; he nodded, agreed, frowned thoughtfully or laughed outright. They sat through the next dance, and through half the next, hidden in one of the many diminutive "parlors" that surrounded the ball−room, and when Susan was surrendered to an outraged partner she felt that she and the great man were fairly started toward a real friendship, and that these attractive boys she was dancing with were really very young, after all.

"Remember Stephen Bocqueraz that Brownie introduced to you just before supper?" asked Ella, as they went home, yawning, sleepy and headachy, the next day. Ella had been playing cards through the supper hour.

"Perfectly!" Susan answered, flushing and smiling.

"You must have made a hit," Ella remarked, "because—I'm giving him a big dinner on Tuesday, at the Palace—and when I talked to him he asked if you would be there. Well, I'm glad you had a nice time, kiddy, and we'll do it again!"

Susan had thanked her gratefully more than once, but she thanked her again now. She felt that she truly loved Ella, so big and good natured and kind.

Emily was a little bit cold when Susan told her about the ball, and the companion promptly suppressed the details of her own successes, and confined her recollections to the girls who had asked for Emily, and to generalities. Susan put her wilting orchids in water, and went dreamily through the next two or three days, recovering from the pleasure and excitement. It was almost a week before Emily was quite herself again; then, when Isabel Wallace came running in to Emily's sick−room to beg Susan to fill a place at their dinner−table at a few hours' notice, Susan's firm refusal quite won Emily's friendship back.

"Isabel's a dear," said Emily, contentedly settling down with the Indian bead−work in which she and Susan had had several lessons, and with which they filled some spare time, "but she's not a leader. I took you up, so now Isabel does! I knew—I felt sure that, if Ella let you borrow that dress, Isabel would begin to patronize you!"

It was just one of Emily's nasty speeches, and Emily really wasn't well, so Susan reminded herself, when the hot, angry color burned in her face, and an angry answer came to her mind. What hurt most was that it was partly true; Emily HAD taken her up, and, when she ceased to be all that Emily required of sympathy and flattery and interest, Emily would find someone else to fill Miss Brown's place. Without Emily she was nobody, and it did not console Susan to reflect that, had Emily's fortune been hers and Emily in her position, the circumstances would be exactly reversed. Just the accident of having money would have made Miss Brown the flattered and admired, the safe and secure one; just the not having it would have pushed Emily further even than Susan was from the world of leisure and beauty and luxury.

"This world IS money!" thought Susan, when she saw the head−waiter come forward so smilingly to meet Ella and herself at the Palm Garden; when Leonard put off a dozen meekly enduring women to finish Miss Emily Saunders' gown on time; when the very sexton at church came hurrying to escort Mrs. Saunders and herself through the disappointed crowds in the aisles, and establish them in, and lock them in, the big empty pew. The newspapers gave half a column of blame to the little girl who tried to steal a two−dollar scarf from the Emporium, but there was nothing but admiration for Ella on the day when she and a twenty−year−old boy, for a wager, led a woolly white toy lamb, a lamb costing twenty−five dollars, through the streets, from the club to the Palace Hotel. The papers were only deeply interested and amused when Miss Elsa Chisholm gave a dinner to six favorite riding−horses, who were entertained in the family dining−room after a layer of tan−bark had been laid on the floor, and fed by their owners from specially designed leather bags and boxes; and they merely reported the fact that Miss Dolly Ripley had found so unusual an intelligence in her gardener that she had deeded to him her grandfather's eighty−thousand−dollar library. "He really has ever so much better brains than I have, don't you

know?" said Miss Ripley to the press.

In return for the newspapers' indulgent attitude, however, they were shown no clemency by the Saunders and the people of their set. On a certain glorious, golden afternoon in May, Susan, twisting a card that bore the name of Miss Margaret Summers, representing the CHRONICLE, went down to see the reporter. The Saunders family hated newspaper notoriety, but it was a favorite saying that since the newspapers would print things anyway, they might as well get them straight, and Susan often sent dinner or luncheon lists to the three morning papers.

However, the young woman who rose when Susan went into the drawing− room was not in search of news. Her young, pretty face was full of distress.

"Miss Saunders?" asked she.

"I'm Miss Brown," Susan said. "Miss Saunders is giving a card−party and I am to act for her."

Miss Summers, beginning her story, also began to cry. She was the society editor, she explained, and two weeks before she had described in her column a luncheon given by Miss Emily Saunders. Among the list of guests she had mentioned Miss Carolyn Seymour.

"Not Carolyn Seymour!" said Susan, shocked. "Why, she never is here! The Seymours—−" she shook her head. "I know people do accept them," said Susan, "but the Saunders don't even know them! They're not in the best set, you know, they're really hardly in society at all!"

"I know NOW," Miss Summers said miserably. "But all the other girls− −this year's debutantes—were there, and I had to guess at most of the names, and I chanced it! Fool that I was!" she interrupted herself bitterly. "Well, the next day, while I was in the office, my telephone rang. It was Thursday, and I had my Sunday page to do, and I was just RUSHING, and I had a bad cold,—I've got it yet. So I just said, 'What is it?' rather sharply, you know, and a voice said, in a businesslike sort of way, 'How did you happen to put Miss Carolyn Seymour's name on Miss Emily Saunders' lunch list?' I never dreamed that it was Miss Saunders; how should I? She didn't say 'I' or 'me' or anything—just that. So I said, 'Well, is it a matter of international importance?'"

"Ouch!" said Susan, wincing, and shaking a doubtful head.

"I know, it was awful!" the other girl agreed eagerly. "But—" her anxious eyes searched Susan's face. "Well; so the next day Mr. Brice called me into the office, and showed me a letter from Miss Ella Saunders, saying—" and Miss Summers began to cry again. "And I can't tell Mamma!" she sobbed. "My brother's been so ill, and I was so proud of my position!"

"Do you mean they—FIRED you?" Susan asked, all sympathy.

"He said he'd have to!" gulped Miss Summers, with a long sniff. "He said that Saunders and Babcock advertise so much with them, and that, if she wasn't appeased somehow—"

"Well, now, I'll tell you," said Susan, ringing for tea, "I'll wait until Miss Saunders is in a good mood, and then I'll do the very best I can for you. You know, a thing like that seems small, but it's just the sort of thing that is REALLY important," she pursued, consolingly. She had quite cheered her caller before the tea−cups were emptied, but she was anything but hopeful of her mission herself.

And Ella justified her misgivings when the topic was tactfully opened the next day.

"I'm sorry for the little thing," said Ella, briskly, "but she certainly oughtn't to have that position if she doesn't know better than that! Carolyn Seymour in this house—I never heard of such a thing! I was denying it all the next day at the club and it's extremely unpleasant. Besides," added Ella, reddening, "she was extremely impertinent about it when I telephoned—−"

"Duchess, she didn't dream it was you! She only said that she didn't know it was so important—−" Susan pleaded.

"Well," interrupted Miss Saunders, in a satisfied and final tone, "next time perhaps she WILL know who it is, and whether it is important or not! Sue, while you're there at the desk," she added, "will you write to Mrs. Bergess, Mrs. Gerald Florence Bergess, and tell her that I looked at the frames at Gump's for her prizes, and they're lovely, from fourteen up, and that I had him put three or four aside—−"

After the dance Peter began to call rather frequently at "High Gardens," a compliment which Emily took entirely to herself, and to escort the girls about on their afternoon calls, or keep them and Ella, and the old mistress of the house as well, laughing throughout the late and formal dinner. Susan's reserve and her resolutions melted before the old charm; she had nothing to gain by snubbing him; it was much pleasanter to let by−gones be by−gones, and enjoy the moment. Peter had every advantage; if she refused him her friendship a hundred other

girls were only too eager to fill her place, so she was gay and companionable with him once more, and extracted a little fresh flavor from the friendship in Emily's unconsciousness of the constant interchange of looks and inflections that went on between Susan and Peter over her head. Susan sometimes thought of Mrs. Carroll's old comment on the popularity of the absorbed and busy girl when she realized that Peter was trying in vain to find time for a personal word with her, or was resenting her interest in some other caller, while she left Emily to him. She was nearer to Peter than ever, a thousand times more sure of herself, and, if she would still have married him, she was far less fond of him than she had been years ago.

Susan asked him some questions, during one idle tea−time, of Hunter, Baxter Hunter. His uncle had withdrawn from the firm now, he told her, adding with characteristic frankness that in his opinion "the old guy got badly stung." The Baxter home had been sold to a club; the old people had found the great house too big for them and were established now in one of the very smartest of the new apartment houses that were beginning to be built in San Francisco. Susan called, with Emily, upon Mrs. Baxter, and somehow found the old lady's personality as curiously shrunk, in some intangible way, as was her domestic domain in actuality. Mrs. Baxter, cackling emphatically and disapprovingly of the world in general, fussily accompanying them to the elevator, was merely a rather tiresome and pitiful old woman, very different from the delicate little grande dame of Susan's recollection. Ella reported the Baxter fortune as sadly diminished, but there were still maids and the faithful Emma; there were still the little closed carriage and the semi−annual trip to Coronado. Nor did Peter appear to have suffered financially in any way; although Mrs. Baxter had somewhat fretfully confided to the girls that his uncle had suggested that it was time that Peter stood upon his own feet; and that Peter accordingly had entered into business relations with a certain very wealthy firm of grain brokers. Susan could not imagine Peter as actively involved in any very lucrative deals, but Peter spent a great deal of money, never denied himself anything, and took frequent and delightful vacations.

He took Emily and Susan to polo and tennis games, and, when the season at the hotel opened, they went regularly to the dances. In July Peter went to Tahoe, where Mrs. Saunders planned to take the younger girls later for at least a few weeks' stay. Ella chaperoned them to Burlingame for a week of theatricals; all three staying with Ella's friend, Mrs. Keith, whose daughter, Mary Peacock, had also Dolly Ripley and lovely Isabel Wallace for her guests. Little Constance Fox, visiting some other friends nearby, was in constant attendance upon Miss Ripley, and Susan thought the relationship between them an extraordinary study; Miss Ripley bored, rude, casual, and Constance increasingly attentive, eager, admiring.

"When are you going to come and spend a week with me?" drawled Miss Ripley to Susan.

"You'll have the loveliest time of your life!" Connie added, brilliantly. "Be sure you ask me for that week, Dolly!"

"We'll write you about it," Miss Ripley said lazily, and Constance, putting the best face she could upon the little slight, slapped her hand playfully, and said:

"Oh, aren't you mean!"

"Dolly takes it so for granted that I'm welcome at her house at ANY time," said Constance to Susan, later, "that she forgets how rude a thing like that can sound!" She had followed Susan into her own room, and now stood by the window, looking down a sun−steeped vista of lovely roads and trees and gardens with a discontented face. Susan, changing her dress for an afternoon on the tennis−courts, merely nodded sympathetically.

"Lord, I would like to go this afternoon!" added Constance, presently.

"Aren't you going over for the tennis?" Susan asked in amazement. For the semi−finals of the tournament were to be played on this glorious afternoon, and there would be a brilliant crowd on the courts and tea at the club to follow.

"No; I can't!" Miss Fox said briefly. "Tell everyone that I'm lying down with a terrible headache, won't you?"

"But why?" asked Susan. For the headache was obviously a fiction.

"You know that mustard−colored linen with the black embroidery that Dolly's worn once or twice, don't you?" asked Connie, with apparent irrelevancy.

Susan nodded, utterly at a loss.

"Well, she gave it to me to−day, and the hat and the parasol," said Constance, with a sort of resigned bitterness. "She said she had got the outfit at Osbourne's, last month, and she thought it would look stunning on me, and wouldn't I like to wear it to the club this afternoon?"

"Well—?" Susan said, as the other paused. "Why not?"

"Oh, why not!" echoed Connie, with mild exasperation. "Don't be a damned fool!"

"Oh, I see!" Susan said, enlightened. "Everybody knows it's Miss Ripley's, of course! She probably didn't think of that!"

"She probably did!" responded Connie, with a rather dry laugh. "However, the fact remains that she'll take it out of me if I go and don't wear it, and Mamma never will forgive me if I do! So, I came in to borrow a book. Of course, Susan, I've taken things from Dolly Ripley before, and I probably will again," she added, with the nearest approach to a sensible manner that Susan had ever seen in her, "but this is going a little TOO far!"

And, borrowing a book, she departed, leaving Susan to finish her dressing in a very sober frame of mind. She wondered if her relationship toward Emily could possibly impress any outsider as Connie's attitude toward Dolly Ripley impressed her.

With Isabel Wallace she began, during this visit, the intimate and delightful friendship for which they two had been ready for a long time. Isabel was two years older than Susan, a beautiful, grave−eyed brunette, gracious in manner, sweet of voice, the finest type that her class and environment can produce. Isabel was well read, musical, traveled; she spoke two or three languages besides her mother tongue. She had been adored all her life by three younger brothers, by her charming and simple, half−invalid mother, and her big, clever father, and now, all the girls were beginning to suspect, was also adored by the very delightful Eastern man who was at present Mrs. Butler Holmes' guest in Burlingame, and upon whom all of them had been wasting their prettiest smiles. John Furlong was college−bred, young, handsome, of a rich Eastern family, in every way a suitable husband for the beautiful woman with whom he was so visibly falling in love.

Susan watched the little affair with a heartache, not all unworthy. She didn't quite want to be Isabel, or want a lover quite like John. But she did long for something beautiful and desirable all her own; it was hard to be always the outsider, always alone. When she thought of Isabel's father and mother, their joy in her joy, her own pleasure in pleasing them, a thrill of pain shook her. If Isabel was all grateful, all radiant, all generous, she, Susan, could have been graceful and radiant and generous too! She lay awake in the soft summer nights, thinking of what John would say to Isabel, and what Isabel, so lovely and so happy, would reply.

"Sue, you will know how wonderful it is when it comes to you!" Isabel said, on the last night of their Burlingame visit, when she gave Susan a shy hint that it was "all RIGHT," if a profound secret still.

The girls did not stay for the theatricals, after all. Emily was deeply disgusted at being excluded from some of the ensembles in which she had hoped to take part and, on the very eve of the festivities, she became alarmingly ill, threw Mrs. Keith's household into utter consternation and confusion, and was escorted home immediately by Susan and a trained nurse.

Back at "High Gardens," they settled down contentedly enough to the familiar routine. Emily spent two−thirds of the time in bed, but Susan, fired by Isabel Wallace's example, took regular exercises now, airing the dogs or finding commissions to execute for Emily or Mrs. Saunders, made radical changes in her diet, and attempted, with only partial success, to confine her reading to improving books. A relative had sent Emily the first of the new jig−saw puzzles from New York, and Emily had immediately wired for more. She and Susan spent hours over them; they became in fact an obsession, and Susan began to see jig−saw divisions: in everything her eye rested on; the lawn, the clouds, or the drawing−room walls.

Sometimes Kenneth joined them, and Susan knew that it was on her account. She was very demure with him; her conversation for Emily, her eyes all sisterly unembarrassment when they met his. Mrs. Saunders was not well, and kept to her room, so that more than once Susan dined alone with the man of the house. When this happened Kenneth would bring his chair down from the head of the table and set it next to hers. He called her "Tweeny" for some favorite character in a play, brought her some books she had questioned him about, asked her casually, on the days she went to town for Emily, at what time she would come back, and joined her on the train.

Susan had thought of him as a husband, as she thought of every unattached man, the instant she met him. But the glamour of those early views of Kenneth Saunders had been somewhat dimmed, and since her arrival at "High Gardens" she had tried rather more not to displease this easily annoyed member of the family, than to make a definite pleasant impression upon him. Now, however, she began seriously to consider him. And it took her a few brief moments only to decide that, if he should ask her, she would be mad to refuse to become his wife. He was probably as fine a match as offered itself at the time in all San Francisco's social set, good−looking, of a suitable

age, a gentleman, and very rich. He was so rich and of so socially prominent a family that his wife need never trouble herself with the faintest thought of her own standing; it would be an established fact, supreme and irrefutable. Beside him Peter Coleman was a poor man, and even Isabel's John paled socially and financially. Kenneth Saunders would be a brilliant "catch" for any girl; for little Susan Brown—it would be a veritable triumph!

Susan's heart warmed as she thought of the details. There would be a dignified announcement from Mrs. Saunders. Then,—Babel! Telephoning, notes, telegrams! Ella would of course do the correct thing; there would be a series of receptions and dinners; there would be formal affairs on all sides. The newspapers would seize upon it; the family jewels would be reset; the long−stored silver resurrected. There would be engagement cups and wedding−presents, and a trip East, and the instant election of young Mrs. Saunders to the Town and Country Club. And, in all the confusion, the graceful figure of the unspoiled little companion would shine serene, poised, gracious, prettily deferential to both the sisters−in−law of whom she now, as a matron, took precedence.

Kenneth Saunders was no hero of romance; he was at best a little silent and unresponsive; he was a trifle bald; his face, Susan had thought at first sight, indicated weakness and dissipation. But it was a very handsome face withal, and, if silent, Kenneth could be very dignified and courteous in his manner; "very much the gentleman," Susan said to herself, "always equal to the situation"!

Other things, more serious things, she liked to think she was woman of the world enough to condone. He drank to excess, of course; no woman could live in the same house with him and remain unaware of that; Susan had often heard him raging in the more intense stages approaching delirium tremens. There had been other things, too;— women, but Susan had only a vague idea of just what that meant, and Kenneth's world resolutely made light of it.

"Ken's no molly−coddle!" Ella had said to her complacently, in connection with this topic, and one of Ella's closest friends had added, "Oh, Heaven save me from ever having one of my sons afraid to go out and do what the other boys do. Let 'em sow their wild oats, they're all the sooner over it!"

So Susan did not regard this phase of his nature very seriously. Indeed his mother often said wailingly that, if Kenneth could only find some "fine girl," and settle down, he would be the steadiest and best fellow in the world. It was Mrs. Saunders who elucidated the last details of a certain episode of Kenneth's early life for Susan. Emily had spoken of it, and Ella had once or twice alluded to it, but from them Susan only gathered that Kenneth, in some inexplicable and outrageous way, had been actually arrested for something that was not in the least his fault, and held as a witness in a murder case. He had been but twenty−two years old at the time, and, as his sisters indignantly agreed, it had ruined his life for years following, and Ken should have sued the person or persons who had dared to involve the son of the house of Saunders in so disgraceful and humiliating an affair.

"It was in one of those bad houses, my dear," Mrs. Saunders finally contributed, "and poor Ken was no worse than the thousands of other men who frequent 'em! Of course, it's terrible from a woman's point of view, but you know what men are! And when this terrible thing happened, Ken wasn't anywhere near—didn't know one thing about it until a great big brute of a policeman grabbed hold of his arm—−! And of course the newspapers mentioned my poor boy's name in connection with it, far and wide!"

After that Kenneth had gone abroad for a long time, and whether the trained nurse who had at that time entered his life was really a nurse, or whether she had merely called herself one, Susan could not quite ascertain. Either the family had selected this nurse, to take care of Kenneth who was not well at the time, or she had joined him later and traveled with him as his nurse. Whatever it was, the association had lasted two or three years, and then Kenneth had come home, definitely disenchanted with women in general and woman in particular, and had settled down into the silent, cynical, unresponsive man that Susan knew. If he ever had any experiences whatever with the opposite sex they were not of a nature to be mentioned before his sisters and his mother. He scorned all the women of Ella's set, and was bitingly critical of Emily's friends.

One night, lying awake, Susan thought that she heard a dim commotion from the direction of the hallway—Kenneth's voice, Ella's voice, high and angry, some unfamiliar feminine voice, hysterical and shrill, and Mrs. Saunders, crying out: "Tottie, don't speak that way to Kennie!"

But before she could rouse herself fully, Mycroft's soothing tones drowned out the other voices; there was evidently a truce. The episode ended a few moments later with the grating of carriage wheels on the drive far below, and Susan was not quite sure, the next morning, that it had been more than a dream.

But Kenneth's history, summed up, was not a bit less edifying, was not indeed half as unpleasant, as that of many of the men, less rich and less prominent than he, who were marrying lovely girls everywhere, with the full consent and approval of parents and guardians. Susan had seen the newspaper accounts of the debauch that preceded young Harry van Vleet's marriage only by a few hours; had seen the bridegroom, still white−faced and shaking, lead away from the altar one of the sweetest of the debutantes. She had heard Rose St. John's mother say pleasantly to Rose's promised husband, "I asked your Chinese boy about those little week−end parties at your bungalow, Russell; I said, 'Yoo, were they pretty ladies Mr. Russ used to have over there?' But he only said 'No can 'member!'"

"That's where his wages go up!" the gentleman had responded cheerfully.

And, after all, Susan thought, looking on, Russell Lord was not as bad as the oldest Gerald boy, who married an Eastern girl, an heiress and a beauty, in spite of the fact that his utter unfitness for marriage was written plain in his face; or as bad as poor Trixie Chauncey's husband, who had entirely disappeared from public view, leaving the buoyant Trixie to reconcile two infant sons to the unknown horrors and dangers of the future.

If Kenneth drank, after his marriage, Mycroft would take care of him, as he did now; but Susan honestly hoped that domesticity, for which Kenneth seemed to have a real liking, would affect him in every way for good. She had not that horror of drink that had once been hers. Everybody drank, before dinner, with dinner, after dinner. It was customary to have some of the men brighten under it, some overdo it, some remain quite sober in spite of it. Susan and Emily, like all the girls they knew, frequently ordered cocktails instead of afternoon tea, when, as it might happen, they were in the Palace or the new St. Francis. The cocktails were served in tea− cups, the waiter gravely passed sugar and cream with them; the little deception was immensely enjoyed by everyone. "Two in a cup, Martini," Emily would say, settling into her seat, and the waiter would look deferentially at Susan, "The same, madam?"

It was a different world from her old world; it used a different language, lived by another code. None of her old values held here; things she had always thought quite permissible were unforgivable sins; things at which Auntie would turn pale with horror were a quietly accepted part of every−day life. No story was too bad for the women to tell over their tea−cups, or in their boudoirs, but if any little ordinary physical misery were alluded to, except in the most flippant way, such as the rash on a child's stomach, or the preceding discomforts of maternity, there was a pained and disgusted silence, and an open snub, if possible, for the woman so crude as to introduce the distasteful topic.

Susan saw good little women ostracized for the fact that their husbands did not appear at ease in evening dress, for their evident respect for their own butlers, or for their mere eagerness to get into society. On the other hand, she saw warmly accepted and admired the beautiful Mrs. Nokesmith, who had married her second husband the day after her release from her first, and pretty Beulah Garrett, whose father had swindled a hundred trusting friends out of their entire capital, and Mrs. Lawrence Edwards, whose oldest son had just had a marriage, contracted with a Barbary Coast woman while he was intoxicated, canceled by law. Divorce and disease, and dishonesty and insanity did not seem so terrible as they once had; perhaps because they were never called by their real names. The insane were beautifully cared for and safely out of sight; to disease no allusion was ever made; dishonesty was carried on in mysterious business avenues far from public inspection and public thought; and, as Ella once pointed out, the happiest people in society were those who had been married unhappily, divorced, and more fortunately mated a second time. All the married women Ella knew had "crushes"—young men who lounged in every afternoon for tea and cigarettes and gossip, and filled chairs at dinner parties, and formed a background in a theater box. Sometimes one or two matrons and their admirers, properly chaperoned, or in safe numbers, went off on motoring trips, and perhaps encountered, at the Del Monte or Santa Cruz hotels their own husbands, with the women that they particularly admired. Nothing was considered quite so pitiful as the wife who found this arrangement at all distressing. "It's always all right," said Ella, broadly, to Susan.

CHAPTER IV

In the autumn Susan went home for a week, for the Lancaster family was convulsed by the prospect of Alfie's marriage to a little nobody whose father kept a large bakery in the Mission, and Susan was needed to brace Alfred's mother for the blow. Mary Lou's old admirer and his little, invalid wife, were staying at the house now, and Susan found "Ferd" a sad blow to her old romantic vision of him: a stout, little, ruddy−cheeked man, too brilliantly dressed, with hair turning gray, and an offensive habit of attacking the idle rich for Susan's benefit, and dilating upon his own business successes. Georgie came over to spend a night in the old home while Susan was there, carrying the heavy, lumpy baby. Myra was teething now, cross and unmanageable, and Georgie was worried because a barley preparation did not seem to agree with her, and Joe disapproved of patent foods. Joe hoped that the new baby—Susan widened her eyes. Oh, yes, in May, Georgie announced simply, and with a tired sigh,— Joe hoped the new baby would be a boy. She herself hoped for a little girl, wouldn't it be sweet to call it May? Georgie looked badly, and if she did not exactly break down and cry during her visit, Susan felt that tears were always close behind her eyes.

Billy, beside her somewhat lachrymose aunt and cousins, shone out, during this visit, as Susan had never known him to do before. He looked splendidly big and strong and well, well groomed and erect in carriage, and she liked the little compliment he paid her in postponing the German lesson that should have filled the evening, and dressing himself in his best to take her to the Orpheum. Susan returned it by wearing her prettiest gown and hat. They set out in great spirits, Susan chattering steadily, in the relief it was to speak her mind honestly, and Billy listening, and now and then shouting out in the laughter that never failed her spirited narratives.

He told her of the Carrolls,—all good news, for Anna had been offered a fine position as assistant matron in one of the best of the city's surgical hospitals; Betts had sold a story to the Argonaut for twelve dollars, and Philip was going steadily ahead; "you wouldn't believe he was the same fellow!" said Billy. Jimmy and Betts and their mother were to go up in a few days for a fortnight's holiday in the little shooting−box that some Eastern friends had built years ago in the Humboldt woods. The owners had left the key with Mrs. Carroll, and she might use the little cabin as much as she liked.

"And what about Jo?" Susan asked.

This was the best news of all. Jo was to go East for the winter with one of her mother's friends, whose daughter was Jo's own age. They were to visit Boston and Washington, New York for the Opera, Palm Beach in February, and New Orleans for the Mardi Gras. Mrs. Frothingham was a widow, and had a son at Yale, who would join them for some of the holidays. Susan was absolutely delighted at the news, and alluded to it over and over again.

"It's so different when people DESERVE a thing, and when it's all new to them," she said to Billy, "it makes it seem so much more glorious!"

They came out of the theater at eleven, cramped and blinking, and Susan, confused for a moment, was trying to get her bearings, when Billy touched her arm.

"The Earl of Somerset is trying to bow to you, Sue!"

She laughed, and followed the direction of his look. It was Stephen Bocqueraz who was smiling at her, a very distinguished figure under the lamp−post, with his fur−lined great−coat, his round tortoise− shell eye−glasses and his silk hat. He came up to them at once, and Susan, pleasantly conscious that a great many people recognized the great man, introduced him to Billy.

He had just gotten back from a long visit in the Southern part of the state, he said, and had been dining to−night with friends at the Bohemian Club, and was walking back to his hotel. Susan could not keep the pleasure the meeting gave her out of her eyes and voice, and Billy showed a sort of boyish and bashful admiration of the writer, too.

"But this—this is a very felicitous occasion," said Mr. Bocqueraz. "We must celebrate this in some fitting manner!"

So he took them to supper, dismissing their hesitation as unworthy of combat; Susan and Billy laughed helplessly and happily as they sat down at the little table, and heard the German waiter's rapture at the commands

Stephen Bocqueraz so easily gave him in his mother tongue. Billy, reddening but determined, must at once try his German too, and the waiter and Bocqueraz laughed at him even while they answered him, and agreed that the young man as a linguist was ganz wunderbar. Billy evidently liked his company; he was at his best to− night, unaffected, youthful, earnest. Susan herself felt that she had never been so happy in her life.

Long afterward she tried to remember what they had talked about. She knew that the conversation had been to her as a draught of sparkling wine. All her little affections were in full play to−night, the little odds and ends of worldly knowledge she had gleaned from Ella and Ella's friends, the humor of Emily and Peter Coleman. And because she was an Irishman's daughter a thousand witticisms flashed in her speech, and her eyes shone like stars under the stimulus of another's wit and the admiration in another's eyes.

It became promptly evident that Bocqueraz liked them both. He began to call Billy "lad," in a friendly, older−brotherly manner, and his laughter at Susan was alternated with moments of the gravest, the most flattering attention.

"She's quite wonderful, isn't she?" he said to Billy under his breath, but Susan heard it, and later he added, quite impersonally, "She's absolutely extraordinary! We must have her in New York, you know; my wife must meet her!"

They talked of music and musicians, and Bocqueraz and Billy argued and disputed, and presently the author's card was sent to the leader of the orchestra, with a request for the special bit of music under discussion. They talked of authors and poets and painters and actors, and he knew many of them, and knew something of them all. He talked of clubs, New York clubs and London clubs, and of plays that were yet to be given, and music that the public would never hear.

Susan felt as if electricity was coursing through her veins. She felt no fatigue, no sleepiness, no hunger; her champagne bubbled untouched, but she emptied her glass of ice−water over and over again. Of the lights and the music and the crowd she was only vaguely conscious; she saw, as if in a dream, the hands of the big clock, at the end of the room, move past one, past two o'clock, but she never thought of the time.

It was after two o'clock; still they talked on. The musicians had gone home, lights were put out in the corners of the room, tables and chairs were being piled together.

Stephen Bocqueraz had turned his chair so that he sat sideways at the table; Billy, opposite him, leaned on his elbows; Susan, sitting between them, framing her face in her hands, moved her eyes from one face to the other.

"And now, children," said the writer, when at last they were in the empty, chilly darkness of the street, "where can I get you a carriage? The cars seem to have stopped."

"The cars stop at about one," said William, "but there's a place two blocks up where we can get a hack. Don't let us take you out of your way."

"Good−night, then, lad," said Bocqueraz, laying his hand affectionately on Billy's shoulder. "Good−night, you wonderful little girl. Tell my wife's good cousins in San Rafael that I am coming over very soon to pay my respects."

He turned briskly on his heel and left them, and Susan stood looking after him for a moment.

"Where's your livery stable?" asked the girl then, taking Billy's arm.

"There isn't any!" Billy told her shamelessly. "But I've got just a dollar and eighty cents, and I was afraid he would put us into a carriage!"

Susan, brought violently to earth, burst out laughing, gathered her skirts up philosophically, and took his arm for the long walk home. It was a cool bright night, the sky was spattered thickly with stars, the moon long ago set. Susan was very silent, mind and heart swept with glorious dreams. Billy, beyond the remark that Bocqueraz certainly was a king, also had little to say, but his frequent yawns indicated that it was rather because of fatigue than of visions.

The house was astir when they reached it, but the confusion there was too great to give anyone time to notice the hour of their return. Alfie had brought his bride to see his mother, earlier in the evening, and Ma had had hysterics the moment that they left the house. These were no sooner calmed than Mrs. Eastman had had a "stroke," the doctor had now come and gone, but Mary Lou and her husband still hovered over the sufferer, "and I declare I don't know what the world's coming to!" Mrs. Lancaster said despairingly.

"What is it−what is it?" Mary Lord was calling, when Susan reached the top flight. Susan went in to give her the news, Mary was restless to−night, and glad of company; the room seemed close and warm. Lydia, sleeping

heavily on the couch, only turned and grunted occasionally at the sound of the girls' voices.

Susan lay awake until almost dawn, wrapped in warm and delicious emotion. She recalled the little separate phases of the evening's talk, brought them from her memory deliberately, one by one. When she remembered that Mr. Bocqueraz had asked if Billy was "the fiance," for some reason she could not define, she shut her eyes in the dark, and a wave of some new, enveloping delight swept her from feet to head. Certain remembered looks, inflections, words, shook the deeps of her being with a strange and poignantly sweet sense of weakness and power: a trembling joy.

The new thrill, whatever it was, was with her when she wakened, and when she ran downstairs, humming the Toreador's song, Mary Lou and her aunt told her that she was like a bit of sunshine in the house; the girl's eyes were soft and bright with dreams; her cheeks were glowing.

When the postman came she flew to meet him. There was no definite hope in her mind as she did so, but she came back more slowly, nevertheless. No letter for her.

But at eleven o'clock a messenger boy appeared with a special delivery letter for Miss Susan Brown, she signed the little book with a sensation that was almost fear. This—this was beginning to frighten her—−

Susan read it with a fast−beating heart. It was short, dignified. Mr. Bocqueraz wrote that he was sending her the book of which he had spoken; he had enjoyed nothing for a long time as much as their little supper last evening; he hoped to see her and that very fine lad, Billy, very soon again. His love to them both. He was her faithful friend, all ways and always, Stephen Graham Bocqueraz.

She slipped it inside her blouse, ignored it for a few moments, returned to it from other thoughts with a sense of infinite delight, and read it again. Susan could not quite analyze its charm, but in her whole being she was conscious of a warmth, a lightness, and a certain sweet and heady happiness throughout the entire day and the next day.

Her thoughts began to turn toward New York. All young Californians are conscious, sooner or later in their growth, of the call of the great city, and just now Susan was wrapped in a cloud of dreams that hung over Broadway. She saw herself one of the ebbing and flowing crowd, watching the world from her place at the breakfast table in a great hotel, sweeping through the perfumed warmth and brightness of a theater lobby to her carriage.

Stephen Bocqueraz had spoken of her coming to New York as a matter of course. "You belong there," he decided, gravely appraising her. "My wife will write to ask you to come, and we will find you just the niche you like among your own sort and kind, and your own work to do."

"Oh, it would be too wonderful!" Susan had gasped.

"New York is not wonderful," he told her, with smiling, kindly, disillusioned eyes, "but YOU are wonderful!"

Susan, when she went back to San Rafael, was seized by a mood of bitter dissatisfaction with herself. What did she know—what could she do? She was fitted neither for the stage nor for literature, she had no gift of music or of art. Lost opportunities rose up to haunt her. Ah, if she had only studied something, if she were only wiser, a linguist, a student of poetry or of history. Nearing twenty−five, she was as ignorant as she had been at fifteen! A remembered line from a carelessly read poem, a reference to some play by Ibsen or Maeterlinck or d'Annunzio, or the memory of some newspaper clipping that concerned the marriage of a famous singer or the power of a new anaesthetic,—this was all her learning!

Stephen Bocqueraz, on the Sunday following their second meeting, called upon his wife's mother's cousin. Mrs. Saunders was still at the hospital, and Emily was driven by the excitement of the occasion behind a very barrier of affectations, but Kenneth was gracious and hospitable, and took them all to the hotel for tea. Here they were the center of a changing, admiring, laughing group; everybody wanted to have at least a word with the great man, and Emily enjoyed a delightful feeling of popularity. Susan, quite eclipsed, was apparently pleasantly busy with her tea, and with the odds and ends of conversation that fell to her. But Susan knew that Stephen Bocqueraz did not move out of her hearing for one moment during the afternoon, nor miss a word that she said; nor say, she suspected, a word that she was not meant to hear. Just to exist, under these conditions, was enough. Susan, in quiet undertones, laughed and chatted and flirted and filled tea−cups, never once directly addressing the writer, and never really addressing anyone else.

Kenneth brought "Cousin Stephen" home for dinner, but Emily turned fractious, and announced that she was not going down.

"YOU'D rather be up here just quietly with me, wouldn't you, Sue?" coaxed Emily, sitting on the arm of Susan's chair, and putting an arm about her.

"Of course I would, old lady! We'll send down for something nice, and get into comfortable things," Susan said.

It hardly disappointed her; she was walking on air. She went demurely to the library door, to make her excuses; and Bocqueraz's look enveloped her like a shaft of sunlight. All the evening, upstairs, and stretched out in a long chair and in a loose silk wrapper, she was curiously conscious of his presence downstairs; whenever she thought of him, she must close her book, and fall to dreaming. His voice, his words, the things he had not said ... they spun a brilliant web about her. She loved to be young; she saw new beauty to−night in the thick rope of tawny hair that hung loosely across her shoulder, in the white breast, half−hidden by the fold of her robe, in the crossed, silk−clad ankles. All the world seemed beautiful tonight, and she beautiful with the rest.

Three days later she came downstairs, at five o'clock on a gloomy, dark afternoon, in search of firelight and tea. Emily and Kenneth, Peter Coleman and Mary Peacock, who were staying at the hotel for a week or two, were motoring. The original plan had included Susan, but at the last moment Emily had been discovered upstairs, staring undecidedly out of the window, humming abstractedly.

"Aren't you coming, Em?" Susan had asked, finding her.

"I—I don't believe I will," Emily said lightly, without turning. "Go on, don't wait for me! It's nothing," she had persisted, when Susan questioned her, "Nothing at all! At least," the truth came out at last, "at least, I think it looks ODD. So now go on, without me," said Emily.

"What looks odd?"

"Nothing does, I tell you! Please go on."

"You mean, three girls and two men," Susan said slowly.

Emily assented by silence.

"Well, then, you go and I'll stay," Susan said, in annoyance, "but it's perfect rubbish!"

"No, you go," Emily said, pettishly.

Susan went, perhaps six feet; turned back.

"I wish you'd go," she said, in dissatisfaction.

"If I did," Emily said, in a low, quiet tone, still looking out of the window, "it would be simply because of the looks of things!"

"Well, go because of the looks of things then!" Susan agreed cheerfully.

"No, but you see," Emily said eagerly, turning around, "it DOES look odd—not to me, of course! But mean odd to other people if you go and I don't−don't you think so, Sue?"

"Ye−es," drawled Susan, with a sort of bored and fexasperated sigh. And she went to her own room to write letters, not disappointed, but irritated so thoroughly that she could hardly control her thoughts.

At five o'clock, dressed in a childish black velvet gown—her one pretty house gown—with the deep embroidered collar and cuffs that were so becoming to her, and with her hair freshly brushed and swept back simply from her face, she came downstairs for a cup of tea.

And in the library, sunk into a deep chair before the fire, she found Stephen Bocqueraz, his head resting against the back of the chair, his knees crossed and his finger−tips fitted together. Susan's heart began to race.

He got up and they shook hands, and stood for too long a moment looking at each other. The sense of floating—floating—losing her anchorage—began to make Susan's head spin. She sat down, opposite him, as he took his chair again, but her breath was coming too short to permit of speech.

"Upon my word I thought the woman said that you were all out!" said Bocqueraz, appreciative eyes upon her, "I hardly hoped for a piece of luck like this!"

"Well, they are, you know. I'm not, strictly speaking, a Saunders," smiled Susan.

"No; you're nobody but yourself," he agreed, following a serious look with his sudden, bright smile. "You're a very extraordinary woman, Mamselle Suzanne," he went on briskly, "and I've got a nice little plan all ready to talk to you about. One of these days Mrs. Bocqueraz—she's a wonderful woman for this sort of thing!—shall write to your aunt, or whoever is in loco parentis, and you shall come on to New York for a visit. And while you're there—−" He broke off, raised his eyes from a study of the fire, and again sent her his sudden and sweet and most disturbing smile.

"Oh, don't talk about it!" said Susan. "It's too good to be true!"

"Nothing's too good to be true," he answered. "Once or twice before it's been my extraordinary good fortune to find a personality, and give it a push in the right direction. You'll find the world kind enough to you—Lillian will see to it that you meet a few of the right people, and you'll do the rest. And how you'll love it, and how they'll love you!" He jumped up. "However, I'm not going to spoil you," he said, smilingly.

He went to one of the bookcases and presently came back to read to her from Phillips' "Paolo and Francesca," and from "The Book and the Ring." And never in later life did Susan read either without hearing his exquisite voice through the immortal lines:

"A ring without a poesy, and that ring mine?
O Lyric Love! ..."
"O Lord of Rimini, with tears we leave her, as we leave a
child,
Be gentle with her, even as God has been...."

"Some day I'll read you Pompilia, little Suzanne," said Bocqueraz. "Do you know Pompilia? Do you know Alice Meynell and some of Patmore's stuff, and the 'Dread of Height'?"

"I don't know anything," said Susan, feeling it true. "Well," he said gaily, "we'll read them all!"

Susan presently poured his tea; her guest wheeling his great leather chair so that its arm touched the arm of her own.

"You make me feel all thumbs, watching me so!" she protested.

"I like to watch you," he answered undisturbed. "Here, we'll put this plate on the arm of my chair,—so. Then we can both use it. Your scones on that side, and mine on this, and my butter−knife between the two, like Prosper Le Gai's sword, eh?"

Susan's color heightened suddenly; she frowned. He was a man of the world, of course, and a married man, and much older than she, but somehow she didn't like it. She didn't like the laughter in his eyes. There had been just a hint of this—this freedom, in his speech a few nights ago, but somehow in Billy's presence it had seemed harmless—−

"And why the blush?" he was askingly negligently, yet watching her closely, as if he rather enjoyed her confusion.

"You know why," Susan said, meeting his eyes with a little difficulty.

"I know why. But that's nothing to blush at. Analyze it. What is there in that to embarrass you?"

"I don't know," Susan said, awkwardly, feeling very young.

"Life is a very beautiful thing, my child," he said, almost as if he were rebuking her, "and the closer we come to the big heart of life the more wonderful things we find. No—no—don't let the people about you make you afraid of life." He finished his cup of tea, and she poured him another. "I think it's time to transplant you," he said then, pleasantly, "and since last night I've been thinking of a very delightful and practical way to do it. Lillian—Mrs. Bocqueraz has a very old friend in New York in Mrs. Gifford Curtis—no, you don't know the name perhaps, but she's a very remarkable woman—an invalid. All the world goes to her teas and dinners, all the world has been going there since Booth fell in love with her, and Patti— when she was in her prime!—spent whole Sunday afternoons singing to her! You'll meet everyone who's at all worth while there now, playwrights, and painters, and writers, and musicians. Her daughters are all married to prominent men; one lives in Paris, one in London, two near her; friends keep coming and going. It's a wonderful family. Well, there's a Miss Concannon who's been with her as a sort of companion for twenty years, but Miss Concannon isn't young, and she confided to me a few months ago that she needed an assistant,— someone to pour tea and write notes and play accompaniments—−"

"A sort of Julie le Breton?" said Susan, with sparkling eyes. She resolved to begin piano practice for two hours a day to−morrow.

"I beg pardon? Yes—yes, exactly, so I'm going to write Lillian at once, and she'll put the wheels in motion!"

"I don't know what good angel ever made you think of ME," said Susan.

"Don't you?" the man asked, in a low tone. There was a pause. Both stared at the fire. Suddenly Bocqueraz cleared his throat.

"Well!" he said, jumping up, "if this clock is right it's after half−past six. Where are these good people?"

"Here they are—there's the car coming in the gate now!" Susan said in relief. She ran out to the steps to meet them.

A day or two later, as she was passing Ella's half−open doorway, Ella's voice floated out into the hall.

"That you, Susan? Come in. Will you do your fat friend a favor?" Ella, home again, had at once resumed her despotic control of the household. She was lying on a couch at this moment, lazily waving a scribbled half sheet of paper over her head.

"Take this to Mrs. Pullet, Sue," said she, "and ask her to tell the cook, in some confidential moment, that there are several things written down here that he seems to have forgotten the existence of. I want to see them on the table, from time to time. While I was with the Crewes I was positively MORTIFIED at the memory of our meals! And from now on, while Mr. Bocqueraz's here, we'll be giving two dinners a week."

"While—?" Susan felt a delicious, a terrifying weakness run like a wave from head to feet.

"He's going to be here for a month or two!" Ella announced complacently. "It was all arranged last night. I almost fell off my feet when he proposed it. He says he's got some work to finish up, and he thinks the atmosphere here agrees with him. Kate Stanlaws turned a lovely pea−green, for they were trying to get him to go with them to Alaska. He'll have the room next to Mamma's, with the round porch, and the big room off the library for a study. I had them clear everything out of it, and Ken's going to send over a desk, and chair, and so on. And do try to do everything you can to make him comfortable, Sue. Mamma's terribly pleased that he wants to come," finished Ella, making a long arm for her novel, "But of course he and I made an instant hit with each other!"

"Oh, of course I will!" Susan promised. She went away with her list, pleasure and excitement and a sort of terror struggling together in her heart.

Pleasure prevailed, however, when Stephen Bocqueraz was really established at "High Gardens," and the first nervous meeting was safely over. Everybody in the house was the happier and brighter for his coming, and Susan felt it no sin to enjoy him with the rest. Meal times became very merry; the tea−hour, when he would come across the hall from his workroom, tired, relaxed, hungry, was often the time of prolonged and delightful talks, and on such evenings as Ella left her cousin free of dinner engagements, even Emily had to admit that his reading, under the drawing−room lamp, was a rare delight.

Sometimes he gave himself a half−holiday, and joined Emily and Susan in their driving or motoring. On almost every evening that he did not dine at home he was downstairs in time for a little chat with Susan over the library fire. They were never alone very long, but they had a dozen brief encounters every day, exchanged a dozen quick, significant glances across the breakfast table, or over the book that he was reading aloud.

Susan lived in a dazed, wide−eyed state of reasonless excitement and perilous delight. It was all so meaningless, she assured her pretty vision in the mirror, as she arranged her bright hair,—the man was married, and most happily married; he was older than she; he was a man of honor! And she, Susan Brown, was only playing this fascinating game exceptionally well. She had never flirted before and had been rather proud of it. Well, she was flirting now, and proud of that, too! She was quite the last girl in the world to fall SERIOUSLY in love, with her eyes wide open, in so extremely undesirable a direction! This was not falling in love at all. Stephen Bocqueraz spoke of his wife half a dozen times a day. Susan, on her part, found plenty of things about him to dislike! But he was clever, and—yes, and fascinating, and he admired her immensely, and there was no harm done so far, and none to be done. Why try to define the affair by cut−and−dried rules; it was quite different from anything that had ever happened before, it stood in a class quite by itself.

The intangible bond between them strengthened every day. Susan, watching him when Ella's friends gathered about him, watching the honest modesty with which he evaded their empty praises, their attempts at lionizing, could not but thrill to know that HER praise stirred him, that the deprecatory, indifferent air was dropped quickly enough for HER! It was intoxicating to know, as she did know, that he was thinking, as she was, of what they would say when they next had a moment together; that, whatever she wore, he found her worth watching; that, whatever her mood, she never failed to amuse and delight him! Her rather evasive beauty grew more definite under his eyes; she bubbled with fun and nonsense. "You little fool!" Ella would laugh, with an approving glance toward Susan at the tea−table, and "Honestly, Sue, you were killing tonight!" Emily, who loved to be amused, said more than once.

One day Miss Brown was delegated to carry a message to Mr. Bocqueraz in his study. Mrs. Saunders was sorry to interrupt his writing, but a very dear old friend was coming to dinner that evening, and would Cousin

Stephen come into the drawing−room for a moment, before he and Ella went out?

Susan tripped demurely to the study door and rapped.

"Come in!" a voice shouted. Susan turned the knob, and put her head into the room. Mr. Bocqueraz, writing at a large table by the window, and facing the door across its shining top, flung down his pen, and stretched back luxuriously in his chair.

"Well, well!" said he, smiling and blinking. "Come in, Susanna!"

"Mrs. Saunders wanted me to ask you—−"

"But come in! I've reached a tight corner; couldn't get any further anyway!" He pushed away his papers. "There are days, you know, when you're not even on bowing acquaintance with your characters."

He looked so genial, so almost fatherly, so contentedly lazy, leaning back in his big chair, the winter sunshine streaming in the window behind him, and a dozen jars of fragrant winter flowers making the whole room sweet, that Susan came in, unhesitatingly. It was the mood of all his moods that she liked best; interested, interesting, impersonal.

"But I oughtn't—you're writing," said Susan, taking a chair across the table from him, and laying bold hands on his manuscript, nevertheless. "What a darling hand you write!" she observed, "and what enormous margins. Oh, I see, you write notes in the margins— corrections?"

"Exactly!" He was watching her between half−closed lids, with lazy pleasure.

"'The only,' in a loop," said Susan, "that's not much of a note! I could have written that myself," she added, eying him sideways through a film of drifting hair.

"Very well, write anything you like!" he offered amusedly.

"Oh, honestly?" asked Susan with dancing eyes. And, at his nod, she dipped a pen in the ink, and began to read the story with a serious scowl.

"Here!" she said suddenly, "this isn't at all sensible!" And she read aloud:

"So crystal clear was the gaze with which he met her own, that she was aware of an immediate sense, a vaguely alarming sense, that her confidence must be made with concessions not only to what he had told her—and told her so exquisitely as to indicate his knowledge of other facts from which those he chose to reveal were deliberately selected—but also to what he had not—surely the most significant detail of the whole significant episode—so chosen to reveal!"

"Oh, I see what it means, when I read it aloud," said Susan, cheerfully honest. "But at first it didn't seem to make sense!"

"Go ahead. Fix it anyway you like."

"Well—−" Susan dimpled. "Then I'll—let's see—I'll put 'surely' after 'also,'" she announced, "and end it up, 'to what he had not so chosen to reveal!' Don't you think that's better?"

"Clearer, certainly.—On that margin, Baby."

"And will you really let it stay that way?" asked the baby, eying the altered page with great satisfaction.

"Oh, really. You will see it so in the book."

His quiet certainty that these scattered pages would surely be a book some day thrilled Susan, as power always thrilled her. Just as she had admired Thorny's old scribbled prices, years before, so she admired this quiet mastery now. She asked Stephen Bocqueraz questions, and he told her of his boyhood dreams, of the early struggles in the big city, of the first success.

"One hundred dollars for a story, Susan. It looked a little fortune!"

"And were you married then?"

"Married?" He smiled. "My dear child, Mrs. Bocqueraz is worth almost a million dollars in her own right. No—we have never faced poverty together!" There was almost a wistful look in his eyes.

"And to whom is this book going to be dedicated?" asked Susan.

"Well, I don't know. Lillian has two, and Julie has one or two, and various men, here and in London. Perhaps I'll dedicate this one to a bold baggage of an Irish girl. Would you like that?"

"Oh, you couldn't!" Susan said, frightened.

"Why couldn't I?"

"Because,—I'd rather you wouldn't! I—and it would look odd!" stammered Susan.

"Would you care, if it did?" he asked, with that treacherous sudden drop in his voice that always stirred her heart so painfully.

"No−o—−" Susan answered, scarcely above a whisper.

"What are you afraid of, little girl?" he asked, putting his hand over hers on the desk.

Susan moved her hand away.

"Because, your wife—−" she began awkwardly, turning a fiery red.

Bocqueraz abruptly left his seat, and walked to a window.

"Susan," he said, coming back, after a moment, "have I ever done anything to warrant—to make you distrust me?"

"No,—never!" said Susan heartily, ashamed of herself.

"Friends?" he asked, gravely. And with his sudden smile he put his two hands out, across the desk.

It was like playing with fire; she knew it. But Susan felt herself quite equal to anyone at playing with fire.

"Friends!" she laughed, gripping his hands with hers. "And now," she stood up, "really I mustn't interrupt you any longer!"

"But wait a moment," he said. "Come see what a pretty vista I get— right across the Japanese garden to the woods!"

"The same as we do upstairs," Susan said. But she went to stand beside him at the window.

"No," said Stephen Bocqueraz presently, quietly taking up the thread of the interrupted conversation, "I won't dedicate my book to you, Susan, but some day I'll write you a book of your own! I have been wishing," he added soberly, his eyes on the little curved bridge and the dwarfed shrubs, the pond and the stepping−stones across the garden, "I have been wishing that I never had met you, my dear. I knew, years ago, in those hard, early days of which I've been telling you, that you were somewhere, but—but I didn't wait for you, Susan, and now I can do no more than wish you God−speed, and perhaps give you a helping hand upon your way! That's all I wanted to say."

"I'm—I'm not going to answer you," said Susan, steadily, composedly.

Side by side they looked out of the window, for another moment or two, then Bocqueraz turned suddenly and catching her hands in his, asked almost gaily:

"Well, this is something, at least, isn't it—to be good friends, and to have had this much of each other?"

"Surely! A lot!" Susan answered, in smiling relief. And a moment later she had delivered her message, and was gone, and he had seated himself at his work again.

How much was pretense and how much serious earnest, on his part, she wondered. How much was real on her own? Not one bit of it, said Susan, fresh from her bath, in the bracing cool winter morning, and walking briskly into town for the mail. Not—not much of it, anyway, she decided when tea−time brought warmth and relaxation, the leaping of fire−light against the library walls, the sound of the clear and cultivated voice.

But what was the verdict later, when Susan, bare−armed and bare− shouldered, with softened light striking brassy gleams from her hair, and the perfumed dimness and silence of the great house impressing every sense, paused for a message from Stephen Bocqueraz at the foot of the stairs, or warmed her shining little slipper at the fire, while he watched her from the chair not four feet away?

When she said "I—I'm not going to answer you," in the clear, bright morning light, Susan was enjoyably aware of the dramatic value of the moment; when she evaded Bocqueraz's eye throughout an entire luncheon she did it deliberately; it was a part of the cheerful, delightful game it pleased them both to be playing.

But not all was posing, not all was pretense. Nature, now and then, treacherously slipped in a real thrill, where only play−acting was expected. Susan, laughing at the memory of some sentimental fencing, was sometimes caught unaware by a little pang of regret; how blank and dull life would be when this casual game was over! After all, he WAS the great writer; before the eyes of all the world, even this pretense at an intimate friendship was a feather in her cap!

And he did not attempt to keep their rapidly developing friendship a secret; Susan was alternately gratified and terrified by the reality of his allusions to her before outsiders. No playing here! Everybody knew, in their little circle, that, in the nicest and most elder− brotherly way possible, Stephen Bocqueraz thought Susan Brown the greatest fun in the world, and quoted her, and presented her with his autographed books. This side of the affair,

being real, had a tendency to make it all seem real, and sometimes confused, and sometimes a little frightened Susan.

"That a woman of Emily's mental caliber can hire a woman of yours, for a matter of dollars and cents," he said to Susan whimsically, "is proof that something is radically wrong somewhere! Well, some day we'll put you where values are a little different. Anybody can be rich. Mighty few can be Susan!"

She did not believe everything he said, of course, or take all his chivalrous speeches quite seriously. But obviously, some of it was said in all honesty, she thought, or why should he take the trouble to say it? And the nearness of his bracing personality blew across the artificial atmosphere in which she lived like the cool breath of great moors or of virgin forests. Genius and work and success became the real things of life; money but a mere accident. A horrible sense of the unreality of everything that surrounded her began to oppress Susan. She saw the poisoned undercurrent of this glittering and exquisite existence, the selfishness, the cruelties, the narrowness. She saw its fundamental insincerity. In a world where wrongs were to be righted, and ignorance enlightened, and childhood sheltered and trained, she began to think it strange that strong, and young, and wealthy men and women should be content to waste enormous sums of money upon food to which they scarcely ever brought a normal appetite, upon bridge−prizes for guests whose interest in them scarcely survived the moment of unwrapping the dainty beribboned boxes in which they came, upon costly toys for children whose nurseries were already crowded with toys. She wondered that they should think it worth while to spend hours and days in harassing dressmakers and milliners, to make a brief appearance in the gowns they were so quickly ready to discard, that they should gratify every passing whim so instantly that all wishes died together, like little plants torn up too soon.

The whole seemed wonderful and beautiful still. But the parts of this life, seriously analyzed, seemed to turn to dust and ashes. Of course, a hundred little shop−girls might ache with envy at reading that Mrs. Harvey Brock was to give her debutante daughter a fancy− dress ball, costing ten thousand dollars, and might hang wistfully over the pictures of Miss Peggy Brock in her Dresden gown with her ribbon−tied crook; but Susan knew that Peggy cried and scolded the whole afternoon, before the dance, because Teddy Russell was not coming, that young Martin Brock drank too much on that evening and embarrassed his entire family before he could be gotten upstairs, and that Mrs. Brock considered the whole event a failure because some favors, for which she had cabled to Paris, did not come, and the effect of the german was lost. Somehow, the "lovely and gifted heiress" of the newspapers never seemed to Susan at all reconcilable with Dolly Ripley, vapid, overdressed, with diamonds sparkling about her sallow throat, and the "jolly impromptu" trip of the St. Johns to New York lost its point when one knew it was planned because the name of young Florence St. John had been pointedly omitted from Ella Saunders dance list.

Boasting, lying, pretending—how weary Susan got of it all! She was too well schooled to smile when Ella, meeting the Honorable Mary Saunders and Sir Charles Saunders, of London, said magnificently, "We bear the same arms, Sir Charles, but of course ours is the colonial branch of the family!" and she nodded admiringly at Dolly Ripley's boyish and blunt fashion of saying occasionally "We Ripleys,—oh, we drink and gamble and do other things, I admit; we're not saints! But we can't lie, you know!"

"I hate to take the kiddies to New York, Mike," perhaps some young matron would say simply. "Percy's family is one of the old, old families there, you know, shamelessly rich, and terribly exclusive! And one doesn't want the children to take themselves seriously yet awhile!"

"Bluffers!" the smiling and interested Miss Brown would say to herself, as she listened. She listened a great deal; everyone was willing to talk, and she was often amused at the very slight knowledge that could carry a society girl through a conversation. In Hunter, Baxter Hunter's offices there would be instant challenges, even at auntie's table affectation met its just punishment, and inaccuracy was promptly detected. But there was no such censorship here.

"Looks like a decent little cob!" some girl would say, staring at rider passing the hotel window, at teatime.

"Yes," another voice would agree, "good points. Looks thoroughbred."

"Yes, he does! Looks like a Kentucky mount."

"Louisa! Not with that neck!"

"Oh, I don't know. My grandfather raised fancy stock, you know. Just for his own pleasure, of course, So I DO know a good horse!"

"Well, but he steps more like a racer," somebody else would contribute.

"That's what I thought! Loose−built for a racer, though."

"And what a fool riding him—the man has no seat!"

"Oh, absolutely not! Probably a groom, but it's a shame to allow it!"

"Groom, of course. But you'll never see a groom riding a horse of mine that way!"

"Rather NOT!"

And, an ordinary rider, on a stable hack, having by this time passed from view, the subject, would be changed.

Or perhaps some social offense would absorb everybody's attention for the better part of half−an−hour.

"Look, Emily," their hostess would say, during a call, "isn't this rich! The Bridges have had their crest put on their mourning− stationery! Don't you LOVE it! Mamma says that the girls must have done it; the old lady MUST know better! Execrable bad taste, I call it."

"Oh, ISN'T that awful!" Emily would inspect the submitted letter with deep amusement.

"Oh, Mary, let's see it—I don't believe it!" somebody else would exclaim.

"Poor things, and they try so hard to do everything right!" Kindly pity would soften the tones of a fourth speaker.

"But you know Mary, they DO do that in England," somebody might protest.

"Oh, Peggy, rot! Of course they don't!"

"Why, certainly they do!" A little feeling would be rising. "When Helen and I were in London we had some friends—"

"Nonsense, Peggy, it's terribly vulgar! I know because Mamma's cousin—"

"Oh honestly, Peggy, it's never done!"

"I never heard of such a thing!"

"You might use your crest in black, Peg, but in color—!"

"Just ask any engraver, Peg. I know when Frances was sending to England for our correct quarterings,—they'd been changed—"

"But I tell you I KNOW," Miss Peggy would say angrily. "Do you mean to tell me that you'd take the word of a stationer—"

"A herald. You can't call that a stationer—"

"Well, then a herald! What do they know?"

"Why, of course they know!" shocked voices would protest. "It's their business!"

"Well," the defender of the Bridges would continue loftily, "all I can say is that Alice and I SAW it—"

"I know that when WE were in London," some pleasant, interested voice would interpose, modestly, "our friends—Lord and Lady Merridew, they were, you know, and Sir Henry Phillpots—they were in mourning, and THEY didn't. But of course I don't know what other people, not nobility, that is, might do!"

And of course this crushing conclusion admitted of no answer. But Miss Peggy might say to Susan later, with a bright, pitying smile:

"Alice will ROAR when I tell her about this! Lord and Lady Merridew,—that's simply delicious! I love it!"

"Bandar−log," Bocqueraz called them, and Susan often thought of the term in these days. From complete disenchantment she was saved, however, by her deepening affection for Isabel Wallace, and, whenever they were together, Susan had to admit that a more lovely personality had never been developed by any environment or in any class. Isabel, fresh, unspoiled, eager to have everyone with whom she came in contact as enchanted with life as she was herself, developed a real devotion for Susan, and showed it in a hundred ways. If Emily was away for a night, Isabel was sure to come and carry Susan off for as many hours as possible to the lovely Wallace home. They had long, serious talks together; Susan did not know whether to admire or envy most Isabel's serene happiness in her engagement, the most brilliant engagement of the winter, and Isabel's deeper interest in her charities, her tender consideration of her invalid mother, her flowers, her plan for the small brothers.

"John is wonderful, of course," Isabel would agree in a smiling aside to Susan when, furred and glowing, she had brought her handsome big lover into the Saunders' drawing−room for a cup of tea, "but I've been spoiled all my life, Susan, and I'm afraid he's going right on with it! And—" Isabel's lovely eyes would be lighted with an ardent glow, "and I want to do something with my life, Sue, something BIG, in return for it all!"

Again, Susan found herself watching with curious wistfulness the girl who had really had an offer of marriage, who was engaged, openly adored and desired. What had he said to her—and she to him— what emotions crossed

their hearts when they went to watch the building of the beautiful home that was to be theirs?

A man and a woman—a man and a woman—loving and marrying—what a miracle the familiar aspects of approaching marriage began to seem! In these days Susan read old poems with a thrill, read "Trilby" again, and found herself trembling, read "Adam Bede," and shut the book with a thundering heart. She went, with the others, to "Faust," and turned to Stephen Bocqueraz a pale, tense face, and eyes brimming with tears.

The writer's study, beyond the big library, had a fascination for her. At least once a day she looked in upon him there, sometimes with Emily, sometimes with Ella, never, after that first day, alone.

"You can see that he's perfectly devoted to that dolly−faced wife of his!" Ella said, half−contemptuously. "I think we all bore him," Emily said. "Stephen is a good and noble man," said his wife's old cousin. Susan never permitted herself to speak of him. "Don't you like him?" asked Isabel. "He seems crazy about you! I think you're terribly fine to be so indifferent about it, Susan!"

On a certain December evening Emily decided that she was very unwell, and must have a trained nurse. Susan, who had stopped, without Emily, at the Wallaces' for tea, understood perfectly that the youngest Miss Saunders was delicately intimating that she expected a little more attention from her companion. A few months ago she would have risen to the occasion with the sort of cheerful flattery that never failed in its effect on Emily, but to−night a sort of stubborn irritation kept her lips sealed, and in the end she telephoned for the nurse Emily fancied, a Miss Watts, who had been taking care of one of Emily's friends.

Miss Watts, effusive and solicitous, arrived, and Susan could see that Emily was repenting of her bargain long before she, Susan, had dressed for dinner. But she ran downstairs with a singing heart, nevertheless. Ella was to bring two friends in for cards, immediately after dinner; Kenneth had not been home for three days; Miss Baker was in close attendance upon Mrs. Saunders, who had retired to her room before dinner; so Susan and Stephen were free to dine alone. Susan had hesitated, in the midst of her dressing, over the consideration of a gown, and had finally compromised with her conscience by deciding upon quite the oldest, plainest, shabbiest black silk in the little collection.

"Most becoming thing you ever put on!" said Emily, trying to reestablish quite cordial relations.

"I know," Susan agreed guiltily.

When she and Stephen Bocqueraz came back into one of the smaller drawing−rooms after dinner Susan walked to the fire and stood, for a few moments, staring down at the coals. The conversation during the softly lighted, intimate little dinner had brought them both to a dangerous mood. Susan was excited beyond the power of reasonable thought. It was all nonsense, they were simply playing; he was a married man, and she a woman who never could by any possibility be anything but "good," she would have agreed impatiently and gaily with her own conscience if she had heard it at all—but just now she felt like enjoying this particular bit of foolery to the utmost, and, since there was really no harm in it, she was going to enjoy it! She had not touched wine at dinner, but some subtler intoxication had seized her, she felt conscious of her own beauty, her white throat, her shining hair, her slender figure in its clinging black, she felt conscious of Stephen's eyes, conscious of the effective background for them both that the room afforded; the dull hangings, subdued lights and softly shining surfaces.

Her companion stood near her, watching her. Susan, still excitedly confident that she controlled the situation, began to feel her breath come deep and swift, began to wish that she could think of just the right thing to say, to relieve the tension a little−began to wish that Ella would come in—

She raised her eyes, a little frightened, a little embarrassed, to his, and in the next second he had put his arms about her and crushed her to him and kissed her on the mouth.

"Susan," he said, very quietly, "you are my girl—you are MY girl, will you let me take care of you? I can't help it—I love you."

This was not play−acting, at last. A grim, an almost terrible earnestness was in his voice; his face was very pale; his eyes dark with passion. Susan, almost faint with the shock, pushed away his arms, walked a few staggering steps and stood, her back turned to him, one hand over her heart, the other clinging to the back of a chair, her breath coming so violently that her whole body shook.

"Oh, don't—don't—don't!" she said, in a horrified and frightened whisper.

"Susan"—he began eagerly, coming toward her. She turned to face him, and breathing as if she had been running, and in simple entreaty, she said:

"Please—please—if you touch me again—if you touch me again—I cannot—the maids will hear—Bostwick

will hear—"

"No, no, no! Don't be frightened, dear," he said quickly and soothingly. "I won't. I won't do anything you don't want me to!"

Susan pressed her hand over her eyes; her knees felt so weak that she was afraid to move. Her breathing slowly grew more even.

"My dear—if you'll forgive me!" the man said repentantly. She gave him a weary smile, as she went to drop into her low chair before the fire.

"No, no, Mr. Bocqueraz, I'm to blame," she said quietly. And suddenly she put her elbows on her knees, and buried her face in her hands.

"Listen, Susan—" he began again. But again she silenced him.

"Just—one—moment—" she said pleadingly. For two or three moments there was silence.

"No, it's my fault," Susan said then, more composedly, pushing her hair back from her forehead with both hands, and raising her wretched eyes. "Oh, how could I—how could I!" And again she hid her face.

Stephen Bocqueraz did not speak, and presently Susan added, with a sort of passion:

"It was wicked, and it was COMMON, and no decent woman—"

"No, you shan't take that tone!" said Bocqueraz, suddenly looking up from a somber study of the fire. "It is true, Susan, and—and I can't be sorry it is. It's the truest thing in the world!"

"Oh, let's not—let's NOT talk that way!" All that was good and honest in her came to Susan's rescue now, all her clean and honorable heritage. "We've only been fooling, haven't we?" she urged eagerly. "You know we have! Why, you—you—"

"No," said Bocqueraz, "it's too big now to be laughed away, Susan!" He came and knelt beside her chair and put his arm about her, his face so close that Susan could lay an arresting hand upon his shoulder. Her heart beat madly, her senses swam.

"You mustn't!" said Susan, trying to force her voice above a hoarse whisper, and failing.

"Do you think you can deceive me about it?" he asked. "Not any more than I could deceive you! Do you think I'M glad—haven't you seen how I've been fighting it—ignoring it—"

Susan's eyes were fixed upon his with frightened fascination; she could not have spoken if life had depended upon it.

"No," he said, "whatever comes of it, or however we suffer for it, I love you, and you love me, don't you, Susan?"

She had forgotten herself now, forgotten that this was only a sort of play—forgotten her part as a leading lady, bare−armed and bright−haired, whose role it was to charm this handsome man, in the soft lamplight. She suddenly knew that she could not deny what he asked, and with the knowledge that she DID care for him, that this splendid thing had come into her life for her to reject or to keep, every rational thought deserted her. It only seemed important that he should know that she was not going to answer "No."

"Do you care a little, Susan?" he asked again. Susan did not answer or move. Her eyes never left his face.

She was still staring at him, a moment later, ashen−faced and helpless, when they heard Bostwick crossing the hall to admit Ella and her chattering friends. Somehow she stood up, somehow walked to the door.

"After nine!" said Ella, briskly introducing, "but I know you didn't miss us! Get a card−table, Bostwick, please. And, Sue, will you wait, like a love, and see that we get something to eat at twelve— at one? Take these things, Lizzie. NOW. What is it, Stephen? A four− spot? You get it. How's the kid, Sue?"

"I'm going right up to see!" Susan said dizzily, glad to escape. She went up to Emily's room, and was made welcome by the bored invalid, and gladly restored to her place as chief attendant. When Emily was sleepy Susan went downstairs to superintend the arrangements for supper; presently she presided over the chafing−dish. She did not speak to Bocqueraz or meet his look once during the evening. But in every fiber of her being she was conscious of his nearness, and of his eyes.

The long night brought misgivings, and Susan went down to breakfast cold with a sudden revulsion of feeling. Ella kept her guest busy all day, and all through the following day. Susan, half−sick at first with the variety and violence of her emotions, had convinced herself, before forty−eight hours were over, that the whole affair had been no more than a moment of madness, as much regretted by him as by herself.

It was humiliating to remember with what a lack of self−control and reserve she had borne herself, she

reflected. "But one more word of this sort," Susan resolved, "and I will simply go back to Auntie within the hour!"

On the third afternoon, a Sunday, Peter Coleman came to suggest an idle stroll with Emily and Susan, and was promptly seized by the gratified Emily for a motor−trip.

"We'll stop for Isabel and John," said Emily, elated. "Unless," her voice became a trifle flat, "unless you'd like to go, Sue," she amended, "and in that case, if Isabel can go, we can—"

"Oh, heavens, no!" Susan said, laughing, pleased at the disgusted face Peter Coleman showed beyond Emily's head. "Ella wants me to go over to the hotel, anyway, to talk about borrowing chairs for the concert, and I'll go this afternoon," she added, lowering her voice so that it should not penetrate the library, where Ella and Bocqueraz and some luncheon guests were talking together.

But when she walked down the drive half an hour later, with the collies leaping about her, the writer quietly fell into step at her side. Susan stopped short, the color rushing into her face. But her companion paid no heed to her confusion.

"I want to talk to you, Susan," said he unsmilingly, and with a tired sigh. "Where shall we walk? Up behind the convent here?"

"You look headachy," Susan said sympathetically, distracted from larger issues by the sight of his drawn, rather colorless face.

"Bad night," he explained briefly. And with no further objection she took the convent road, and they walked through the pale flood of winter sunshine together. There had been heavy rains; to−day the air was fresh−washed and clear, but they could hear the steady droning of the fog−horn on the distant bay.

The convent, washed with clear sunlight, loomed high above its bare, well−kept gardens. The usual Sunday visitors were mounting and descending the great flight of steps to the doorway; a white−robed portress stood talking to one little group at the top, her folded arms lost in her wide sleeves. A three−year−old, in a caped white coat, made every one laugh by her independent investigations of arches and doorway.

"Dear Lord, to be that size again!" thought Susan, heavy−hearted.

"I've been thinking a good deal since Tuesday night, Susan," began Bocqueraz quietly, when they had reached the shelved road that runs past the carriage gates and lodges of beautiful private estates, and circles across the hills, above the town. "And, of course, I've been blaming myself bitterly; but I'm not going to speak of that now. Until Tuesday I hoped that what pain there was to bear, because of my caring for you, would be borne by me alone. If I blame myself, Sue, it's only because I felt that I would rather bear it, any amount of it, than go away from you a moment before I must. But when I realize that you, too—"

He paused, and Susan did not speak, could not speak, even though she knew that her silence was a definite statement.

"No—" he said presently, "we must face the thing honestly. And perhaps it's better so. I want to speak to you about my marriage. I was twenty−five, and Lillian eighteen. I had come to the city, a seventeen−year−old boy, to make my fortune, and it was after the first small success that we met. She was an heiress—a sweet, pretty, spoiled little girl; she is just a little girl now in many ways. It was a very extraordinary marriage for her to wish to make; her mother disapproved; her guardians disapproved. I promised the mother to go away, and I did, but Lillian had an illness a month or two later and they sent for me, and we were married. Her mother has always regarded me as of secondary importance in her daughter's life; she took charge of our house, and of the baby when Julie came, and went right on with her spoiling and watching and exulting in Lillian. They took trips abroad; they decided whether or not to open the town house; they paid all the bills. Lillian has her suite of rooms, and I mine. Julie is very prettily fond of me; they like to give a big tea, two or three times a winter, and have me in evidence, or Lillian likes to have me plan theatricals, or manage amateur grand−opera for her. When Julie was about ten I had my own ideas as to her upbringing, but there was a painful scene, in which the child herself was consulted, and stood with her mother and grandmother—

"So, for several years, Susan, it has been only the decent outer shell of a marriage. We sometimes live in different cities for months at a time, or live in the same house, and see no more of each other than guests in the same hotel. Lillian makes no secret of it; she would be glad to be free. We have never had a day, never an hour, of real companionship! My dear Sue—" his voice, which had been cold and bitter, softened suddenly, and he turned to her the sudden winning smile that she remembered noticing the first evening they had known each other. "My

dear Sue," he said, "when I think what I have missed in life I could go mad! When I think what it would be to have beside me a comrade who liked what I like, who would throw a few things into a suit case, and put her hand in mine, and wander over the world with me, laughing and singing through Italy, watching a sudden storm from the doorway of an English inn—"

"Ah, don't!" Susan said wistfully.

"You have never seen the Canadian forests, Sue, on some of the tropical beaches, or the color in a japanese street, or the moon rising over the Irish lakes!" he went on, "and how you would love it all!",

"We oughtn't—oughtn't to talk this way—", Susan said unsteadily.

They were crossing a field, above the town, and came now to a little stile. Susan sat down on the little weather−burned step, and stared down on the town below. Bocqueraz leaned on the rail, and looked at her.

"Always—always—always," he pursued seriously. "I have known that you were somewhere in the world. Just you, a bold and gay and witty and beautiful woman, who would tear my heart out by the roots when I met you, and shake me out of my comfortable indifference to the world and everything in it. And you have come! But, Susan, I never knew, I never dreamed what it would mean to me to go away from you, to leave you in peace, never guessing—"

"No, it's too late for that!" said Susan, clearing her throat. "I'd rather know."

If she had been acting it would have been the correct thing to say. The terrifying thought was that she was not acting; she was in deadly, desperate earnest now, and yet she could not seem to stop short; every instant involved her the deeper.

"We—we must stop this," she said, jumping up, and walking briskly toward the village. "I am so sorry—I am so ashamed! It all seemed— seemed so foolish up to—well, to Tuesday. We must have been mad that night! I never dreamed that things would go so far. I don't blame you, I blame myself. I assure you I haven't slept since, I can't seem to eat or think or do anything naturally any more! Sometimes I think I'm going crazy!"

"My poor little girl!" They were in a sheltered bit of road now, and Bocqueraz put his two hands lightly on her shoulders, and stopped her short. Susan rested her two hands upon his arms, her eyes, raised to his, suddenly brimmed with tears. "My poor little girl!" he said again tenderly, "we'll find a way out! It's come on you too suddenly, Sue—it came upon me like a thunderbolt. But there's just one thing," and Susan remembered long afterward the look in his eyes as he spoke of it, "just one thing you mustn't forget, Susan. You belong to me now, and I'll move heaven and earth—but I'll have you. It's come all wrong, sweetheart, and we can't see our way now. But, my dearest, the wonderful thing is that it has come—−

"Think of the lives," he went on, as Susan did not answer, "think of the women, toiling away in dull, dreary lives, to whom a vision like this has never come!"

"Oh, I know!" said Susan, in sudden passionate assent.

"But don't misunderstand me, dear, you're not to be hurried or troubled in this thing. We'll think, and talk things over, and plan. My world is a broader and saner world than yours is, Susan, and when I take you there you will be as honored and as readily accepted as any woman among them all. My wife will set me free—−" he fell into a muse, as they walked along the quiet country road, and Susan, her brain a mad whirl of thoughts, did not interrupt him. "I believe she will set me free," he said, "as soon as she knows that my happiness, and all my life, depend upon it. It can be done; it can be arranged, surely. You know that our eastern divorce laws are different from yours here, Susan—−"

"I think I must be mad to let you talk so!" burst out Susan, "You must not! Divorce—−! Why, my aunt—−!"

"We'll not mention it again," he assured her quickly, but although for the rest of their walk they said very little, the girl escaped upstairs to her room before dinner with a baffled sense that the dreadful word, if unpronounced, had been none the less thundering in her brain and his all the way.

She made herself comfortable in wrapper and slippers, rather to the satisfaction of Emily, who had brought Peter back to dinner, barely touched the tray that the sympathetic Lizzie brought upstairs, and lay trying to read a book that she flung aside again and again for the thoughts that would have their way.

She must think this whole thing out, she told herself desperately; view it dispassionately and calmly; decide upon the best and quickest step toward reinstating the old order, toward blotting out this last fortnight of weakness and madness. But, if Susan was fighting for the laws of men, a force far stronger was taking arms against her, the great law of nature held her in its grip. The voice of Stephen Bocqueraz rang across her sanest resolution; the

touch of Stephen Bocqueraz's hand burned her like a fire.

Well, it had been sent to her, she thought resentfully, lying back spent and exhausted; she had not invited it. Suppose she accepted it; suppose she sanctioned his efforts to obtain a divorce, suppose she were married to him—And at the thought her resolutions melted away in the sudden delicious and enervating wave of emotion that swept over her. To belong to him!

"Oh, my God, I do not know what to do!" Susan whispered. She slipped to her knees, and buried her face in her hands. If her mind would but be still for a moment, would stop its mad hurry, she might pray.

A knock at the door brought her to her feet; it was Miss Baker, who was sitting with Kenneth to−night, and who wanted company. Susan was glad to go noiselessly up to the little sitting−room next to Kenneth's room, and sit chatting under the lamp. Now and then low groaning and muttering came from the sick man, and the women paused for a pitiful second. Susan presently went in to help Miss Baker persuade him to drink some cooling preparation.

The big room was luxurious enough for a Sultan, yet with hints of Kenneth's earlier athletic interests in evidence too. A wonderful lamp at the bedside diffused a soft light. The sufferer, in embroidered and monogrammed silk night−wear, was under a trimly drawn sheet, with a fluffy satin quilt folded across his feet. He muttered and shook his head, as the drink was presented, and, his bloodshot eyes discovering Susan, he whispered her name, immediately shouting it aloud, hot eyes on her face:

"Susan!"

"Feeling better?" Susan smiled encouragingly, maternally, down upon him.

But his gaze had wandered again. He drained the glass, and immediately seemed quieter.

"He'll sleep now," said Miss Baker, when they were back in the adjoining room. "Doesn't it seem a shame?"

"Couldn't he be cured, Miss Baker?"

"Well," the nurse pursed her lips, shook her head thoughtfully. "No, I don't believe he could now. Doctor thinks the south of France will do wonders, and he says that if Mr. Saunders stayed on a strict diet for, say a year, and then took some German cure—but I don't know! Nobody could make him do it anyway. Why, we can't keep him on a diet for twenty−four hours! Of course he can't keep this up. A few more attacks like this will finish him. He's going to have a nurse in the morning, and Doctor says that in about a month he ought to get away. It's my opinion he'll end in a mad−house," Miss Baker ended, with quiet satisfaction.

"Oh, don't!" Susan cried in horror.

"Well, a lot of them do, my dear! He'll never get entirely well, that's positive. And now the problem is," the nurse, who was knitting a delicate rainbow afghan for a baby, smiled placidly over her faint pinks and blues, "now the question is, who's going abroad with him? He can't go alone. Ella declines the honor," Miss Baker's lips curled; she detested Ella "Emily—you know what Emily is! And the poor mother, who would really make the effort, he says gets on his nerves. Anyway, she's not fit. If he had a man friend—−! But the only one he'd go with, Mr. Russell, is married."

"A nurse?" suggested Susan.

"Oh, my dear!" Miss Baker gave her a significant look. "There are two classes of nurses," she said, "one sort wouldn't dare take a man who has the delirium tremens anywhere, much less to a strange country, and the other—−! They tried that once, before my day it was, but I guess that was enough for them. Of course the best thing that he could do," pursued the nurse lightly, "is get married."

"Well," Susan felt the topic a rather delicate one. "Ought he marry?" she ventured.

"Don't think I'd marry him!" Miss Baker assured her hastily, "but he's no worse than the Gregory boy, married last week. He's really no worse than lots of others!"

"Well, it's a lovely, lovely world!" brooded Susan bitterly. "I wish to GOD," she added passionately, "that there was some way of telling right from wrong! If you want to have a good time and have money enough, you can steal and lie and marry people like Kenneth Saunders; there's no law that you can't break—pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth! That IS society! And yet, if you want to be decent, you can slave away a thousand years, mending and patching and teaching and keeping books, and nothing beautiful or easy ever comes your way!"

"I don't agree with you at all," said Miss Baker, in disapproval. "I hope I'm not bad," she went on brightly, "but I have a lovely time! Everyone here is lovely to me, and once a month I go home to my sister. We're the

greatest chums ever, and her baby, Marguerite, is named for me, and she's a perfect darling! And Beek—that's her husband—is the most comical thing I ever saw; he'll go up and get Mrs. Tully—my sister rents one of her rooms,—and we have a little supper, and more cutting−UP! Or else Beek'll sit with the baby, and we girls go to the theater!"

"Yes, that's lovely," Susan said, but Miss Baker accepted the words and not the tone, and went on to innocent narratives of Lily, Beek and the little Marguerite.

"And now, I wonder what a really good, conscientious woman would do," thought Susan in the still watches of the night. Go home to Auntie, of course. He might follow her there, but, even if he did, she would have made the first right step, and could then plan the second. Susan imagined Bocqueraz in Auntie's sitting−room and winced in the dark. Perhaps the most definite stand she took in all these bewildering days was when she decided, with a little impatient resentment, that she was quite equal to meeting the situation with dignity here.

But there must be no hesitation, no compromise. Susan fell asleep resolving upon heroic extremes.

Just before dinner, on the evening following, she was at the grand piano in the big drawing−room, her fingers lazily following the score of "Babes in Toyland," which Ella had left open upon the rack. Susan felt tired and subdued, wearily determined to do her duty, wearily sure that life, for the years to come, would be as gray and sad as to−day seemed. She had been crying earlier in the day and felt the better for the storm. Susan had determined upon one more talk with Bocqueraz,—the last.

And presently he was leaning on the piano, facing her in the dim light. Susan's hands began to tremble, to grow cold. Her heart beat high with nervousness; some primitive terror assailed her even here, in the familiar room, within the hearing of a dozen maids.

"What's the matter?" he asked, as she did not smile.

Susan still watched him seriously. She did not answer.

"My fault?" he asked.

"No−o." Susan's lip trembled. "Or perhaps it is, in a way," she said slowly and softly, still striking almost inaudible chords. "I can't− −I can't seem to see things straight, whichever way I look!" she confessed as simply as a troubled child.

"Will you come across the hall into the little library with me and talk about it for two minutes?" he asked.

"No." Susan shook her head.

"Susan! Why not?"

"Because we must stop it all," the girl said steadily, "ALL, every bit of it, before we—before we are sorry! You are a married man, and I knew it, and it is ALL WRONG—"

"No, it's not all wrong, I won't admit that," he said quickly. "There has been no wrong."

It was a great weight lifted from Susan's heart to think that this was true. Ended here, the friendship was merely an episode.

"If we stop here," she said almost pleadingly.

"If we stop here," he agreed, slowly. "If we end it all here. Well. And of course, Sue, chance might, MIGHT set me free, you know, and then—"

Again the serious look, followed by the sweet and irresistible smile. Susan suddenly felt the hot tears running down her cheeks.

"Chance won't," she said in agony. And she began to fumble blindly for a handkerchief.

In an instant he was beside her, and as she stood up he put both arms about her, and she dropped her head on his shoulder, and wept silently and bitterly. Every instant of this nearness stabbed her with new joy and new pain; when at last he gently tipped back her tear−drenched face, she was incapable of resisting the great flood of emotion that was sweeping them both off their feet.

"Sue, you do care! My dearest, you DO care?"

Susan, panting, clung to him.

"Oh, yes—yes!" she whispered. And, at a sound from the hall, she crushed his handkerchief back into his hand, and walked to the deep archway of a distant window. When he joined her there, she was still breathing hard, and had her hand pressed against her heart, but she was no longer crying.

"I am mad I think!" smiled Susan, quite mistress of herself.

"Susan," he said eagerly, "I was only waiting for this! If you knew− −if you only knew what an agony I've

been in yesterday and to−day—! And I'm not going to distress you now with plans, my dearest. But, Sue, if I were a divorced man now, would you let it be a barrier?"

"No," she said, after a moment's thought. "No, I wouldn't let anything that wasn't a legal barrier stand in the way. Even though divorce has always seemed terrible to me. But—but you're not free, Mr. Bocqueraz."

He was standing close behind her, as she stood staring out into the night, and now put his arm about her, and Susan, looking up over her shoulder, raised childlike blue eyes to his.

"How long are you going to call me that?" he asked.

"I don't know—Stephen," she said. And suddenly she wrenched herself free, and turned to face him.

"I can't seem to keep my senses when I'm within ten feet of you!" Susan declared, half−laughing and half−crying.

"But Sue, if my wife agrees to a divorce," he said, catching both her hands.

"Don't touch me, please," she said, loosening them.

"I will not, of course!" He took firm hold of a chair−back. "If Lillian—" he began again, very gravely.

Susan leaned toward him, her face not twelve inches away from his face, her hand laid lightly for a second on his arm.

"You know that I will go with you to the end of the world, Stephen!" she said, scarcely above a whisper, and was gone.

It became evident, in a day or two, that Kenneth Saunders' illness had taken a rather alarming turn. There was a consultation of doctors; there was a second nurse. Ella went to the extreme point of giving up an engagement to remain with her mother while the worst was feared; Emily and Susan worried and waited, in their rooms. Stephen Bocqueraz was a great deal in the sick−room; "a real big brother," as Mrs. Saunders said tearfully.

The crisis passed; Kenneth was better, was almost normal again. But the great specialist who had entered the house only for an hour or two had left behind him the little seed that was to vitally affect the lives of several of these people.

"Dr. Hudson says he's got to get away," said Ella to Susan, "I wish I could go with him. Kenneth's a lovely traveler."

"I wish I could," Emily supplemented, "but I'm no good."

"And doctor says that he'll come home quite a different person," added his mother. Susan wondered if she fancied that they all looked in a rather marked manner at her. She wondered, if it was not fancy, what the look meant.

They were all in the upstairs sitting−room in the bright morning light when this was said. They had drifted in there one by one, apparently by accident. Susan, made a little curious and uneasy by a subtle sense of something unsaid—something pending, began to wonder, too, if it had really been accident that assembled them there.

But she was still without definite suspicions when Ella, upon the entrance of Chow Yew with Mr. Kenneth's letters and the new magazines, jumped up gaily, and said:

"Here, Sue! Will you run up with these to Ken—and take these violets, too?"

She put the magazines in Susan's hands, and added a great bunch of dewy wet violets that had been lying on the table. Susan, really glad to escape from the over−charged atmosphere of the room, willingly went on her way.

Kenneth was sitting up to−day, very white, very haggard,—clean− shaven and hollow−eyed, and somehow very pitiful. He smiled at Susan, as she came in, and laid a thin hand on a chair by the bed. Susan sat down, and as she did so the watching nurse went out.

"Well, had you ordered a pillow of violets with shaky doves?" he asked, in a hoarse thin echo of his old voice. "No, but I guess you were pretty sick," the girl said soberly. "How goes it to−day?"

"Oh, fine!" he answered hardily, "as soon as I am over the ether I'll feel like a fighting cock! Hudson talked a good deal with his mouth," said Kenneth coughing. "But the rotten thing about me, Susan," he went on, "is that I can't booze,—I really can't do it! Consequently, when some old fellow like that gets a chance at me, he thinks he ought to scare me to death!" He sank back, tired from coughing. "But I'm all right!" he finished, comfortably, "I'll be alright again after a while."

"Well, but now, honestly, from now on—−" Susan began, timidly but eagerly, "won't you truly TRY—"

"Oh, sure!" he said simply. "I promised. I'm going to cut it out, ALL of it. I'm done. I don't mean to say that I've ever been a patch on some of the others," said Kenneth. "Lord, you ought to see some of the men who really

DRINK! At the same time, I've had enough. It's me to the simple joys of country life—I'm going to try farming. But first they want me to try France for awhile, and then take this German treatment, whatever it is. Hudson wants me to get off by the first of the year."

"Oh, really! France!" Susan's eyes sparkled. "Oh, aren't you wild!"

"I'm not so crazy about it. Not Paris, you know, but some dinky resort."

"Oh, but fancy the ocean trip—and meeting the village people—and New York!" Susan exclaimed. "I think every instant of traveling would be a joy!" And the vision of herself in all these places, with Stephen Bocqueraz as interpreter, wrung her heart with longing.

Kenneth was watching her closely. A dull red color had crept into his face.

"Well, why don't you come?" he laughed awkwardly.

Something in his tone made Susan color uncomfortably too.

"That DID sound as if I were asking myself along!" she smiled.

"Oh, no, it didn't!" he reassured her. "But—but I mean it. Why don't you come?"

They were looking steadily at each other now. Susan tried to laugh.

"A scandal in high life!" she said, in an attempt to make the conversation farcical. "Elopement surprises society!"

"That's what I mean—that's what I mean!" he said eagerly, yet bashfully too. "What's the matter with our—our getting married, Susan? You and I'll get married, d'ye see?"

And as, astonished and frightened and curiously touched she stood up, he caught at her skirt. Susan put her hand over his with a reassuring and soothing gesture.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" he said, beginning to cough again. "You said you would. And I—I am terribly fond of you—you could do just as you like. For instance, if you wanted to take a little trip off anywhere, with friends, you know," said Kenneth with boyish, smiling generosity, "you could ALWAYS do it! I wouldn't want to tie you down to me!" He lay back, after coughing, but his bony hand still clung to hers. "You're the only woman I ever asked to undertake such a bad job," he finished, in a whisper.

"Why—but honestly—−" Susan began. She laughed out nervously and unsteadily. "This is so sudden," said she. Kenneth laughed too.

"But, you see, they're hustling me off," he complained. "This weather is so rotten! And El's keen for it," he urged, "and Mother too. If you'll be so awfully, awfully good—I know you aren't crazy about me—and you know some pretty rotten things about me—"

The very awkwardness of his phrasing won her as no other quality could. Susan felt suddenly tender toward him, felt old and sad and wise.

"Mr. Saunders," she said, gently, "you've taken my breath away. I don't know what to say to you. I can't pretend that I'm in love with you—"

"Of course you're not!" he said, very much embarrassed, "but if there's no one else, Sue—"

"There is someone else," said Susan, her eyes suddenly watering. "But—but that's not going—right, and it never can! If you'll give me a few days to think about it, Kenneth—"

"Sure! Take your time!" he agreed eagerly.

"It would be the very quietest and quickest and simplest wedding that ever was, wouldn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, absolutely!" Kenneth seemed immensely relieved. "No riot!"

"And you will let me think it over?" the girl asked, "because—I know other girls say this, but it's true!—I never DREAMED—"

"Sure, you think it over. I'll consider you haven't given me the faintest idea of how you feel," said Kenneth. They clasped hands for good−by. Susan fancied that his smile might have been an invitation for a little more affectionate parting, but if it was she ignored it. She turned at the door to smile back at him before she went downstairs.

CHAPTER V

Susan went straight downstairs, and, with as little self− consciousness as if the house had been on fire, tapped at and opened the door of Stephen Bocqueraz's study. He half rose, with a smile of surprise and pleasure, as she came in, but his own face instantly reflected the concern and distress on hers, and he came to her, and took her hand in his.

"What is it, Susan?" he asked, sharply.

Susan had closed the door behind her. Now she drew him swiftly to the other side of the room, as far from the hall as possible. They stood in the window recess, Susan holding tight to the author's hand; Stephen eyeing her anxiously and eagerly.

"My very dear little girl, what IS it?"

"Kenneth wants me to marry him," Susan said panting. "He's got to go to France, you know. They want me to go with him."

"What?" Bocqueraz asked slowly. He dropped her hands.

"Oh, don't!" Susan said, stung by his look. "Would I have come straight to you, if I had agreed?"

"You said 'no'?" he asked quickly.

"I didn't say anything!" she answered, almost with anger. "I don't know what to do—or what to say!" she finished forlornly.

"You don't know what to do?" echoed Stephen, in his clear, decisive tones. "What do you mean? Of course, it's monstrous! Ella never should have permitted it. There's only one thing for you to do?"

"It's not so easy as that," Susan said.

"How do you mean that it's not easy? You can't care for him?"

"Care for him!" Susan's scornful voice was broken by tears. "Of course I don't care for him!" she said. "But—can't you see? If I displease them, if I refuse to do this, that they've all thought out evidently, and planned, I'll have to go back to my aunt's!"

Stephen Bocqueraz, his hands in his coat−pockets, stood silently watching her.

"And fancy what it would mean to Auntie," Susan said, beginning to pace the floor in agony of spirit. "Comfort for the rest of her life! And everything for the girls! I would do anything else in the world," she said distressfully, "for one tenth the money, for one twentieth of it! And I believe he would be kind to me, and he SAYS he is positively going to stop—and it isn't as if you and I—you and−I—−" she stopped short, childishly.

"Of course you would be extremely rich," Stephen said quietly.

"Oh, rich—rich—rich!" Susan pressed her locked hands to her heart with a desperate gesture. "Sometimes I think we are all crazy, to make money so important!" she went on passionately. "What good did it ever bring anyone! Why aren't we taught when we're little that it doesn't count, that it's only a side−issue! I've seen more horrors in the past year−and−a−half than I ever did in my life before;— disease and lying and cruelty, all covered up with a layer of flowers and rich food and handsome presents! Nobody enjoys anything; even wedding−presents are only a little more and a little better than the things a girl has had all her life; even children don't count; one can't get NEAR them! Stephen," Susan laid her hand upon his arm, "I've seen the horribly poor side of life,—the poverty that is worse than want, because it's hopeless,—and now I see the rich side, and I don't wonder any longer that sometimes people take violent means to get away from it!"

She dropped into the chair that faced his, at the desk, and cupped her face in her hands, staring gloomily before her. "If any of my own people knew that I refused to marry Kenneth Saunders," she went on presently, "they would simply think me mad; and perhaps I am! But, although he was his very sweetest and nicest this morning,—and I know how different he can be!—somehow, when I leaned over him, the little odor of ether!—" She broke off short, with a little shudder.

There was a silence. Then Susan looked at her companion uncomfortably.

"Why don't you talk to me?" she asked, with a tremulous smile.

Bocqueraz sat down at the desk opposite her, and stared at her across folded arms.

"Nothing to say," he said quietly. But instantly some sudden violent passion shook him; he pressed both palms

to his temples, and Susan could see that the fingers with which he covered his eyes were shaking. "My God! What more can I do?" he said aloud, in a low tone. "What more can I do? You come to me with this, little girl," he said, gripping her hands in his. "You turn to me, as your only friend just now. And I'm going to be worthy of your trust in me!"

He got up and walked to the window, and Susan followed him there.

"Sweetheart," he said to her, and in his voice was the great relief that follows an ended struggle, "I'm only a man, and I love you! You are the dearest and truest and wittiest and best woman I ever knew. You've made all life over for me, Susan, and you've made me believe in what I always thought was only the fancy of writers and poets;— that a man and woman are made for each other by God, and can spend all their lives,—yes, and other lives elsewhere—in glorious companionship, wanting nothing but each other. I've seen a good many women, but I never saw one like you. Will you let me take care of you, dear? Will you trust me? You know what I am, Sue; you know what my work stands for. I couldn't lie to you. You say you know the two extremes of life, dear, but I want to show you a third sort; where money ISN'T paramount, where rich people have souls, and where poor people get all the happiness that there is in life!"

His arm was about her now; her senses on fire; her eyes brimming.

"But do you love me?" whispered Susan.

"Love you!" His face had grown pale. "To have you ask me that," he said under his breath, "is the most heavenly—the most wonderful thing that ever came into my life! I'm not worthy of it. But God knows that I will take care of you, Sue, and, long before I take you to New York, to my own people, these days will be only a troubled dream. You will be my wife then—"

The wonderful word brought the happy color to her face.

"I believe you," she said seriously, giving him both her hands, and looking bravely into his eyes. "You are the best man I ever met—I can't let you go. I believe it would be wrong to let you go." She hesitated, groped for words. "You're the only thing in the world that seems real to me," Susan said. "I knew that the old days at Auntie's were all wrong and twisted somehow, and here—" She indicated the house with a shudder. "I feel stifled here!" she said. "But—but if there is really some place where people are good and simple, whether they're rich or poor, and honest, and hard−working— I want to go there! We'll have books and music, and a garden," she went on hurriedly, and he felt that the hands in his were hot, "and we'll live so far away from all this sort of thing, that we'll forget it and they'll forget us! I would rather," Susan's eyes grew wistful, "I would rather have a garden where my babies could make mud−pies and play, then be married to Kenneth Saunders in the Cathedral with ten brides−maids!"

Perhaps something in the last sentence stirred him to sudden compunction.

"You know that it means going away with me, little girl?" he asked.

"No, it doesn't mean that," she answered honestly. "I could go back to Auntie, I suppose. I could wait!" "I've been thinking of that," he said, seriously. "I want you to listen to me. I have been half planning a trip to Japan, Susan, I want to take you with me. We'll loiter through the Orient—that makes your eyes dance, my little Irishwoman; but wait until you are really there; no books and no pictures do it justice! We'll go to India, and you shall see the Taj Mahal—all lovers ought to see it!"

"And the great desert—" Susan said dreamily.

"And the great desert. We'll come home by Italy and France, and we'll go to London. And while we're there, I will correspond with Lillian, or Lillian's lawyer. There will be no reason then why she should hold me."

"You mean," said Susan, scarlet−cheeked, "that—that just my going with you will be sufficient cause?"

"It is the only ground on which she would," he assented, watching her, "that she could, in fact." Susan stared thoughtfully out of the window. "Then," he took up the narrative, "then we stay a few months in London, are quietly married there,—or, better yet, sail at once for home, and are married in some quiet little Jersey town, say, and then—then I bring home the loveliest bride in the world! No one need know that our trip around the world was not completely chaperoned. No one will ask questions. You shall have your circle—"

"But I thought you were not going to Japan until the serial rights of the novel were sold?" Susan temporized.

For answer he took a letter from his pocket, and with her own eyes she read an editor's acceptance of the new novel for what seemed to her a fabulous sum. No argument could have influenced her as the single typewritten sheet did. Why should she not trust this man, whom all the world admired and trusted? Heart and mind were

reconciled now; Susan's eyes, when they were raised to his, were full of shy adoration and confidence.

"That's my girl!" he said, very low. He put his arm about her and she leaned her head on his shoulder, grateful to him that he said no more just now, and did not even claim the kiss of the accepted lover. Together they stood looking down at the leafless avenue, for a long moment.

"Stephen!" called Ella's voice at the door. Susan's heart lost a beat; gave a sick leap of fear; raced madly.

"Just a moment," Bocqueraz said pleasantly. He stepped noiselessly to the door of the porch, noiselessly opened it, and Susan slipped through.

"Don't let me interrupt you, but is Susan here?" called Ella.

"Susan? No," Susan herself heard him say, before she went quietly about the corner of the house and, letting herself in at the side− door, lost the sound of their voices.

She had entered the rear hall, close to a coat−closet; and now, following a sudden impulse, she put on a rough little hat and the long cloak she often wore for tramps, ran down the drive, crossed behind the stables, and was out in the quiet highway, in the space of two or three minutes.

Quick−rising clouds were shutting out the sun; a thick fog was creeping up from the bay, the sunny bright morning was to be followed by a dark and gloomy afternoon. Everything looked dark and gloomy already; gardens everywhere were bare; a chilly breeze shook the ivy leaves on the convent wall. As Susan passed the big stone gateway, in its close−drawn network of bare vines, the Angelus rang suddenly from the tower;—three strokes, a pause, three more, a final three,—dying away in a silence as deep as that of a void. Susan remembered another convent−bell, heard years ago, a delicious assurance of meal−time. A sharp little hungry pang assailed her even now at the memory, and with the memory came just a fleeting glimpse of a little girl, eager, talkative, yellow of braids, leading the chattering rush of girls into the yard.

The girls were pouring out of the big convent−doors now, some of them noticed the passer−by, eyed her respectfully. She knew that they thought of her as a "young lady." She longed for a wistful moment to be one of them, to be among them, to have no troubles but the possible "penance" after school, no concern but for the contents of her lunch−basket!

She presently came to the grave−yard gate, and went in, and sat down on a tilted little filigree iron bench, near one of the graves. She could look down on the roofs of the village below, and the circle of hills beyond, and the marshes, cut by the silver ribbons of streams that went down to the fog−veiled bay. Cocks crowed, far and near, and sometimes there came to her ears the shouts of invisible children, but she was shut out of the world by the soft curtain of the fog.

Not even now did her breath come evenly. Susan began to think that her heart would never beat normally again. She tried to collect her thoughts, tried to analyze her position, only to find herself studying, with amused attention, the interest of a brown bird in the tip of her shoe, or reflecting with distaste upon the fact that somehow she must go back to the house, and settle the matter of her attitude toward Kenneth, once and for all.

Over all her musing poured the warm flood of excitement and delight that the thought of Stephen Bocqueraz invariably brought. Her most heroic effort at self−blame melted away at the memory of his words. What nonsense to treat this affair as a dispassionate statement of the facts might represent it! Whatever the facts, he was Stephen Bocqueraz, and she Susan Brown, and they understood each other, and were not afraid!

Susan smiled as she thought of the romances built upon the histories of girls who were "led astray," girls who were "ruined," men whose promises of marriage did not hold. It was all such nonsense! It did not seem right to her even to think of these words in connection with this particular case; she felt as if it convicted her somehow of coarseness.

She abandoned consecutive thought, and fell to happy musing. She shut her eyes and dreamed of crowded Oriental streets, of a great desert asleep under the moonlight, of New York shining clean and bright, the spring sunlight, and people walking the streets under the fresh green of tall trees. She had seen it so, in many pictures, and in all her dreams, she liked the big city the best. She dreamed of a little dining−table in a flying railway−train—

But when Stephen Bocqueraz entered the picture, so near, so kind, so big and protecting, Susan thought as if her heart would burst, she opened her eyes, the color flooding her face.

The cemetery was empty, dark, silent. The glowing visions faded, and Susan made one more conscientious effort to think of herself, what she was doing, what she planned to do.

"Suppose I go to Auntie's and simply wait—" she began firmly. The thought went no further. Some little memory, drifting across the current, drew her after it. A moment later, and the dreams had come back in full force.

"Well, anyway, I haven't DONE anything yet and, if I don't want to, I can always simply STOP at the last moment," she said to herself, as she began to walk home.

At the great gateway of the Wallace home, two riders overtook her; Isabel, looking exquisitely pretty in her dashing habit and hat, and her big cavalier were galloping home for a late luncheon.

"Come in and have lunch with us!" Isabel called gaily, reining in. But Susan shook her head, and refused their urging resolutely. Isabel's wedding was but a few weeks off now, and Susan knew that she was very busy. But, beside that, her heart was so full of her own trouble, that the sight of the other girl, radiant, adored, surrounded by her father and mother, her brothers, the evidences of a most unusual popularity, would have stabbed Susan to the heart. What had Isabel done, Susan asked herself bitterly, to have every path in life made so lovely and so straight, while to her, Susan, even the most beautiful thing in the world had come in so clouded and distorted a form.

But he loved her! And she loved him, and that was all that mattered, after all, she said to herself, as she reentered the house and went upstairs.

Ella called her into her bed−room as she passed the door, by humming the Wedding−march.

"Tum−TUM−ti−tum! Tum TUM−ti−tum!" sang Ella, and Susan, uneasy but smiling, went to the doorway and looked in.

"Come in, Sue," said Ella, pausing in the act of inserting a large bare arm into a sleeve almost large enough to accommodate Susan's head. "Where've you been all this time? Mama thought that you were upstairs with Ken, but the nurse says that he's been asleep for an hour."

"Oh, that's good!" said Susan, trying to speak naturally, but turning scarlet. "The more he sleeps the better!"

"I want to tell you something, Susan," said Ella, violently tugging at the hooks of her skirt,—"Damn this thing!—I want to tell you something, Susan. You're a very lucky girl; don't you fool yourself about that! Now it's none of my affair, and I'm not butting in, but, at the same time, Ken's health makes this whole matter a little unusual, and the fact that, as a family—" Ella picked up a hand− mirror, and eyed the fit of her skirt in the glass—"as a family," she resumed, after a moment, "we all think it's the wisest thing that Ken could do, or that you could do, makes this whole thing very different in the eyes of society from what it MIGHT be! I don't say it's a usual marriage; I don't say that we'd all feel as favorably toward it as we do if the circumstances were different," Ella rambled on, snapping the clasp of a long jeweled chain, and pulling it about her neck to a becoming position. "But I do say that it's a very exceptional opportunity for a girl in your position, and one that any sensible girl would jump at. I may be Ken's sister," finished Ella, rapidly assorting rings and slipping a selected few upon her fingers, "but I must say that!"

"I know," said Susan, uncomfortably. Ella, surprised perhaps at the listless tone, gave her a quick glance.

"Mama," said Miss Saunders, with a little color, "Mama is the very mildest of women, but as Mama said, 'I don't see what more any girl could wish!' Ken has got the easiest disposition in the world, if he's let alone, and, as Hudson said, there's nothing really the matter with him, he may live for twenty or thirty years, probably will!"

"Yes, I know," Susan said quickly, wishing that some full and intelligent answer would suggest itself to her.

"And finally," Ella said, quite ready to go downstairs for an informal game of cards, but not quite willing to leave the matter here. "Finally, I must say, Sue, that I think this shilly−shallying is very—very unbecoming. I'm not asking to be in your confidence, *I* don't care one way or the other, but Mama and the Kid have always been awfully kind to you—"

"You've all been angels," Susan was glad to say eagerly.

"Awfully kind of you," Ella pursued, "and all I say is this, make up your mind! It's unexpected, and it's sudden, and all that,—very well! But you're of age, and you've nobody to please but yourself, and, as I say—as I say—while it's nothing to me, I like you and I hate to have you make a fool of yourself!"

"Did Ken say anything to you?" Susan asked, with flaming cheeks.

"No, he just said something to Mama about it's being a shame to ask a girl your age to marry a man as ill as he. But that's all sheer nonsense," Ella said briskly, "and it only goes to show that Ken is a good deal more decent than people might think! What earthly objection any girl could have I can't imagine myself!" Ella finished

pointedly.

"Nobody could!" Susan said loyally.

"Nobody could,—exactly!" Ella said in a satisfied tone. "For a month or two," she admitted reasonably, "you may have to watch his health pretty closely. I don't deny it. But you'll be abroad, you'll have everything in the world that you want. And, as he gets stronger, you can go about more and more. And, whatever Hudson says, I think that the day will come when he can live where he chooses, and do as he likes, just like anyone else! And I think—−" Ella, having convinced herself entirely unaided by Susan, was now in a mellowed mood. "I think you're doing much the wisest thing!" she said. "Go up and see him later, there's a nice child! The doctor's coming at three; wait until he goes."

And Ella was gone.

Susan shut the door of Ella's room, and took a deep chair by a window. It was perhaps the only place in the house in which no one would think of looking for her, and she still felt the need of being alone.

She sat back in the chair, and folded her arms across her chest, and fell to deep thinking. She had let Ella leave her under a misunderstanding, not because she did not know how to disabuse Ella's mind of the idea that she would marry Kenneth, and not because she was afraid of the result of such a statement, but because, in her own mind, she could not be sure that Kenneth Saunders, with his millions, was not her best means of escape from a step even more serious in the eyes of the world than this marriage would have been.

If she would be pitied by a few people for marrying Kenneth, she would be envied by a thousand. The law, the church, the society in which they moved could do nothing but approve. On the other hand, if she went away with Stephen Bocqueraz, all the world would rise up to blame her and to denounce her. A third course would be to return to her aunt's house,—with no money, no work, no prospects of either, and to wait, years perhaps—−

No, no, she couldn't wait. Rebellion rose in her heart at the mere thought. "I love him!" said Susan to herself, thrilled through and through by the mere words. What would life be without him now— without the tall and splendid figure, the big, clever hands, the rich and well−trained voice, without his poetry, his glowing ideals, his intimate knowledge of that great world in whose existence she had always had a vague and wistful belief?

And how he wanted her—−! Susan could feel the nearness of his eagerness, without sharing it.

She herself belonged to that very large class of women for whom passion is only a rather−to−be−avoided word. She was loving, and generous where she loved, but far too ignorant of essential facts regarding herself, and the world about her, to either protect herself from being misunderstood, or to give even her thoughts free range, had she desired to do so. What knowledge she had had come to her,—in Heaven alone knows what distorted shape!—from some hazily remembered passage in a play, from some joke whose meaning had at first entirely escaped her, or from some novel, forbidden by Auntie as "not nice," but read nevertheless, and construed into a hundred vague horrors by the mystified little brain.

Lately all this mass of curiously mixed information had had new light thrown upon it because of the sudden personal element that entered into Susan's view. Love became the great Adventure, marriage was no longer merely a question of gifts and new clothes and a honeymoon trip, and a dear little newly furnished establishment. Nothing sordid, nothing sensual, touched Susan's dreams even now, but she began to think of the constant companionship, the intimacy of married life, the miracle of motherhood, the courage of the woman who can put her hand in any man's hand, and walk with him out from the happy, sheltered pale of girlhood, and into the big world!

She was interrupted in her dreaming by Ella's maid, who put her head into the room with an apologetic:

"Miss Saunders says she's sorry, Miss Brown, but if Mrs. Richardson isn't here, and will you come down to fill the second table?"

Downstairs went Susan, to be hastily pressed into service.

"Heaven bless you, Sue," said Ella, the cards already being dealt. "Kate Richardson simply hasn't come, and if you'll fill in until she does——You say hearts?" Ella interrupted herself to say to her nearest neighbor. "Well, I can't double that. I lead and you're down, Elsa—"

To Susan it seemed a little flat to sit here seriously watching the fall of the cards, deeply concerned in the doubled spade or the dummy for no trump. When she was dummy she sat watching the room dreamily, her thoughts drifting idly to and fro. It was all curiously unreal,—Stephen gone to a club dinner in the city, Kenneth lying upstairs, she, sitting here, playing cards! When she thought of Kenneth a little flutter of excitement seized

her; with Stephen's memory a warm flood of unreasoning happiness engulfed her.

"I beg your pardon!" said Susan, suddenly aroused.

"Your lead, Miss Brown—−"

"Mine? Oh, surely. You made it—−?"

"I bridged it. Mrs. Chauncey made it diamonds."

"Oh, surely!" Susan led at random. "Oh, I didn't mean to lead that!" she exclaimed. She attempted to play the hand, and the following hand, with all her power, and presently found herself the dummy again.

Again serious thought pressed in upon her from all sides. She could not long delay the necessity of letting Kenneth, and Kenneth's family, know that she would not do her share in their most recent arrangement for his comfort. And after that—−? Susan had no doubt that it would be the beginning of the end of her stay here. Not that it would be directly given as the reason for her going; they had their own ways of bringing about what suited them, these people.

But what of Stephen? And again warmth and confidence and joy rose in her heart. How big and true and direct he was, how far from everything that flourished in this warm and perfumed atmosphere! "It must be right to trust him," Susan said to herself, and it seemed to her that even to trust him supremely, and to brave the storm that would follow, would be a step in the right direction. Out of the unnatural atmosphere of this house, gone forever from the cold and repressing poverty of her aunt's, she would be out in the open air, free to breathe and think and love and work—−

"Oh, that nine is the best, Miss Brown! You trumped it—−"

Susan brought her attention to the game again. When the cards were finally laid down, tea followed, and Susan must pour it. After that she ran up to her room to find Emily there, dressing for dinner.

"Oh, Sue, there you are! Listen, Mama wants you to go in and see her a minute before dinner," Emily said.

"I am dead!" Susan began flinging off her things, loosened the masses of her hair, and shook it about her, tore off her tight slippers and flung them away.

"Should think you would be," Emily said sympathetically. She was evidently ready for confidences, but Susan evaded them. At least she owed no explanation to Emily!

"El wants to put you up for the club," called Emily above the rush of hot water into the bathtub.

"Why should she?" Susan called back smiling, but uneasy, but Emily evidently did not hear.

"Don't forget to look in on Mama," she said again, when Susan was dressed. Susan nodded.

"But, Lord, this is a terrible place to try to THINK in!" the girl thought, knocking dutifully on Mrs. Saunders' door.

The old lady, in a luxurious dressing−gown, was lying on the wide couch that Miss Baker had drawn up before the fire.

"There's the girl I thought had forgotten all about me!" said Mrs. Saunders in tremulous, smiling reproach. Susan went over and, although uncomfortably conscious of the daughterliness of the act, knelt down beside her, and squeezed the little shell−like hand. Miss Baker smiled from the other side of the room where she was folding up the day−covers of the bed with windmill sweeps of her arms.

"Well, now, I didn't want to keep you from your dinner," murmured the old lady. "I just wanted to give you a little kiss, and tell you that I've been thinking about you!"

Susan gave the nurse, who was barely out of hearing, a troubled look. If Miss Baker had not been there, she would have had the courage to tell Kenneth's mother the truth. As it was, Mrs. Saunders misinterpreted her glance.

"We won't say ONE WORD!" she whispered with childish pleasure in the secret. The little claw−like hands drew Susan down for a kiss; "Now, you and Doctor Cooper shall just have some little talks about my boy, and in a year he'll be just as well as ever!" whispered the foolish, fond little mother, "and we'll go into town next week and buy all sorts of pretty things, shall we? And we'll forget all about this bad sickness! Now, run along, lovey, it's late!"

Susan, profoundly apprehensive, went slowly out of the room. She turned to the stairway that led to the upper hall to hear Ella's voice from her own room:

"Sue! Going up to see Ken?"

"Yes," Susan said without turning back.

"That's a good child," Ella called gaily. "The kid's gone down to dinner, but don't hurry. I'm dining out."

"I'll be down directly," Susan said, going on. She crossed the dimly lighted, fragrant upper hall, and knocked on Kenneth's door.

It was instantly opened by the gracious and gray−haired Miss Trumbull, the night nurse. Kenneth, in a gorgeous embroidered Mandarin coat, was sitting up and enjoying his supper.

"Come in, woman," he said, smiling composedly. Susan felt warmed and heartened by his manner, and came to take her chair by the bed. Miss Trumbull disappeared, and the two had the big, quiet room to themselves.

"Well," said Kenneth, laying down a wish−bone, and giving her a shrewd smile. "You can't do it, and you're afraid to say so, is that it?"

A millstone seemed lifted from Susan's heart. She smiled, and the tears rushed into her eyes.

"I—honestly, I'd rather not," she said eagerly.

"That other fellow, eh?" he added, glancing at her before he attacked another bone with knife and fork.

Taken unawares, she could not answer. The color rushed into her face. She dropped her eyes.

"Peter Coleman, isn't it?" Kenneth pursued.

"Peter Coleman!" Susan might never have heard the name before, so unaffected was her astonishment.

"Well, isn't it?"

Susan felt in her heart the first stirring of a genuine affection for Kenneth Saunders. He seemed so bright, so well to−night, he was so kind and brotherly.

"It's Stephen," said she, moved by a sudden impulse to confide. He eyed her in blank astonishment, and Susan saw in it a sort of respect. But he only answered by a long whistle.

"Gosh, that is tough," he said, after a few moments of silence. "That is the limit, you poor kid! Of course his wife is particularly well and husky?"

"Particularly!" echoed Susan with a shaky laugh. For the first time in their lives she and Kenneth talked together with entire naturalness and with pleasure. Susan's heart felt lighter than it had for many a day.

"Stephen can't shake his wife, I suppose?" he asked presently.

"Not—not according to the New York law, I believe," Susan said.

"Well—that's a case where virtue is its own reward,—NOT," said Kenneth. "And he—he cares, does he?" he asked, with shy interest.

A rush of burning color, and the light in Susan's eyes, were her only answer.

"Shucks, what a rotten shame!" Kenneth said regretfully. "So he goes away to Japan, does he? Lord, what a shame—−"

Susan really thought he was thinking more of her heart−affair than his own, when she finally left him. Kenneth was heartily interested in the ill−starred romance. He bade her good−night with real affection and sympathy.

Susan stood bewildered for a moment, outside the door, listening to the subdued murmurs that came up from the house, blinking, after the bright glow of Kenneth's lamps, in the darkness of the hall. Presently she crossed to a wide window that faced across the village, toward the hills. It was closed; the heavy glass gave back only a dim reflection of herself, bare−armed, bare−throated, with spangles winking dully on her scarf.

She opened the window and the sweet cold night air came in with a rush, and touched her hot cheeks and aching head with an infinite coolness. Susan knelt down and drank deep of it, raised her eyes to the silent circle of the hills, the starry arch of the sky.

There was no moon, but Tamalpais' great shoulder was dimly outlined against darker blackness, and moving, twinkling dots showed where ferryboats were crossing and recrossing the distant bay. San Francisco's lights glittered like a chain of gems, but San Rafael, except for a half−concealed household light, here and there under the trees, was in darkness. Faint echoes of dance−music came from the hotel, the insistent, throbbing bass of a waltz; Susan shuddered at the thought of it; the crowd and the heat, the laughing and flirting, the eating and drinking. Her eyes searched the blackness between the stars;—oh, to plunge into those infinite deeps, to breathe the untainted air of those limitless great spaces!

Garden odors, wet and sweet, came up to her; she got the exquisite breath of drenched violets, of pinetrees. Susan thought of her mother's little garden, years ago, of the sunken stone ale−bottles that framed the beds, of alyssum and marigolds and wall−flowers and hollyhocks growing all together. She remembered her little self,

teasing for heart−shaped cookies, or gravely attentive to the bargain driven between her mother and the old Chinese vegetable− vendor, with his loaded, swinging baskets. It went dimly through Susan's mind that she had grown too far away from the good warm earth. It was years since she had had the smell of it and the touch of it, or had lain down in its long grasses. At her aunt's house, in the office, and here, it seemed so far away! Susan had a hazy vision of some sensible linen gardening dresses—of herself out in the spring sunshine, digging, watering, getting happier and dirtier and hotter every minute—−

Somebody was playing Walther's song from "Die Meistersinger" far downstairs, and the plaintive passionate notes drew Susan as if they had been the cry of her name. She went down to find Emily and Peter Coleman laughing and flirting over a box of chocolates, at the inglenook seat in the hall, and Stephen Bocqueraz alone in the drawing−room, at the piano. He stopped playing as she came in, and they walked to the fire and took opposite chairs beside the still brightly burning logs.

"Anything new?" he asked.

"Oh, lots!" Susan said wearily. "I've seen Kenneth. But they don't know that I can't—can't do it. And they're rather taking it for granted that I am going to!"

"Going to marry him!" he asked aghast. "Surely you haven't equivocated about it, Susan?" he asked sharply.

"Not with him!" she answered in quick self−defense, with a thrill for the authoritative tone. "I went up there, tired as I am, and told him the absolute truth," said Susan. "But they may not know it!"

"I confess I don't see why," Bocqueraz said, in disapproval. "It would seem to me simple enough to—−"

"Oh, perhaps it does seem simple, to you!" Susan defended herself wearily, "but it isn't so easy! Ella is dreadful when she's angry,— I don't know quite what I will do, if this ends my being here—−"

"Why should it?" he asked quickly.

"Because it's that sort of a position. I'm here as long as I'm wanted," Susan said bitterly, "and when I'm not, there'll be a hundred ways to end it all. Ella will resent this, and Mrs. Saunders will resent it, and even if I was legally entitled to stay, it wouldn't be very pleasant under those circumstances!" She rested her head against the curved back of her chair, and he saw tears slip between her lashes.

"Why, my darling! My dearest little girl, you mustn't cry!" he said, in distress. "Come to the window and let's get a breath of fresh air!"

He crossed to a French window, and held back the heavy curtain to let her step out to the wide side porch. Susan's hand held his tightly in the darkness, and he knew by the sound of her breathing that she was crying.

"I don't know what made me go to pieces this way," she said, after a moment. "But it has been such a day!" And she composedly dried her eyes, and restored his handkerchief to him.

"You poor little girl!" he said tenderly. "—−Is it going to be too cold out here for you, Sue?"

"No−o!" said Susan, smiling, "it's heavenly!"

"Then we'll talk. And we must make the most of this too, for they may not give us another chance! Cheer up, sweetheart, it's only a short time now! As you say, they're going to resent the fact that my girl doesn't jump at the chance to ally herself with all this splendor, and to−morrow may change things all about for every one of us. Now, Sue, I told Ella to−day that I sail for Japan on Sunday—−"

"Oh, my God!" Susan said, taken entirely unawares.

He was near enough to put his arm about her shoulders.

"My little girl," he said, gravely, "did you think that I was going to leave you behind?"

"I couldn't bear it," Susan said simply.

"You could bear it better than I could," he assured her. "But we'll never be separated again in this life, I hope! And every hour of my life I'm going to spend in trying to show you what it means to me to have you—with your beauty and your wit and your charm—trust me to straighten out all this tangle! You know you are the most remarkable woman I ever knew, Susan," he interrupted himself to say, seriously. "Oh, you can shake your head, but wait until other people agree with me! Wait until you catch the faintest glimpse of what our life is going to be! And how you'll love the sea! And that reminds me," he was all business−like again, "the Nippon Maru sails on Sunday. You and I sail with her."

He paused, and in the gradually brightening gloom Susan's eyes met his, but she did not speak nor stir.

"It's the ONLY way, dear!" he said urgently. "You see that? I can't leave you here and things cannot go on this way. It will be hard for a little while, but we'll make it a wonderful year, Susan, and when it's over, I'll take my

wife home with me to New York."

"It seems incredible," said Susan slowly, "that it is ever RIGHT to do a thing like this. You—you think I'm a strong woman, Stephen," she went on, groping for the right words, "but I'm not—in this way. I think I COULD be strong," Susan's eyes were wistful, "I could be strong if my husband were a pioneer, or if I had an invalid husband, or if I had to—to work at anything," she elucidated. "I could even keep a store or plow, or go out and shoot game! But my life hasn't run that way, I can't seem to find what I want to do, I'm always bound by conditions I didn't make—−"

"Exactly, dear! And now you are going to make conditions for yourself," he added eagerly, as she hesitated. Susan sighed.

"Not so soon as Sunday," she said, after a pause.

"Sunday too soon? Very well, little girl. If you want to go Sunday, we'll go. And, if you say not, I'll await your plans," he agreed.

"But, Stephen—what about tickets?"

"The tickets are upstairs," he told her. "I reserved the prettiest suite on board for Miss Susan Bocqueraz, my niece, who is going with me to meet her father in India, and a near−by stateroom for myself. But, of course, I'll forfeit these reservations rather than hurry or distress you now. When I saw the big liner, Susan, the cleanness and brightness and airiness of it all; and when I thought of the deliciousness of getting away from the streets and smells and sounds of the city, out on the great Pacific, I thought I would be mad to prolong this existence here an unnecessary day. But that's for you to say."

"I see," she said dreamily. And through her veins, like a soothing draught, ran the premonition of surrender. Delicious to let herself go, to trust him, to get away from all the familiar sights and faces! She turned in the darkness and laid both hands on his shoulders. "I'll be ready on Sunday," said she gravely. "I suppose, as a younger girl, I would have thought myself mad to think of this. But I have been wrong about so many of those old ideas; I don't feel sure of anything any more. Life in this house isn't right, Stephen, and certainly the old life at Auntie's,—all debts and pretense and shiftlessness,—isn't right either."

"You'll not be sorry, dear," he told her, holding her hands.

An instant later they were warned, by a sudden flood of light on the porch, that Mr. Coleman had come to the open French window.

"Come in, you idiots!" said Peter. "We're hunting for something to eat!"

"You come out, it's a heavenly night!" Stephen said readily.

"Nothing stirring," Mr. Coleman said, sauntering toward them nevertheless. "Don't you believe a word she says, Mr. Bocqueraz, she's an absolute liar!"

"Peter, go back, we're talking books," said Susan, unruffled.

"Well, I read a book once, Susan," he assured her proudly. "Say, let's go over to the hotel and have a dance, what?"

"Madman!" the writer said, in indulgent amusement, as Peter went back. "We'll be in directly, Coleman!" he called. Then he said quickly, and in a low tone to Susan. "Shall you stay here until Sunday, or would you rather be with your own people?"

"It just depends upon what Ella and Emily do," Susan answered. "Kenneth may not tell them. If he does, it might be better to go. This is Tuesday. Of course I don't know, Stephen, they may be very generous about it, they may make it as pleasant as they can. But certainly Emily isn't sorry to find some reason for terminating my stay here. We've—perhaps it's my fault, but we've been rather grating on each other lately. So I think it's pretty safe to say that I will go home on Wednesday or Thursday."

"Good," he said. "I can see you there!"

"Oh, will you?" said Susan, pleased.

"Oh, will I! And another thing, dear, you'll need some things. A big coat for the steamer, and some light gowns—but we can get those. We'll do some shopping in Paris—−"

He had touched a wrong chord, and Susan winced.

"I have some money," she assured him, hastily, "and I'd rather— rather get those things myself!"

"You shall do as you like," he said gravely. Silently and thoughtfully they went back to the house.

CHAPTER VI

Susan lay awake almost all night, quiet and wide−eyed in the darkness, thinking, thinking, thinking. She arraigned herself mentally before a jury of her peers, and pleaded her own case. She did not think of Stephen Bocqueraz to−night,—thought of him indeed did not lead to rational argument!—but she confined her random reflections to the conduct of other women. There was a moral code of course, there were Commandments. But by whose decree might some of these be set aside, and ignored, while others must still be observed in the letter and the spirit? Susan knew that Ella would discharge a maid for stealing perfumery or butter, and within the hour be entertaining a group of her friends with the famous story of her having taken paste jewels abroad, to be replaced in London by real stones and brought triumphantly home under the very eyes of the custom−house inspectors. She had heard Mrs. Porter Pitts, whose second marriage followed her divorce by only a few hours, addressing her respectful classes in the Correction Home for Wayward Girls. She had heard Mrs. Leonard Orvis congratulated upon her lineage and family connections on the very same occasion when Mrs. Orvis had entertained a group of intimates with a history of her successful plan for keeping the Orvis nursery empty.

It was to the Ellas, the Pitts, the Orvises, that Susan addressed her arguments. They had broken laws. She was only temporarily following their example. She heard the clock strike four, before she went to sleep, and was awakened by Emily at nine o'clock the next morning.

It was a rainy, gusty morning, with showers slapping against the windows. The air in the house was too warm, radiators were purring everywhere, logs crackled in the fireplaces of the dining−room and hall. Susan, looking into the smaller library, saw Ella in a wadded silk robe, comfortably ensconced beside the fire, with the newspapers.

"Good−morning, Sue," said Ella politely. Susan's heart sank. "Come in," said Ella. "Had your breakfast?"

"Not yet," said Susan, coming in.

"Well, I just want to speak to you a moment," said Ella, and Susan knew, from the tone, that she was in for an unpleasant half−hour. Emily, following Susan, entered the library, too, and seated herself on the window−seat. Susan did not sit down.

"I've got something on my mind, Susan," Ella said, frowning as she tossed aside her papers, "and,—you know me. I'm like all the Roberts, when I want to say a thing, I say it!" Ella eyed her groomed fingers a moment, bit at one before she went on. "Now, there's only one important person in this house, Sue, as I always tell everyone, and that's Mamma! 'Em and I don't matter,' I say, 'but Mamma's old, and she hasn't very much longer to live, and she DOES count!' I—you may not always see it," Ella went on with dignity, "but I ALWAYS arrange my engagements so that Mamma shall be the first consideration, she likes to have me go places, and I like to go, but many and many a night when you and Em think that I am out somewhere I'm in there with Mamma—−"

Susan knew that they were in the realm of pure fiction now, but she could only listen. She glanced at Emily, but Emily only looked impressed and edified.

"So—" Ella, unchallenged, went on. "So when I see anyone inclined to be rude to Mamma, Sue—−"

"As you certainly were—−" Emily began.

"Keep out of this, Baby," Ella said. Susan asked in astonishment;

"But, good gracious, Ella! When was I ever rude to your mother?"

"Just—one—moment, Sue," Ella said, politely declining to be hurried. "Well! So when I realize that you deceived Mamma, Sue, it— I've always liked you, and I've always said that there was a great deal of allowance to be made for you," Ella interrupted herself to say kindly, "but, you know, that is the one thing I can't forgive!— In just a moment—−" she added, as Susan was about to speak again. "Well, about a week ago, as you know, Ken's doctor said that he must positively travel. Mamma isn't well enough to go, the kid can't go, and I can't get away just now, even," Ella was deriving some enjoyment from her new role of protectress, "even if I would leave Mamma. What Ken suggested, you know, seemed a suitable enough arrangement at the time, although I think, and I know Mamma thinks, that it was just one of the poor boy's ideas which might have worked very well, and might not! One never can tell about such things. Be that as it may, however—−"

"Oh, Ella, what on earth are you GETTING at!" asked Susan, in sudden impatience.

"Really, Sue!" Emily said, shocked at this irreverence, but Ella, flushing a little, proceeded with a little more directness.

"I'm getting at THIS—please shut up, Baby! You gave Mamma to understand that it was all right between you and Ken, and Mamma told me so before I went to the Grahams' dinner, and I gave Eva Graham a pretty strong hint! Now Ken tells Mamma that that isn't so at all,— I must say Ken, for a sick boy, acted very well! And really, Sue, to have you willing to add anything to Mamma's natural distress and worry now it,—well, I don't like it, and I say so frankly!"

Susan, angered past the power of reasonable speech, remained silent for half−a−minute, holding the back of a chair with both hands, and looking gravely into Ella's face.

"Is that all?" she asked mildly.

"Except that I'm surprised at you," Ella said a little nettled.

"I'm not going to answer you," Susan said, "because you know very well that I have always loved your Mother, and that I deceived nobody! And you can't make me think SHE has anything to do with this! It isn't my fault that I don't want to marry your brother, and Emily knows how utterly unfair this is!"

"Really, I don't know anything about it!" Emily said airily.

"Oh, very well," Susan said, at white heat. She turned and went quietly from the room.

She went upstairs, and sat down crosswise on a small chair, and stared gloomily out of the window. She hated this house, she said to herself, and everyone in it! A maid, sympathetically fluttering about, asked Miss Brown if she would like her breakfast brought up.

"Oh, I would!" said Susan gratefully. Lizzie presently brought in a tray, and arranged an appetizing little meal.

"They're something awful, that's what I say," said Lizzie presently in a cautious undertone. "But I've been here twelve years, and I say there's worse places! Miss Ella may be a little raspy now, Miss Brown, but don't you take it to heart!" Susan, the better for hot coffee and human sympathy, laughed out in cheerful revulsion of feeling.

"Things are all mixed up, Lizzie, but it's not my fault," she said gaily.

"Well, it don't matter," said the literal Lizzie, referring to the tray. "I pile 'em up anyhow to carry 'em downstairs!"

Breakfast over, Susan still loitered in her own apartments. She wanted to see Stephen, but not enough to risk encountering someone else in the halls. At about eleven o'clock, Ella knocked at the door, and came in.

"I'm in a horrible rush," said Ella, sitting down on the bed and interesting herself immediately in a silk workbag of Emily's that hung there. "I only want to say this, Sue," she began. "It has nothing to do with what we were talking of this morning, but—I've just been discussing it with Mamma!—but we all feel, and I'm sure you do, too, that this is an upset sort of time. Emily, now," said Ella, reaching her sister's name with obvious relief, "Em's not at all well, and she feels that she needs a nurse,—I'm going to try to get that nurse Betty Brock had,—Em may have to go back to the hospital, in fact, and Mamma is so nervous about Ken, and I—−" Ella cleared her throat, "I feel this way about it," she said. "When you came here it was just an experiment, wasn't it?"

"Certainly," Susan agreed, very red in the face.

"Certainly, and a most successful one, too," Ella conceded relievedly. "But, of course, if Mamma takes Baby abroad in the spring,—you see how it is? And of course, even in case of a change now, we'd want you to take your time. Or,—I'll tell you, suppose you go home for a visit with your aunt, now. Monday is Christmas, and then, after New Year's, we can write about it, if you haven't found anything else you want to do, and I'll let you know—−"

"I understand perfectly," Susan said quietly, but with a betraying color. "Certainly, I think that would be wisest."

"Well, I think so," said Ella with a long breath. "Now, don't be in a hurry, even if Miss Polk comes, because you could sleep upstairs— −"

"Oh, I'd rather go at once−to−day," Susan said.

"Indeed not, in this rain," Ella said with her pleasant, half− humorous air of concern. "Mamma and Baby would think I'd scared you away. Tomorrow, Sue, if you're in such a hurry. But this afternoon some people are coming in to meet Stephen—he's really going on Sunday, he says,—stay and pour!"

It would have been a satisfaction to Susan's pride to refuse. She knew that Ella really needed her this afternoon, and would have liked to punish that lady to that extent. But hurry was undignified and cowardly, and

Stephen's name was a charm, and so it happened that Susan found herself in the drawing−room at five o'clock, in the center of a chattering group, and stirred, as she was always stirred, by Stephen's effect on the people he met. He found time to say to her only a few words, "You are more adorable than ever!" but they kept Susan's heart singing all evening, and she and Emily spent the hours after dinner in great harmony; greater indeed than they had enjoyed for months.

The next day she said her good−byes, agitated beyond the capacity to feel any regret, for Stephen Bocqueraz had casually announced his intention to take the same train that she did for the city. Ella gave her her check; not for the sixty dollars that would have been Susan's had she remained to finish out her month, but for ten dollars less.

Emily chattered of Miss Polk, "she seemed to think I was so funny and so odd, when we met her at Betty's," said Emily, "isn't she crazy? Do YOU think I'm funny and odd, Sue?"

Stephen put her in a carriage at the ferry and they went shopping together. He told her that he wanted to get some things "for a small friend," and Susan, radiant in the joy of being with him, in the delicious bright winter sunshine, could not stay his hand when he bought the "small friend" a delightful big rough coat, which Susan obligingly tried on, and a green and blue plaid, for steamer use, a trunk, and a parasol "because it looked so pretty and silly," and in Shreve's, as they loitered about, a silver scissors and a gold thimble, a silver stamp−box and a traveler's inkwell, a little silver watch no larger than a twenty−five−cent piece, a little crystal clock, and, finally, a ring, with three emeralds set straight across it, the loveliest great bright stones that Susan had ever seen, "green for an Irish gir−rl," said Stephen.

Then they went to tea, and Susan laughed at him because he remembered that Orange Pekoe was her greatest weakness, and he laughed at Susan because she was so often distracted from what she was saying by the flash of her new ring.

"What makes my girl suddenly look so sober?"

Susan smiled, colored.

"I was thinking of what people will say."

"I think you over−estimate the interest that the world is going to take in our plans, Susan," he said, gravely, after a thoughtful moment. "We take our place in New York, in a year or two, as married people. 'Mrs. Bocqueraz'"—the title thrilled Susan unexpectedly,— "'Mrs. Bocqueraz is his second wife,' people will say. 'They met while they were both traveling about the world, I believe.' And that's the end of it!"

"But the newspapers may get it," Susan said, fearfully.

"I don't see how," he reassured her. "Ella naturally can't give it to them, for she will think you are at your aunt's. Your aunt—−"

"Oh, I shall write the truth to Auntie," Susan said, soberly. "Write her from Honolulu, probably. And wild horses wouldn't get it out of HER. But if the slightest thing should go wrong—−"

"Nothing will, dear. We'll drift about the world awhile, and the first thing you know you'll find yourself married hard and tight, and being invited to dinners and lunches and things in New York!"

Susan's dimples came into view.

"I forget what a very big person you are," she smiled. "I begin to think you can do anything you want to do!"

She had a reminder of his greatness even before they left the tea− room, for while they were walking up the wide passage toward the arcade, a young woman, an older woman, and a middle−aged man, suddenly addressed the writer.

"Oh, do forgive me!" said the young woman, "but AREN'T you Stephen Graham Bocqueraz? We've been watching you—I just couldn't HELP—"

"My daughter is a great admirer—−" the man began, but the elder woman interrupted him.

"We're ALL great admirers of your books, Mr. Bocqueraz," said she, "but it was Helen, my daughter here!—who was sure she recognized you. We went to your lecture at our club, in Los Angeles—−"

Stephen shook hands, smiled and was very gracious, and Susan, shyly smiling, too, felt her heart swell with pride. When they went on together the little episode had subtly changed her attitude toward him; Susan was back for the moment in her old mood, wondering gratefully what the great man saw in HER to attract him!

A familiar chord was touched when an hour later, upon getting out of a carriage at her aunt's door, she found the right of way disputed by a garbage cart, and Mary Lou, clad in a wrapper, holding the driver in spirited

conversation through a crack in the door. Susan promptly settled a small bill, kissed Mary Lou, and went upstairs in harmonious and happy conversation.

"I was just taking a bath!" said Mary Lou, indignantly. Mary Lou never took baths easily, or as a matter of course. She always made an event of them, choosing an inconvenient hour, assembling soap, clothing and towels with maddening deliberation, running about in slippered feet for a full hour before she locked herself into, and everybody else out of, the bathroom. An hour later she would emerge from the hot and steam−clouded apartment, to spend another hour in her room in leisurely dressing. She was at this latter stage now, and regaled Susan with all the family news, as she ran her hand into stocking after stocking in search of a whole heel, and forced her silver cuff−links into the starched cuffs of her shirtwaist.

Ferd Eastman's wife had succumbed, some weeks before, to a second paralytic stroke, and Mary Lou wept unaffectedly at the thought of poor Ferd's grief. She said she couldn't help hoping that some sweet and lovely girl,—"Ferd knows so many!" said Lou, sighing,—would fill the empty place. Susan, with an unfavorable recollection of Ferd's fussy, important manner and red face, said nothing. Georgie, Mary Lou reported, was a very sick woman, in Ma's and Mary Lou's opinion. Ma had asked the young O'Connors to her home for Christmas dinner; "perhaps they expected us to ask the old lady," said Mary Lou, resentfully, "anyway, they aren't coming!" Georgie's baby, it appeared, was an angel, but Joe disciplined the poor little thing until it would make anyone's heart sick.

Of Alfie the report was equally discouraging: "Alfie's wife is perfectly awful," his sister said, "and their friends, Sue,—barbers and butchers! However, Ma's asked 'em here for Christmas dinner, and then you'll see them!" Virginia was still at the institution, but of late some hope of eventual restoration of her sight had been given her. "It would break your heart to see her in that place, it seems like a poorhouse!" said Mary Lou, with trembling lips, "but Jinny's an angel. She gets the children about her, and tells them stories; they say she's wonderful with them!"

There was really good news of the Lord sisters, Susan was rejoiced to hear. They had finally paid for their lot in Piedmont Hills, and a new trolley−car line, passing within one block of it, had trebled its value. This was Lydia's chance to sell, in Mary Lou's opinion, but Lydia intended instead to mortgage the now valuable property, and build a little two−family house upon it with the money thus raised. She had passed the school−examinations, and had applied for a Berkeley school. "But better than all," Mary Lou announced, "that great German muscle doctor has been twice to see Mary,—isn't that amazing? And not a cent charged—−"

"Oh, God bless him!" said Susan, her eyes flashing through sudden mist. "And will she be cured?"

"Not ever to really be like other people, Sue. But he told her, last time, that by the time that Piedmont garden was ready for her, she'd be ready to go out and sit in it every day! Lydia fainted away when he said it,—yes, indeed she did!"

"Well, that's the best news I've heard for many a day!" Susan rejoiced. She could not have explained why, but some queer little reasoning quality in her brain made her own happiness seem the surer when she heard of the happiness of other people.

The old odors in the halls, the old curtains and chairs and dishes, the old, old conversation; Mrs. Parker reading a clean, neatly lined, temperate little letter from Loretta, signed "Sister Mary Gregory"; Major Watts anxious to explain to Susan just the method of building an army bridge that he had so successfully introduced during the Civil War,—"S'ee, 'Who is this boy, Cutter?' 'Why, sir, I don't know,' says Captain Cutter, 'but he says his name is Watts!' 'Watts?' says the General, 'Well,' s'ee, 'If I had a few more of your kind, Watts, we'd get the Yanks on the run, and we'd keep 'em on the run.'"

Lydia Lord came down to get Mary's dinner, and again Susan helped the watery vegetable into a pyramid of saucers, and passed the green glass dish of pickles, and the pink china sugar−bowl. But she was happy to−night, and it seemed good to be home, where she could be her natural self, and put her elbows on the table, and be listened to and laughed at, instead of playing a role.

"Gosh, we need you in this family, Susie!" said William Oliver, won from fatigue and depression to a sudden appreciation of her gaiety.

"Do you, Willie darling?"

"Don't you call me Willie!" he looked up to say scowlingly.

"Well, don't you call me Susie, then!" retorted Susan. Mrs. Lancaster patted her hand, and said affectionately,

"Don't it seem good to have the children scolding away at each other again!"

Susan and William had one of their long talks, after dinner, while they cracked and ate pine−nuts, and while Mary Lou, at the other end of the dining−room table, painstakingly wrote a letter to a friend of her girlhood. Billy was frankly afraid that his men were reaching the point when a strike would be the natural step, and as president of their new−formed union, and spokesman for them whenever the powers had to be approached, he was anxious to delay extreme measures as long as he could. Susan was inclined to regard the troubles of the workingman as very largely of his own making. "You'll simply lose your job," said Susan, "and that'll be the end of it. If you made friends with the Carpenters, on the other hand, you'd be fixed for life. And the Carpenters are perfectly lovely people. Mrs. Carpenter is on the hospital board, and a great friend of Ella's. And she says that it's ridiculous to think of paying those men better wages when their homes are so dirty and shiftless, and they spend their money as they do! You know very well there will always be rich people and poor people, and that if all the money in the world was divided on Monday morning—−"

"Don't get that old chestnut off!" William entreated.

"Well, I don't care!" Susan said, a little more warmly for the interruption. "Why don't they keep their houses clean, and bring their kids up decently, instead of giving them dancing lessons and white stockings!"

"Because they've had no decent training themselves, Sue—−"

"Oh, decent training! What about the schools?"

"Schools don't teach anything! But if they had fair play, and decent hours, and time to go home and play with the kids, and do a little gardening, they'd learn fast enough!"

"The poor you have always with you," said Mary Lou, reverently. Susan laughed outright, and went around the table to kiss her cousin.

"You're an old darling, Mary Lou!" said she. Mary Lou accepted the tribute as just.

"No, but I don't think we ought to forget the IMMENSE good that rich people do, Billy," she said mildly. "Mrs. Holly's daughters gave a Christmas−tree party for eighty children yesterday, and the Saturday Morning Club will have a tree for two hundred on the twenty−eighth!"

"Holly made his money by running about a hundred little druggists out of the business," said Billy, darkly.

"Bought and paid for their businesses, you mean," Susan amended sharply.

"Yes, paid about two years' profits," Billy agreed, "and would have run them out of business if they hadn't sold. If you call that honest!"

"It's legally honest," Susan said lazily, shuffling a pack for solitaire. "It's no worse than a thousand other things that people do!"

"No, I agree with you there!" Billy said heartily, and he smiled as if he had had the best of the argument.

Susan followed her game for awhile in silence. Her thoughts were glad to escape to more absorbing topics, she reviewed the happy afternoon, and thrilled to a hundred little memories. The quiet, stupid evening carried her back, in spirit, to the Susan of a few years ago, the shabby little ill−dressed clerk of Hunter, Baxter Hunter, who had been such a limited and suppressed little person. The Susan of to−day was an erect, well−corseted, well−manicured woman of the world; a person of noticeable nicety of speech, accustomed to move in the very highest society. No, she could never come back to this, to the old shiftless, penniless ways. Any alternative rather!

"And, besides, I haven't really done anything yet," Susan said to herself, uneasily, when she was brushing her hair that night, and Mary Lou was congratulating her upon her improved appearance and manner.

On Saturday she introduced her delighted aunt and cousin to Mr. Bocqueraz, who came to take her for a little stroll.

"I've always thought you were quite an unusual girl, Sue," said her aunt later in the afternoon, "and I do think it's a real compliment for a man like that to talk to a girl like you! I shouldn't know what to say to him, myself, and I was real proud of the way you spoke up; so easy and yet so ladylike!"

Susan gave her aunt only an ecstatic kiss for answer. Bread was needed for dinner, and she flashed out to the bakery for it, and came flying back, the bread, wrapped in paper and tied with pink string, under her arm. She proposed a stroll along Filmore Street to Mary Lou, in the evening, and they wrapped up for their walk under the clear stars. There was a holiday tang to the very air; even the sound of a premature horn, now and then; the shops were full of shoppers.

Mary Lou had some cards to buy, at five cents apiece, or two for five cents, and they joined the gently pushing

groups in the little stationery stores. Insignificant little shoppers were busily making selections from the open trays of cards; school−teachers, stenographers, bookkeepers and clerks kept up a constant little murmur among themselves.

"How much are these? Thank you!" "She says these are five, Lizzie; do you like them better than the little holly books?" "I'll take these two, please, and will you give me two envelopes?—Wait just a moment, I didn't see these !" "This one was in the ten−cent box, but it's marked five, and that lady says that there were some just like it for five. If it's five, I want it!" "Aren't these cunnin', Lou?" "Yes, I noticed those, did you see these, darling?" "I want this one—I want these, please,—will you give me this one?"

"Are you going to be open at all to−morrow?" Mary Lou asked, unwilling to be hurried into a rash choice. "Isn't this little one with a baby's face sweet?" said a tall, gaunt woman, gently, to Susan.

"Darling!" said Susan.

"But I want it for an unmarried lady, who isn't very fond of children," said the woman delicately. "So perhaps I had better take these two funny little pussies in a hat!"

They went out into the cold street again, and into a toy−shop where a lamb was to be selected for Georgie's baby. And here was a roughly dressed young man holding up a three−year−old boy to see the elephants and horses. Little Three, a noisy little fellow, with cold red little hands, and a worn, soiled plush coat, selected a particularly charming shaggy horse, and shouted with joy as his father gave it to him.

"Do you like that, son? Well, I guess you'll have to have it; there's nothing too good for you!" said the father, and he signaled a saleswoman. The girl looked blankly at the change in her hand.

"That's two dollars, sir," she said, pleasantly, displaying the tag.

"What?" the man stammered, turning red. "Why—why, sure—that's right! But I thought—−" he appealed to Susan. "Don't that look like twenty cents?" he asked.

Mary Lou tugged discreetly at Susan's arm, but Susan would not desert the baby in the plush coat.

"It IS!" she agreed warmly.

"Oh, no, ma'am! These are the best German toys," said the salesman firmly.

"Well, then, I guess—−" the man tried gently to disengage the horse from the jealous grip of its owner, "I guess we'd better leave this horse here for some other little feller, Georgie," said he, "and we'll go see Santa Claus."

"I thess want my horse that Dad GAVE me!" said Georgie, happily.

"Shall I ask Santa Claus to send it?" asked the saleswoman, tactfully.

"No−o−o!" said Georgie, uneasily. "Doncher letter have it, Dad!"

"Give the lady the horse, old man," said the father, "and we'll go find something pretty for Mamma and the baby!" The little fellow's lips quivered, but even at three some of the lessons of poverty had been learned. He surrendered the horse obediently, but Susan saw the little rough head go down tight against the man's collar, and saw the clutch of the grimy little hand.

Two minutes later she ran after them, and found them seated upon the lowest step of an out−of−the−way stairway; the haggard, worried young father vainly attempting to console the sobbing mite upon his knee.

"Here, darling," said Susan. And what no words could do, the touch of the rough−coated pony did for her; up came the little face, radiant through tears; Georgie clasped his horse again.

"No, ma'am, you mustn't—I thank you very kindly, ma'am, but——" was all that Susan heard before she ran away.

She would do things like that every day of her life, she thought, lying awake in the darkness that night. Wasn't it better to do that sort of thing with money than to be a Mary Lou, say, without? She was going to take a reckless and unwise step now. Admitted. But it would be the only one. And after busy and blameless years everyone must come to see that it had been for the best.

Every detail was arranged now. She and Stephen had visited the big liner that afternoon; Susan had had her first intoxicating glimpse of the joy of sea−travel, had peeped into the lovely little cabin that was to be her own, had been respectfully treated by the steward as the coming occupant of that cabin. She had seen her new plaid folded on a couch, her new trunk in place, a great jar of lovely freesia lilies already perfuming the fresh orderliness of the place.

Nothing to do now but to go down to the boat in the morning. Stephen had both tickets in his pocket−book. A

careful scrutiny of the first−cabin list had assured Susan that no acquaintances of hers were sailing. If, in the leave−taking crowd, she met someone that she knew, what more natural than that Miss Brown had been delegated by the Saunders family to say good−bye to their charming cousin? Friends had promised to see Stephen off, but, if Ella appeared at all, it would be but for a moment, and Susan could easily avoid her. She was not afraid of any mishap.

But three days of the pure, simple old atmosphere had somewhat affected Susan, in spite of herself. She could much more easily have gone away with Stephen Bocqueraz without this interval. Life in the Saunders home stimulated whatever she had of recklessness and independence, frivolity and irreverence of law. She would be admired for this step by the people she had left; she could not think without a heartache of her aunt's shame and distress.

However there seemed nothing to do now but to go to sleep. Susan's last thought was that she had not taken the step YET,—in so much, at least, she was different from the girls who moved upon blind and passionate impulses. She could withdraw even now.

The morning broke like many another morning; sunshine and fog battling out−of−doors, laziness and lack of system making it generally characteristic of a Sunday morning within. Susan went to Church at seven o'clock, because Mary Lou seemed to expect it of her, and because it seemed a good thing to do, and was loitering over her breakfast at half−past−eight, when Mrs. Lancaster came downstairs.

"Any plan for to−day, Sue?" asked her aunt. Susan jumped nervously.

"Goodness, Auntie! I didn't see you there! Yes, you know I have to go and see Mr. Bocqueraz off at eleven."

"Oh, so you do! But you won't go back with the others, dear? Tell them we want you for Christmas!"

"With the others?"

"Miss Ella and Emily," her aunt supplied, mildly surprised.

"Oh! Oh, yes! Yes, I suppose so. I don't know," Susan said in great confusion.

"You'll probably see Lydia Lord there," pursued Mrs. Lancaster, presently. "She's seeing Mrs. Lawrence's cousins off."

"On the Nippon Maru?" Susan asked nervously.

"How you do remember names, Sue! Yes, Lydia's going down."

"I'd go with you, Sue, if it wasn't for those turkeys to stuff," said Mary Lou. "I do love a big ship!"

"Oh, I wish you could!" Susan said.

She went upstairs with a fast−beating heart. Her heart was throbbing so violently, indeed, that, like any near loud noise, it made thought very difficult. Mary Lou came in upon her packing her suitcase.

"I suppose they may want you to go right back," said Mary Lou regretfully, in reference to the Saunders, "but why don't you leave that here in case they don't?"

"Oh, I'd rather take it," said Susan.

She kissed her cousin good−bye, gave her aunt a particularly fervent hug, and went out into the doubtful morning. The fog−horn was booming on the bay, and when Susan joined the little stream of persons filing toward the dock of the great Nippon Maru, fog was already shutting out all the world, and the eaves of the pier dripped with mist. Between the slow−moving motor−cars and trucks on the dock, well−dressed men and women were picking their way through the mud.

Susan went unchallenged up the gang−plank, with girls in big coats, carrying candy−boxes and violets, men with cameras, elderly persons who watched their steps nervously. The big ship was filled with chattering groups, young people raced through cabins and passageways, eager to investigate.

Stevedores were slinging trunks and boxes on board; everywhere were stir and shouting and movement. Children shrieked and romped in the fitful sunlight; there were tears and farewells, on all sides; postal−writers were already busy about the tables in the writing− room, stewards were captured on their swift comings and goings, and interrogated and importuned. Fog lay heavy and silent over San Francisco; and the horn still boomed down the bay.

Susan, standing at the rail looking gravely on at the vivid and exciting picture, felt an uneasy and chilling little thought clutch at her heart. She had always said that she could withdraw, at this particular minute she could withdraw. But in a few moments more the dock would be moving steadily away from her; the clock in the ferry−tower, with gulls wheeling about it, the ferry−boats churning long wakes in the smooth surface of the bay, the stir

of little craft about the piers, the screaming of a hundred whistles, in a hundred keys, would all be gone. Alcatraz would be passed, Black Point and the Golden Gate; they would be out beyond the rolling head−waters of the harbor. No withdrawing then.

Her attention was attracted by the sudden appearance of guards at the gang−plank, no more visitors would be allowed on board. Susan smiled at the helpless disgust of some late−comers, who must send their candy and books up by the steward. Twenty−five minutes of twelve, said the ferry clock.

"Are you going as far as Japan, my dear?" asked a gentle little lady at Susan's shoulder.

"Yes, we're going even further!" said friendly Susan.

"I'm going all alone," said the little lady, "and old as I am, I so dread it! I tell Captain Wolseley—−"

"I'm making my first trip, too," said Susan, "so we'll stand by each other!"

A touch on her arm made her turn suddenly about; her heart thundering. But it was only Lydia Lord.

"Isn't this thrilling, Sue?" asked Lydia, excited and nervous. "What WOULDN'T you give to be going? Did you go down and see the cabins; aren't they dear? Have you found the Saunders party?"

"Are the Saunders here?" asked Susan.

"Miss Ella was, I know. But she's probably gone now. I didn't see the younger sister. I must get back to the Jeromes," said Lydia; "they began to take pictures, and I'd thought I run away for a little peep at everything, all to myself! They say that we shore people will have to leave the ship at quarter of twelve."

She fluttered away, and a second later Susan found her hand covered by the big glove of Stephen Bocqueraz.

"Here you are, Susan," he said, with business−like satisfaction. "I was kept by Ella and some others, but they've gone now. Everything seems to be quite all right."

Susan turned a rather white and strained face toward him, but even now his bracing bigness and coolness were acting upon her as a tonic.

"We're at the Captain's table," he told her, "which you'll appreciate if you're not ill. If you are ill, you've got a splendid stewardess,—Mrs. O'Connor. She happens to be an old acquaintance of mine; she used to be on a Cunarder, and she's very much interested in my niece, and will look out for you very well." He looked down upon the crowded piers. "Wonderful sight, isn't it?" he asked. Susan leaned beside him at the rail, her color was coming back, but she saw nothing and heard nothing of what went on about her.

"What's he doing that for?" she asked suddenly. For a blue−clad coolie was working his way through the crowded docks, banging violently on a gong. The sound disturbed Susan's overstrained nerves.

"I don't know," said Stephen. "Lunch perhaps. Would you like to have a look downstairs before we go to lunch?"

"That's a warning for visitors to go ashore," volunteered a bright− faced girl near them, who was leaning on the rail, staring down at the pier. "But they'll give a second warning," she added, "for we're going to be a few minutes late getting away. Aren't you glad you don't have to go?" she asked Susan gaily.

"Rather!" said Susan huskily.

Visitors were beginning now to go reluctantly down the gang−plank, and mass themselves on the deck, staring up at the big liner, their faces showing the strained bright smile that becomes so fixed during the long slow process of casting off. Handkerchiefs began to wave, and to wipe wet eyes; empty last promises were exchanged between decks and pier. A woman near Susan began to cry,—a homely little woman, but the big handsome man who kissed her was crying, too.

Suddenly the city whistles, that blow even on Sunday in San Francisco, shrilled twelve. Susan thought of the old lunch−room at Hunter, Baxter Hunter's, of Thorny and the stewed tomatoes, and felt the bitter tears rise in her throat.

Various passengers now began to turn their interest to the life of the ship. There was talk of luncheon, of steamer chairs, of asking the stewardess for jars to hold flowers. Susan had drawn back from the rail, no one on the ship knew her, but somebody on the pier might.

"Now let us go find Mrs. O'Connor," Stephen said, in a matter−of− fact tone. "Then you can take off your hat and freshen up a bit, and we can look over the ship." He led her cleverly through the now wildly churning crowds, into the comparative quiet of the saloon.

Here they found Mrs. O'Connor, surrounded by an anxious group of travelers. Stephen put Susan into her charge, and the two women studied each other with interest.

Susan saw a big−boned, gray−haired, capable−looking Irishwoman, in a dress of dark−blue duck, with a white collar and white cuffs, heard a warming, big voice, and caught a ready and infectious smile. In all the surrounding confusion Mrs. O'Connor was calm and alert; so normal in manner and speech indeed that merely watching her had the effect of suddenly cooling Susan's blood, of reducing her whirling thoughts to something like their old, sane basis. Travel was nothing to Mrs. O'Connor; farewells were the chief of her diet; and her manner with Stephen Bocqueraz was crisp and quiet. She fixed upon him shrewd, wise eyes that had seen some curious things in their day, but she gave Susan a motherly smile.

"This is my niece, Mrs. O'Connor," said Stephen, introducing Susan. "She's never made the trip before, and I want you to help me turn her over to her Daddy in Manila, in first−class shape."

"I will that," agreed the stewardess, heartily.

"Well, then I'll have a look at my own diggings, and Mrs. O'Connor will take you off to yours. I'll be waiting for you in the library, Sue," Stephen said, walking off, and Susan followed Mrs. O'Connor to her own cabin.

"The very best on the ship, as you might know Mr. Bocqueraz would get for anyone belonging to him," said the stewardess, shaking pillows and straightening curtains with great satisfaction, when they reached the luxurious little suite. "He's your father's brother, he tells me. Was that it?"

She was only making talk, with the kindliest motives, for a nervous passenger, but the blood rushed into Susan's face. Somehow it cut her to the heart to have to remember her father just at this instant; to make him, however distantly, a party to this troubled affair.

"And you've lost your dear mother," Mrs. O'Connor said, misunderstanding the girl's evident distress. "Well, my dear, the trip will do you a world of good, and you're blessed in this—you've a good father left, and an uncle that would lay down and die for you. I leave my own two girls, every time I go," she pursued, comfortably. "Angela's married,—she has a baby, poor child, and she's not very strong,—and Regina is still in boarding−school, in San Rafael. It's hard to leave them—−"

Simple, kindly talk, such as Susan had heard from her babyhood. And the homely honest face was not strange, nor the blue, faded eyes, with their heartening assurance of good−fellowship.

But suddenly it seemed to Susan that, with a hideous roaring and rocking, the world was crashing to pieces about her. Her soul sickened and shrank within her. She knew nothing of this good woman, who was straightening blankets and talking—talking—talking, three feet from her, but she felt she could not bear—she could not BEAR this kindly trust and sympathy—she could not bear the fear that some day she would be known to this woman for what she was!

A gulf yawned before her. She had not foreseen this. She had known that there were women in the world, plenty of them, Stephen said, who would understand what she was doing and like her in spite of it, even admire her.

But what these blue eyes would look when they knew it, she very well knew. Whatever glories and heights awaited Susan Brown in the days to come, she could never talk as an equal with Ann O'Connor or her like again, never exchange homely, happy details of babies and boarding−school and mothers and fathers again!

Plenty of women in the world who would understand and excuse her,— but Susan had a mad desire to get among these sheltering women somehow, never to come in contact with these stupid, narrow−visioned others—−!

"Leo—that's my son−in−law, is an angel to her," Mrs. O'Connor was saying, "and it's not everyone would be, as you know, for poor Angela was sick all the time before Raymond came, and she's hardly able to stir, even yet. But Leo gets his own breakfasts——"

Susan was at the washstand busy with brush and comb. She paused.

Life stretched before her vision a darkened and wearisome place. She had a sudden picture of Mrs. O'Connor's daughter,—of Georgie—of all helpless women upon whom physical weakness lays its heavy load. Pale, dispirited women, hanging over the little cradles, starting up at little cries in the night, comforted by the boyish, sympathetic husbands, and murmuring tired thanks and appreciations—−

She, Susan, would be old some day, might be sick and weak any day; there might be a suffering child. What then? What consolation for a woman who set her feet deliberately in the path of wrong? Not even a right to the consolation these others had, to the strong arm and the heartening voice at the day's end. And the child—what could she teach a child of its mother?

"But I might not have one," said Susan to herself. And instantly tears of self−pity bowed her head over the

little towel−rack, and turned her heart to water. "I love children so—and I couldn't have children!" came the agonized thought, and she wept bitterly, pressing her eyes against the smooth folds of the towel.

"Come now, come now," said Ann O'Connor, sympathetic but not surprised. "You mustn't feel that way. Dry your eyes, dear, and come up on deck. We'll be casting off any moment now. Think of meeting your good father—−"

"Oh, Daddy!—−" The words were a long wail. Then Susan straightened up resolutely.

"I mustn't do this," she said sensibly. "I must find Mr. Bocqueraz."

Suddenly it seemed to her that she must have just the sight and touch of Stephen or she would lose all self−control. "How do I get to the library?" she asked, white lipped and breathing hard.

Sympathetic Mrs. O'Connor willingly directed her, and Susan went quickly and unseeingly through the unfamiliar passageway and up the curving staircase. Stephen—said her thoughts over and over again— just to get to him,—to put herself in his charge, to awaken from the nightmare of her own fears. Stephen would understand—would make everything right. People noticed her, for even in that self−absorbed crowd, she was a curious figure,—a tall, breathless girl, whose eyes burned feverishly blue in her white face. But Susan saw nobody, noticed nothing. Obstructions she put gently aside; voices and laughter she did not hear; and when suddenly a hand was laid upon her arm, she jumped in nervous fright.

It was Lydia Lord who clutched her eagerly by the wrist, homely, excited, shabbily dressed Lydia who clung to her, beaming with relief and satisfaction.

"Oh, Sue,—what a piece of good fortune to find you!" gasped the little governess. "Oh, my dear, I've twisted my ankle on one of those awful deck stairways!" she panted. "I wonder a dozen people a day don't get killed on them! And, Sue, did you know, the second gong has been rung? I didn't hear it, but they say it has! We haven't a second to lose—seems so dreadful—and everyone so polite and yet in such a hurry—this way, dear, he says this way—My! but that is painful!"

Dashed in an instant from absolute security to this terrible danger of discovery, Susan experienced something like vertigo. Her senses seemed actually to fail her. She could do only the obvious thing. Dazed, she gave Lydia her arm, and automatically guided the older woman toward the upper deck. But that this astounding enterprise of hers should be thwarted by Lydia Lord! Not an earthquake, not a convulsed conspiracy of earth and sea, but this little teacher, in her faded little best, with her sprained ankle!

That Lydia Lord, smiling in awkward deprecation, and giving apologetic glances to interested bystanders who watched their limping progress, should consider herself the central interest of this terrible hour!—−It was one more utterly irreconcilable note in this time of utter confusion and bewilderment. Terror of discovery, mingled in the mad whirl of Susan's thoughts with schemes of escape; and under all ran the agonizing pressure for time—minutes were precious now—every second was priceless!

Lydia Lord was the least manageable woman in the world. Susan had chafed often enough at her blunt, stupid obstinacy to be sure of that! If she once suspected what was Susan's business on the Nippon Maru—less, if she so much as suspected that Susan was keeping something, anything, from her, she would not be daunted by a hundred captains, by a thousand onlookers. She would have the truth, and until she got it, Susan would not be allowed out of her arm's reach. Lydia would cheerfully be bullied by the ship's authorities, laughed at, insulted, even arrested in happy martyrdom, if it once entered into her head that Mrs. Lancaster's niece, the bright−headed little charge of the whole boarding−house, was facing what Miss Lord, in virtuous ignorance, was satisfied to term "worse than death." Lydia would be loyal to Mrs. Lancaster, and true to the simple rules of morality by which she had been guided every moment of her life. She had sometimes had occasion to discipline Susan in Susan's naughty and fascinating childhood; she would unsparingly discipline Susan now.

Mary Lou might have been evaded; the Saunders could easily have been silenced, as ladies are easily silenced; but Lydia was neither as unsuspecting as Mary Lou, nor was she a lady. Had Susan been rude and cold to this humble friend throughout her childhood, she might have successfully defied and escaped Lydia now. But Susan had always been gracious and sympathetic with Lydia, interested in her problems, polite and sweet and kind. She could not change her manner now; as easily change her eyes or hair as to say, "I'm sorry you've hurt your foot, you'll have to excuse me,—I'm busy!" Lydia would have stopped short in horrified amazement, and, when Susan sailed on the Nippon Maru, Lydia would have sailed, too.

Guided by various voices, breathless and unseeing, they limped on. Past staring men and women, through

white−painted narrow doorways, in a general hush of shocked doubt, they made their way.

"We aren't going to make it!" gasped Lydia. Susan felt a sick throb at her heart. What then?

"Oh, yes we are!" she murmured as they came out on the deck near the gang−plank. Embarrassment overwhelmed her; everyone was watching them—suppose Stephen was watching—suppose he called her—−

Susan's one prayer now was that she and Lydia might reach the gang− plank, and cross it, and be lost from sight among the crowd on the dock. If there was a hitch now!—−

"The shore gong rang ten minutes ago, ladies!" said a petty officer at the gang−plank severely.

"Thank God we're in time!" Lydia answered amiably, with her honest, homely smile.

"You've got to hurry; we're waiting!" added the man less disapprovingly.

Susan, desperate now, was only praying for oblivion. That Lydia and Stephen might not meet—that she might be spared only that—that somehow they might escape this hideous publicity—this noise and blare, was all she asked. She did not dare raise her eyes; her face burned.

"She's hurt her foot!" said pitying voices, as the two women went slowly down the slanting bridge to the dock.

Down, down, down they went! And every step carried Susan nearer to the world of her childhood, with its rigid conventions, its distrust of herself, its timidity of officials, and in crowded places! The influence of the Saunders' arrogance and pride failed her suddenly; the memory of Stephen's bracing belief in the power to make anything possible forsook her. She was only little Susan Brown, not rich and not bold and not independent, unequal to the pressure of circumstances.

She tried, with desperate effort, to rally her courage. Men were waiting even now to take up the gang−plank when she and Lydia left it; in another second it would be too late.

"Is either of you ladies sailing?" asked the guard at its foot.

"No, indeed!" said Lydia, cheerfully. Susan's eye met his miserably− −but she could not speak.

They went slowly along the pier, Susan watching Lydia's steps, and watching nothing else. Her face burned, her heart pounded, her hands and feet were icy cold. She merely wished to get away from this scene without a disgraceful exposition of some sort, to creep somewhere into darkness, and to die. She answered Lydia's cheerful comments briefly; with a dry throat.

Suddenly beside one of the steamer's great red stacks there leaped a plume of white steam, and the prolonged deep blast of her whistle drowned all other sounds.

"There she goes!" said Lydia pausing.

She turned to watch the Nippon Maru move against the pier like a moving wall, swing free, push slowly out into the bay. Susan did not look.

"It makes me sick," she said, when Lydia, astonished, noticed she was not watching.

"Why, I should think it did!" Lydia exclaimed, for Susan's face was ashen, and she was biting her lips hard to keep back the deadly rush of faintness that threatened to engulf her.

"I'm afraid—air—Lyd—−" whispered Susan. Lydia forgot her own injured ankle.

"Here, sit on these boxes, darling," she said. "Well, you poor little girl you! There, that's better. Don't worry about anyone watching you, just sit there and rest as long as you feel like it! I guess you need your lunch!"

PART THREE. Service

CHAPTER I

December was unusually cold and bleak, that year, and after the holidays came six long weeks during which there were but a few glimpses of watery sunlight, between long intervals of fogs and rains. Day after day broke dark and stormy, day after day the office−going crowds jostled each other under wet umbrellas, or, shivering in wet shoes and damp outer garments, packed the street− cars.

Mrs. Lancaster's home, like all its type, had no furnace, and moisture and cold seemed to penetrate it, and linger therein. Wind howled past the dark windows, rain dripped from the cornice above the front door, the acrid odor of drying woolens and wet rubber coats permeated the halls. Mrs. Lancaster said she never had known of so much sickness everywhere, and sighed over the long list of unknown dead in the newspaper every morning.

"And I shouldn't be one bit surprised if you were sickening for something, Susan," her aunt said, in a worried way, now and then. But Susan, stubbornly shaking her head, fighting against tears, always answered with ill−concealed impatience:

"Oh, PLEASE don't, auntie! I'M all right!"

No such welcome event as a sudden and violent and fatal illness was likely to come her way, she used bitterly to reflect. She was here, at home again, in the old atmosphere of shabbiness and poverty; nothing was changed, except that now her youth was gone, and her heart broken, and her life wrecked beyond all repairing. Of the great world toward which she had sent so many hopeful and wistful and fascinated glances, a few years ago, she now stood in fear. It was a cruel world, cold and big and selfish; it had torn her heart out of her, and cast her aside like a dry husk. She could not keep too far enough away from it to satisfy herself in future, she only prayed for obscurity and solitude for the rest of her difficult life.

She had been helped through the first dreadful days that had followed the sailing of the Nippon Maru, by a terrified instinct of self−protection. Having failed so signally in this venture, her only possible course was concealment. Mary Lord did not guess—Mrs. Saunders did not guess—Auntie did not guess! Susan spent every waking hour, and many of the hours when she was supposedly asleep, in agonized search for some unguarded move by which she might be betrayed.

A week went by, two weeks—life resumed its old aspect outwardly. No newspaper had any sensational revelation to make in connection with the news of the Nippon Maru's peaceful arrival in Honolulu harbor, and the reception given there for the eminent New York novelist. Nobody spoke to Susan of Bocqueraz; her heart began to resume its natural beat. And with ebbing terror it was as if the full misery of her heart was revealed.

She had severed her connections with the Saunders family; she told her aunt quietly, and steeled herself for the scene that followed, which was more painful even than she had feared. Mrs. Lancaster felt indignantly that an injustice had been done Susan, was not at all sure that she herself would not call upon Miss Saunders and demand a full explanation. Susan combated this idea with surprising energy; she was very silent and unresponsive in these days, but at this suggestion she became suddenly her old vigorous self.

"I don't understand you lately, Sue," her aunt said disapprovingly, after this outburst. "You don't act like yourself at all! Sometimes you almost make auntie think that you've got something on your mind."

Something on her mind! Susan could have given a mad laugh at the suggestion. Madness seemed very near sometimes, between the anguished aching of her heart, and the chaos of shame and grief and impotent rebellion that possessed her soul. She was sickened with the constant violence of her emotions, whether anger or shame shook her, or whether she gave way to desperate longings for the sound of Stephen Bocqueraz's voice, and the touch of his hand again, she was equally miserable. Perhaps the need of him brought the keenest pang, but, after all, love with Susan was still the unknown quantity, she was too closely concerned with actual discomforts to be able to afford the necessary hours and leisure for brooding over a disappointment in love. That pain came only at intervals,—a voice, overheard in the street, would make her feel cold and weak with sudden memory, a poem or a bit of music that recalled Stephen Bocqueraz would ring her heart with sorrow, or, worst of all, some reminder of the great city where he made his home, and the lives that gifted and successful and charming men and women lived there, would scar across the dull wretchedness of Susan's thoughts with a touch of flame. But the steady misery of everyday had nothing to do with these, and, if less sharp, was still terrible to bear.

Desperately, with deadly determination, she began to plan an escape. She told herself that she would not go away until she was sure that Stephen was not coming back for her, sure that he was not willing to accept the situation as she had arranged it. If he rebelled,—if he came back for her,—if his devotion were unaffected by what had passed, then she must meet that situation as it presented itself.

But almost from the very first she knew that he would not come back and, as the days went by, and not even a letter came, however much her pride suffered, she could not tell herself that she was very much surprised. In her most sanguine moments she could dream that he had had news in Honolulu,—his wife was dead, he had hurried home, he would presently come back to San Francisco, and claim Susan's promise. But for the most part she did not deceive herself; her friendship with Stephen Bocqueraz was over. It had gone out of her life as suddenly as it had come, and with it, Susan told herself, had gone so much more! Her hope of winning a place for herself, her claim on the life she loved, her confidence that, as she was different, so would her life be different from the other lives she knew. All, all was gone. She was as helpless and as impotent as Mary Lou!

She had her moods when planning vague enterprises in New York or Boston satisfied her, and other moods when she determined to change her name, and join a theatrical troupe. From these some slight accident might dash her to the bitterest depths of despondency. She would have a sudden, sick memory of Stephen's clear voice, of the touch of his hand, she would be back at the Browning dance again, or sitting between him and Billy at that memorable first supper—−

"Oh, my God, what shall I do?" she would whisper, dizzy with pain, stopping short over her sewing, or standing still in the street, when the blinding rush of recollection came. And many a night she lay wakeful beside Mary Lou, her hands locked tight over her fast− beating heart, her lips framing again the hopeless, desperate little prayer: "Oh, God, what shall I do!"

No avenue of thought led to comfort, there was no comfort anywhere. Susan grew sick of her own thoughts. Chief among them was the conviction of failure, she had tried to be good and failed. She had consented to be what was not good, and failed there, too.

Shame rose like a rising tide. She could not stem it; she could not even recall the arguments that had influenced her so readily a few months ago, much less be consoled by them. Over and over again the horrifying fact sprang from her lulled reveries: she was bad—she was, at heart at least, a bad woman—she was that terrible, half− understood thing of which all good women stood in virtuous fear.

Susan rallied to the charge as well as she could. She had not really sinned in actual fact, after all, and one person only knew that she had meant to do so. She had been blinded and confused by her experience in a world where every commandment was lightly broken, where all sacred matters were regarded as jokes.

But the stain remained, rose fresh and dreadful through her covering excuses. Consciousness of it influenced every moment of her day and kept her wakeful far into the night. Susan's rare laughter was cut short by it, her brave resolves were felled by it, her ambition sank defeated before the memory of her utter, pitiable weakness. A hundred times a day she writhed with the same repulsion and shock that she might have felt had her offense been a well−concealed murder.

She had immediately written Stephen Bocqueraz a shy, reserved little letter, in the steamship company's care at Yokohama. But it would be two months before an answer to that might be expected, and meanwhile there was great financial distress at the boarding−house. Susan could not witness it without at least an effort to help.

Finally she wrote Ella a gay, unconcerned note, veiling with nonsense her willingness to resume the old relationship. The answer cut her to the quick. Ella had dashed off only a few lines of crisp news; Mary Peacock was with them now, they were all crazy about her. If Susan wanted a position why didn't she apply to Madame Vera? Ella had heard her say that she needed girls. And she was sincerely Susan's, Ella Cornwallis Saunders.

Madame Vera was a milliner; the most popular of her day. Susan's cheeks flamed as she read the little note. But, meditating drearily, it occurred to her that it might be as well to go and see the woman. She, Susan, had a knowledge of the social set that might be valuable in that connection. While she dressed, she pleased herself with a vision of Mademoiselle Brown, very dignified and severely beautiful, in black silk, as Madame Vera's right−hand woman.

The milliner was rushing about the back of her store at the moment that Susan chanced to choose for her nervously murmured remarks, and had to have them repeated several times. Then she laughed heartily and merrily, and assured Susan in very imperfect and very audible English, that forty girls were already on her list

waiting for positions in her establishment.

"I thought perhaps—knowing all the people—" Susan stammered very low.

"How—why should that be so good?" Madame asked, with horrible clearness. "Do I not know them myself?"

Susan was glad to escape without further parley.

"See, now," said Madame Vera in a low tone, as she followed Susan to the door, "You do not come into my workshop, eh?"

"How much?" asked Susan, after a second's thought.

"Seven dollars," said the other with a quick persuasive nod, "and your dinner. That is something, eh? And more after a while."

But Susan shook her head. And, as she went out into the steadily falling rain again, bitter tears blinded her eyes.

She cried a great deal in these days, became nervous and sensitive and morbid. She moped about the house, restless and excited, unwilling to do anything that would take her away from the house when the postman arrived, reading the steamship news in every morning's paper.

Yet, curiously enough, she never accepted this experience as similar to what poor Mary Lou had undergone so many years ago,—this was not a "disappointment in love,"—this was only a passing episode. Presently she would get herself in hand again and astonish them with some achievement brilliant enough to sweep these dark days from everyone's memory.

She awaited her hour, impatiently at first, later with a sort of resentful calm. Susan's return home, however it affected them financially, was a real delight to her aunt and Mary Lou. The cousins roomed together, were together all day long.

Susan presently flooded the house with the circulars of a New York dramatic school, wrote mysterious letters pertaining to them. After a while these disappeared, and she spent a satisfied evening or two in filling blanks of application for admission into a hospital training−school. In February she worked hard over a short story that was to win a hundred dollar prize. Mary Lou had great confidence in it.

The two loitered over their toast and coffee, after the boarders' breakfast, made more toast to finish the coffee, and more coffee to finish the toast. The short winter mornings were swiftly gone; in the afternoon Susan and Mary Lou dressed with great care and went to market. They would stop at the library for a book, buy a little bag of candy to eat over their solitaire in the evening, perhaps pay a call on some friend, whose mild history of financial difficulties and helpless endurance matched their own.

Now and then, on Sundays, the three women crossed the Oakland ferry and visited Virginia, who was patiently struggling back to the light. They would find her somewhere in the great, orderly, clean institution, with a knot of sweet−faced, vague−eyed children clustered about her. "Good−bye, Miss 'Ginia!" the unearthly, happy little voices would call, as the uncertain little feet echoed away. Susan rather liked the atmosphere of the big institution, and vaguely envied the brisk absorbed attendants who passed them on swift errands. Stout Mrs. Lancaster, for all her panting and running, invariably came within half a second of missing the return train for the city; the three would enter it laughing and gasping, and sink breathless into their seats, unable for sheer mirth to straighten their hats, or glance at their fellow−passengers.

In March Georgie's second little girl, delicate and tiny, was born too soon, and the sturdy Myra came to her maternal grandmother for an indefinite stay. Georgie's disappointment over the baby's sex was instantly swallowed up in anxiety over the diminutive Helen's weight and digestion, and Susan and Mary Lou were delighted to prolong Myra's visit from week to week. Georgie's first−born was a funny, merry little girl, and Susan developed a real talent for amusing her and caring for her, and grew very fond of her. The new baby was well into her second month before they took Myra home,—a dark, crumpled little thing Susan thought the newcomer, and she thought that she had never seen Georgie looking so pale and thin. Georgie had always been freckled, but now the freckles seemed fairly to stand out on her face. But in spite of the children's exactions, and the presence of grim old Mrs. O'Connor, Susan saw a certain strange content in the looks that went between husband and wife.

"Look here, I thought you were going to be George Lancaster O'Connor!" said Susan, threateningly, to the new baby.

"I don't know why a boy wouldn't have been named Joseph Aloysius, like his father and grandfather," said the

old lady disapprovingly.

But Georgie paid no heed. The baby's mother was kneeling beside the bed where little Helen lay, her eyes fairly devouring the tiny face.

"You don't suppose God would take her away from me, Sue, because of that nonsense about wanting a boy?" Georgie whispered.

Susan's story did not win the hundred dollar prize, but it won a fifth prize of ten dollars, and kept her in pocket money for some weeks. After that Mary Lord brought home an order for twenty place− cards for a child's Easter Party, and Susan spent several days happily fussing with water colors and so earned five dollars more.

Time did not hang at all heavily on her hands; there was always an errand or two to be done for auntie, and always a pack of cards and a library book with which to fill the evening. Susan really enjoyed the lazy evenings, after the lazy days. She and Mary Lou spent the first week in April in a flurry of linens and ginghams, making shirtwaists for the season; for three days they did not leave the house, nor dress fully, and they ate their luncheons from the wing of the sewing−machine.

Spring came and poured over the whole city a bath of warmth and perfume. The days lengthened, the air was soft and languid. Susan loved to walk to market now, loved to loiter over calls in the late after−noon, and walk home in the lingering sunset light. If a poignant regret smote her now and then, its effect was not lasting, she dismissed it with a bitter sigh.

But constant humiliation was good for neither mind nor body; Susan felt as pinched in soul as she felt actually pinched by the old cheerless, penniless condition, hard and bitter elements began to show themselves in her nature. She told herself that one great consolation in her memories of Stephen Bocqueraz was that she was too entirely obscure a woman to be brought to the consideration of the public, whatever her offense might or might not be. Cold and sullen, Susan saw herself as ill−used, she could not even achieve human contempt—she was not worthy of consideration. Just one of the many women who were weak—−

And sometimes, to escape the desperate circling of her thoughts, she would jump up and rush out for a lonely walk, through the wind− blown, warm disorder of the summer streets, or sometimes, dropping her face suddenly upon a crooked arm, she would burst into bitter weeping.

Books and pictures, random conversations overheard, or contact with human beings all served, in these days, to remind her of herself. Susan's pride and self−confidence and her gay ambition had sustained her through all the self−denial of her childhood. Now, failing these, she became but an irritable, depressed and discouraged caricature of her old self. Her mind was a distressed tribunal where she defended herself day and night; convincing this accuser— convincing that one—pleading her case to the world at large. Her aunt and cousin, entirely ignorant of its cause, still were aware that there was a great change in her, and watched her with silent and puzzled sympathy.

But they gave her no cause to feel herself a failure. They thought Susan unusually clever and gifted, and, if her list of actual achievements were small, there seemed to be no limit to the things that she COULD do. Mary Lou loved to read the witty little notes she could dash off at a moment's notice, Lydia Lord wiped her eyes with emotion that Susan's sweet, untrained voice aroused when she sang "Once in a Purple Twilight," or "Absent." Susan's famous eggless ginger−bread was one of the treats of Mrs. Lancaster's table.

"How do you do it, you clever monkey!" said Auntie, watching over Susan's shoulder the girl's quick fingers, as Susan colored Easter cards or drew clever sketches of Georgie's babies, or scribbled a jingle for a letter to amuse Virginia. And when Susan imitated Mrs. Patrick Campbell as Paula, or Mrs. Fiske as Becky Sharp, even William had to admit that she was quite clever enough to be a professional entertainer.

"But I wish I had one definite big gift, Billy," said Susan, on a July afternoon, when she and Mr. Oliver were on the ferry boat, going to Sausalito. It was a Sunday, and Susan thought that Billy looked particularly well to−day, felt indeed, with some discomfort, that he was better groomed and better dressed than she was, and that there was in him some new and baffling quality, some reserve that she could not command. His quick friendly smile did not hide the fact that his attention was not all hers; he seemed pleasantly absorbed in his own thoughts. Susan gave his clean−shaven, clear− skinned face many a half−questioning look as she sat beside him on the boat. He was more polite, more gentle, more kind that she remembered him—what was missing, what was wrong to−day?

It came to her suddenly, half−astonished and half−angry, that he was no longer interested in her. Billy had

outgrown her, he had left her behind. He did not give her his confidence to−day, nor ask her advice. He scowled now and then, as if some under−current of her chatter vaguely disturbed him, but offered no comment. Susan felt, with a little, sick pressure at her heart, that somehow she had lost an old friend!

He was stretched out comfortably, his long legs crossed before him, his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets, and his half−shut, handsome eyes fixed on the rushing strip of green water that was visible between the painted ropes of the deck−rail.

"And what are your own plans, Sue?" he presently asked, unsmilingly.

Susan was chilled by the half−weary tone.

"Well, I'm really just resting and helping Auntie, now," Susan said cheerfully. "But in the fall—−" she made a bold appeal to his interest, "—in the fall I think I shall go to New York?"

"New York?" he echoed, aroused. "What for?"

"Oh, anything!" Susan answered confidently. "There are a hundred chances there to every one here," she went on, readily, "institutions and magazines and newspapers and theatrical agencies— Californians always do well in New York!"

"That sounds like Mary Lou," said Billy, drily. "What does she know about it?"

Susan flushed resentfully.

"Well, what do you!" she retorted with heat.

"No, I've never been there," admitted Billy, with self−possession. "But I know more about it than Mary Lou! She's a wonder at pipe− dreams,—my Lord, I'd rather have a child of mine turned loose in the street than be raised according to Mary Lou's ideas! I don't mean," Billy interrupted himself to say seriously, "that they weren't all perfectly dandy to me when I was a kid—you know how I love the whole bunch! But all that dope about not having a chance here, and being 'unlucky' makes me weary! If Mary Lou would get up in the morning, and put on a clean dress, and see how things were going in the kitchen, perhaps she'd know more about the boarding− house, and less about New York!"

"It may never have occurred to you, Billy, that keeping a boarding− house isn't quite the ideal occupation for a young gentlewoman!" Susan said coldly.

"Oh, darn everything!" Billy said, under his breath. Susan eyed him questioningly, but he did not look at her again, or explain the exclamation.

The always warm and welcoming Carrolls surrounded them joyfully, Susan was kissed by everybody, and Billy had a motherly kiss from Mrs. Carroll in the unusual excitement of the occasion.

For there was great news. Susan had it from all of them at once; found herself with her arms linked about the radiant Josephine while she said incredulously:

"Oh, you're NOT! Oh, Jo, I'm so glad! Who is it—and tell me all about it—and where's his picture—−"

In wild confusion they all straggled out to the lawn, and Susan sat down with Betsey at her feet, Anna sitting on one arm of her low chair, and Josephine kneeling, with her hands still in Susan's.

He was Mr. Stewart Frothingham, and Josephine and his mother and sister had gone up to Yale for his graduation, and "it" had been instantaneous, "we knew that very day," said Josephine, with a lovely awe in her eyes, "but we didn't say anything to Mrs. Frothingham or Ethel until later." They had all gone yachting together, and to Bar Harbor, and then Stewart had gone into his uncle's New York office, "we shall have to live in New York," Josephine said, radiantly, "but one of the girls or Mother will ALWAYS be there!"

"Jo says it's the peachiest house you ever saw!" Betsey contributed.

"Oh, Sue—right down at the end of Fifth Avenue—but you don't know where that is, do you? Anyway, it's wonderful—−"

It was all wonderful, everybody beamed over it. Josephine already wore her ring, but no announcement was to be made until after a trip she would make with the Frothinghams to Yellowstone Park in September. Then the gallant and fortunate and handsome Stewart would come to California, and the wedding would be in October.

"And you girls will all fall in love with him!" prophesied Josephine.

"Fall?" echoed Susan studying photographs. "I head the waiting list! You grab−all! He's simply perfection—rich and stunning, and an old friend—and a yacht and a motor—−"

"And a fine, hard−working fellow, Sue," added Josephine's mother.

"I begin to feel old and unmarried," mourned Susan. "What did you say, William dear?" she added, suddenly

turning to Billy, with a honeyed smile.

They all shouted. But an hour or two later, in the kitchen, Mrs. Carroll suddenly asked her of her friendship with Peter Coleman.

"Oh, we've not seen each other for months, Aunt Jo!" Susan said cheerfully. "I don't even know where he is! I think he lives at the club since the crash."

"There was a crash?"

"A terrible crash. And now the firm's reorganized; it's Hunter, Hunter Brauer. Thorny told me about it. And Miss Sherman's married, and Miss Cottle's got consumption and has to live in Arizona, or somewhere. However,—−" she returned to the original theme, "Peter seems to be still enjoying life! Did you see the account of his hiring an electric delivery truck, and driving it about the city on Christmas Eve, to deliver his own Christmas presents, dressed up himself as an expressman? And at the Bachelor's dance, they said it was his idea to freeze the floor in the Mapleroom, and skate the cotillion!"

"Goose that he is!" Mrs. Carroll smiled. "How hard he works for his fun! Well, after all that's Peter—one couldn't expect him to change!"

"Does anybody change?" Susan asked, a little sadly. "Aren't we all born pretty much as we're going to be? There are so many lives—−" She had tried to keep out the personal note, but suddenly it crept in, and she saw the kitchen through a blur of tears. "There are so many lives," she pursued, unsteadily, "that seem to miss their mark. I don't mean poor people. I mean strong, clever young women, who could do things, and who would love to do certain work,—yet who can't get hold of them! Some people are born to be busy and happy and prosperous, and others, like myself," said Susan bitterly, "drift about, and fail at one thing after another, and never get anywhere!"

Suddenly she put her head down on the table and burst into tears.

"Why Sue—why Sue!" The motherly arm was about her, she felt Mrs. Carroll's cheek against her hair. "Why, little girl, you musn't talk of failure at your age!" said Mrs. Carroll, tenderly.

"I'll be twenty−six this fall," Susan said, wiping her eyes, "and I'm not started yet! I don't know how to begin. Sometimes I think," said Susan, with angry vigor, "that if I was picked right out of this city and put down anywhere else on the globe, I could be useful and happy! But here I can't! How—−" she appealed to the older woman passionately, "How can I take an interest in Auntie's boarding−house when she herself never keeps a bill, doesn't believe in system, and likes to do things her own way?"

"Sue, I do think that things at home are very hard for you," Mrs. Carroll said with quick sympathy. "It's too bad, dear, it's just the sort of thing that I think you fine, energetic, capable young creatures ought to be saved! I wish we could think of just the work that would interest you."

"But that's it—I have no gift!" Susan said, despondingly.

"But you don't need a gift, Sue. The work of the world isn't all for girls with gifts! No, my dear, you want to use your energies—you won't be happy until you do. You want happiness, we all do. And there's only one rule for happiness in this world, Sue, and that's service. Just to the degree that they serve people are happy, and no more. It's an infallible test. You can try nations by it, you can try kings and beggars. Poor people are just as unhappy as rich people, when they're idle; and rich people are really happy only when they're serving somebody or something. A millionaire—a multimillionaire—may be utterly wretched, and some poor little clerk who goes home to a sick wife, and to a couple of little babies, may be absolutely content—probably is."

"But you don't think that the poor, as a class, are happier than the rich?"

"Why, of course they are!"

"Lots of workingmen's wives are unhappy," submitted Susan.

"Because they're idle and shiftless and selfish, Sue. But there are some among them who are so busy mixing up spice cake, and making school−aprons, and filling lamps and watering gardens that they can't stop to read the new magazines,—and those are the happiest people in the world, I think. No, little girl, remember that rule. Not money, or success, or position or travel or love makes happiness,—service is the secret."

Susan was watching her earnestly, wistfully. Now she asked simply:

"Where can I serve?"

"Where can you serve—you blessed child!" Mrs. Carroll said, ending her little dissertation with a laugh. "Well, let me see—I've been thinking of you lately, Sue, and wondering why you never thought of settlement work? You'd be so splendid, with your good−nature, and your buoyancy, and your love for children. Of course

they don't pay much, but money isn't your object, is it?"

"No−o, I suppose it isn't," Susan said uncertainly. "I—I don't see why it should be!" And she seemed to feel her horizon broadening as she spoke.

She and Billy did not leave until ten o'clock, fare−wells, as always, were hurried, but Josephine found time to ask Susan to be her bridesmaid, Betsey pleaded for a long visit after the wedding, "we'll simply die without Jo!" and Anna, with her serious kiss, whispered, "Stand by us, Sue—it's going to break Mother's heart to have her go so far away!"

Susan could speak of nothing but Josephine's happiness for awhile, when she and Billy were on the boat. They had the dark upper deck almost to themselves, lights twinkled everywhere about them, on the black waters of the bay. There was no moon. She presently managed a delicately tentative touch upon his own feeling in the matter. "He— he was glad, wasn't he? He hadn't been seriously hurt?"

Bill, catching her drift, laughed out joyously.

"That's so—I was crazy about her once, wasn't I?" Billy asked, smilingly reminiscent. "But I like Anna better now. Only I've sort of thought sometimes that Anna has a crush on someone—Peter Coleman, maybe."

"No, not on him," Susan hesitated. "There's a doctor at the hospital, but he's awfully rich and important—−" she admitted.

"Oh." Billy withdrew. "And you—are you still crazy about that mutt?" he asked.

"Peter? I've not seen him for months. But I don't see why you call him a mutt!"

"Say, did you ever know that he made a pretty good thing out of Mrs. Carroll's window washer?" Billy asked confidentally, leaning toward her in the dark.

"He paid her five hundred dollars for it!" Susan flashed back. "Did YOU know that?"

"Sure I knew that," Billy said.

"Well—well, did he make more than THAT?" Susan asked.

"He sold it to the Wakefield Hardware people for twenty−five thousand dollars," Billy announced.

"For WHAT!"

"For twenty−five thousand," he repeated. "They're going to put them into lots of new apartments. The National Duplex, they call it. Yep, it's a big thing, I guess."

"Bill, you mean twenty−five hundred!"

"Twenty−five thousand, I tell you! It was in the 'Scientific American,' I can show it to you!"

Susan kept a moment's shocked silence.

"Billy, I don't believe he would do that!" she said at last.

"Oh, shucks," Billy said good−naturedly, "it was rotten, but it wasn't as bad as that! It was legal enough. She was pleased with her five hundred, and I suppose he told himself that, but for him, she mightn't have had that! Probably he meant to give her a fat check—−."

"Give her? Why, it was hers!" Susan burst out. "What did Peter Coleman have to do with it, anyway!"

"Well, that's the way all big fortunes are built up," Billy said. "You happen to see this, though, and that's why it seems so rotten!"

"I'll never speak to Peter Coleman again!" Susan declared, outraged.

"You'll have to cut out a good many of your friends in the Saunders set if you want to be consistent," Billy said. "This doesn't seem to me half as bad as some others! What I think is rotten is keeping hundreds of acres of land idle, for years and years, or shutting poor little restless kids up in factories, or paying factory girls less than they can live on, and drawing rent from the houses where they are ruined, body and soul! The other day some of our men were discharged because of bad times, and as they walked out they passed Carpenter's eighteen−year−old daughter sitting in the motor, with a chauffeur in livery in front, and with her six−hundred−dollar Pekingese sprawling in her lap, in his little gold collar. Society's built right on that sort of thing, Sue! you'd be pretty surprised if you could see a map of the bad−house district, with the owners' names attached."

"They can't be held responsible for the people who rent their property!" Susan protested.

"Bocqueraz told me that night that in New York you'll see nice− looking maids, nice−looking chauffeurs, and magnificent cars, any afternoon, airing the dogs in the park," said Billy.

The name silenced Susan; she felt her breath come short.

"He was a dandy fellow," mused Billy, not noticing. "Didn't you like him?"

"Like him!" burst from Susan's overcharged heart. An amazed question or two from him brought the whole story out. The hour, the darkness, the effect of Josephine's protected happiness, and above all, the desire to hold him, to awaken his interest, combined to break down her guard.

She told him everything, passionately and swiftly, dwelling only upon the swift rush of events that had confused her sense of right and wrong, and upon the writer's unparalleled devotion.

Billy, genuinely shocked at her share of the affair, was not inclined to take Bocqueraz's protestations very seriously. Susan found herself in the odious and unforeseen position of defending Stephen Bocqueraz's intentions.

"What a dirty rotter he must be, when he seemed such a prince!" was William's summary. "Pretty tough on you, Sue," he added, with fraternal kindly contempt, "Of course you would take him seriously, and believe every word! A man like that knows just how to go about it,—and Lord, you came pretty near getting in deep!"

Susan's face burned and she bit her lip in the darkness. It was unbearable that Billy should think Bocqueraz less in earnest than she had been, should imagine her so easily won! She wished heartily that she had not mentioned the affair.

"He probably does that everywhere he goes," said Billy, thoughtfully. "You had a pretty narrow escape, Sue, and I'll bet he thought he got out of it pretty well, too! After the thing had once started, he probably began to realize that you are a lot more decent than most, and you may bet he felt pretty rotten about it—−"

"Do you mean to say that he DIDN'T mean to—−" began Susan hotly, stung even beyond anger by outraged pride. But, as the enormity of her question smote her suddenly, she stopped short, with a sensation almost of nausea.

"Marry you?" Billy finished it for her. "I don't know—probably he would. Lord, Lord, what a blackguard! What a skunk!" And Billy got up with a short breath, as if he were suffocating, walked away from her, and began to walk up and down across the broad dark deck.

Susan felt bitter remorse and shame sweep her like a flame as he left her. She felt, sitting there alone in the darkness, as if she would die of the bitterness of knowing herself at last. In beginning her confidence, she had been warmed by the thought of the amazing and romantic quality of her news, she had thought that Bocqueraz's admiration would seem a great thing in Billy's eyes. Now she felt sick and cold and ashamed, the glamour fell, once and for all, from what she had done and, as one hideous memory after another roared in her ears, Susan felt as if her thoughts would drive her mad.

Billy came suddenly back to his seat beside her, and laid his hand over hers. She knew that he was trying to comfort her.

"Never you mind, Sue," he said, "it's not your fault that there are men rotten enough to take advantage of a girl like you. You're easy, Susan, you're too darned easy, you poor kid. But thank God, you got out in time. It would have killed your aunt," said Billy, with a little shudder, "and I would never have forgiven myself. You're like my own sister, Sue, and I never saw it coming! I thought you were wise to dope like that—−"

"Wise to dope like that!" Susan could have risen up and slapped him, in the darkness. She could have burst into frantic tears; she would gladly have felt the boat sinking—sinking to hide her shame and his contempt for her under the friendly, quiet water.

For long years the memory of that trip home from Sausalito, the boat, the warm and dusty ferry−place, the jerking cable−car, the grimy, wilted street, remained vivid and terrible in her memory.

She found herself in her room, talking to the aroused Mary Lou. She found herself in bed, her heart beating fast, her eyes wide and bright. Susan meant to stop thinking of what could not be helped, and get to sleep at once.

The hours went by, still she lay wakeful and sick at heart. She turned and tossed, sighed, buried her face in her pillow, turned and tossed again. Shame shook her, worried her in dreams, agonized her when she was awake. Susan felt as if she would lose her mind in the endless hours of this terrible night.

There was a little hint of dawn in the sky when she crept wearily over Mary Lou's slumbering form.

"Ha! What is it?" asked Mary Lou.

"It's early—I'm going out—my head aches!" Susan said. Mary Lou sank back gratefully, and Susan dressed in the dim light. She crept downstairs, and went noiselessly out into the chilly street.

Her head ached, and her skin felt dry and hot. She took an early car for North Beach, sat mute and chilled on the dummy until she reached the terminal, and walked blindly down to the water. Little waves shifted wet pebbles on the shore, a cool wind sighed high above her.

Susan found a sheltered niche among piles of lumber—and sat staring dully ahead of her. The water was dark, but the fog was slowly lifting, to show barges at anchor, and empty rowboats rocking by the pier. The tide was low, piles closely covered with shining black barnacles rose lank from the water; odorous webs of green seaweed draped the wooden cross−bars and rusty iron cleats of the dock.

Susan remembered the beaches she had known in her childhood, when, a small skipping person, she had run ahead of her father and mother, wet her shoes in the sinking watery sand, and curved away from the path of the waves in obedience to her mother's voice. She remembered walks home beside the roaring water, with the wind whistling in her ears, the sunset full in her eyes, her tired little arms hooked in the arms of the parents who shouted and laughed at each other over the noisy elements.

"My good, dear, hungry, little, tired Mouse!" her mother had called her, in the blissful hour of supper and warmth and peace that followed.

Her mother had always been good—her father good. Every one was good,—even impractical, absurd Mary Lou, and homely Lydia Lord, and little Miss Sherman at the office, with her cold red hands, and her hungry eyes,—every one was good, except Susan.

Dawn came, and sunrise. The fog lifted like a curtain, disappeared in curling filaments against the sun. Little brown−sailed fishing− smacks began to come dipping home, sunlight fell warm and bright on the roofs of Alcatraz, the blue hills beyond showed soft against the bluer sky. Ferry boats cut delicate lines of foam in the sheen of the bay, morning whistles awakened the town. Susan felt the sun's grateful warmth on her shoulders and, watching the daily miracle of birth, felt vaguely some corresponding process stir her own heart. Nature cherishes no yesterdays; the work of rebuilding and replenishing goes serenely on. Punctual dawn never finds the world unready, April's burgeoning colors bury away forever the memories of winter wind and deluge.

"There is some work that I may still do, in this world, there is a place somewhere for me," thought Susan, walking home, hungry and weary, "Now the question is to find them!"

Early in October came a round−robin from the Carrolls. Would Susan come to them for Thanksgiving and stay until Josephine's wedding on December third? "It will be our last time all together in one sense," wrote Mrs. Carroll, "and we really need you to help us over the dreadful day after Jo goes!"

Susan accepted delightedly for the wedding, but left the question of Thanksgiving open; her aunt felt the need of her for the anniversary. Jinny would be at home from Berkeley and Alfred and his wife Freda were expected for Thanksgiving Day. Mrs. Alfred was a noisy and assertive little person, whose complacent bullying of her husband caused his mother keen distress. Alfred was a bookkeeper now, in the bakery of his father−in−law, in the Mission, and was a changed man in these days; his attitude toward his wife was one of mingled fear and admiration. It was a very large bakery, and the office was neatly railed off, "really like a bank," said poor Mrs. Lancaster, but Ma had nearly fainted when first she saw her only son in this enclosure, and never would enter the bakery again. The Alfreds lived in a five−room flat bristling with modern art papers and shining woodwork; the dining−room was papered in a bold red, with black wood trimmings and plate−rail; the little drawing−room had a gas−log surrounded with green tiles. Freda made endless pillows for the narrow velour couch, and was very proud of her Mission rocking−chairs and tasseled portieres. Her mother's wedding− gift had been a piano with a mechanical player attached; the bride was hospitable and she loved to have groups of nicely dressed young people listening to the music, while she cooked for them in the chafing−dish. About once a month, instead of going to "Mama's" for an enormous Sunday dinner, she and Alfred had her fat "Mama" and her small wiry "Poppa" and little Augusta and Lulu and Heinie come to eat a Sunday dinner with them. And when this happened stout Mrs. Hultz always sent her own cook over the day before with a string of sausages and a fowl and a great mocha cake, and cheese and hot bread, so that Freda's party should not "cost those kits so awful a lot," as she herself put it.

And no festivity was thought by Freda to warrant Alfred's approach to his old habits. She never allowed him so much as a sherry sauce on his pudding. She frankly admitted that she "yelled bloody murder" if he suggested absenting himself from her side for so much as a single evening. She adored him, she thought him the finest type of man she knew, but she allowed him no liberty.

"A doctor told Ma once that when a man drank, as Alfie did, he couldn't stop right off short, without affecting his heart," said Mary Lou, gently.

"All right, let it affect his heart then!" said the twenty−year−old Freda hardily. Ma herself thought this disgustingly cold−blooded; she said it did not seem refined for a woman to admit that her husband had his

failings, and Mary Lou said frankly that it was easy enough to see where THAT marriage would end, but Susan read more truly the little bride's flashing blue eyes and the sudden scarlet in her cheeks, and she won Freda's undying loyalty by a surreptitious pressure of her fingers.

CHAPTER II

One afternoon in mid−November Susan and Mary Lou chanced to be in the dining−room, working over a puzzle−card that had been delivered as an advertisement of some new breakfast food. They had intended to go to market immediately after lunch, but it was now three o'clock, and still they hung over the fascinating little combination of paper angles and triangles, feeling that any instant might see the problem solved.

Suddenly the telephone rang, and Susan went to answer it, while Mary Lou, who had for some minutes been loosening her collar and belt preparatory to changing for the street, trailed slowly upstairs, holding her garments together.

Outside was a bright, warm winter day, babies were being wheeled about in the sunshine, and children, just out of school, were shouting and running in the street. From where Susan sat at the telephone she could see a bright angle of sunshine falling through the hall window upon the faded carpet of the rear entry, and could hear Mrs. Cortelyou's cherished canary, Bobby, bursting his throat in a cascade of song upstairs. The canary was still singing when she hung up the receiver, two minutes later,—the sound drove through her temples like a knife, and the placid sunshine in the entry seemed suddenly brazen and harsh.

Susan went upstairs and into Mary Lou's room.

"Mary Lou—−" she began.

"Why, what is it?" said Mary Lou, catching her arm, for Susan was very white, and she was staring at her cousin with wide eyes and parted lips.

"It was Billy," Susan answered. "Josephine Carroll's dead."

"WHAT!" Mary Lou said sharply.

"That's what he said," Susan repeated dully. "There was an accident,—at Yellowstone—they were going to meet poor Stewart—and when he got in—they had to tell him—poor fellow! Ethel Frothingham's arm was broken, and Jo never moved—Phil has taken Mrs. Carroll on to−day—Billy just saw them off!" Susan sat down at the bureau, and rested her head in her hands. "I can't believe it!" she said, under her breath. "I simply CANNOT believe it!"

"Josephine Carroll killed! Why—it's the most awful thing I ever heard!" Mary Lou exclaimed. Her horror quieted Susan.

"Billy didn't know anything more than that," Susan said, beginning hastily to change her dress. "I'll go straight over there, I guess. He said they only had a wire, but that one of the afternoon papers has a short account. My goodness—goodness—goodness—when they were all so happy! And Jo always the gayest of them all—it doesn't seem possible!"

Still dazed, she crossed the bay in the pleasant afternoon sunlight, and went up to the house. Anna was already there, and the four spent a quiet, sad evening together. No details had reached them, the full force of the blow was not yet felt. When Anna had to go away the next day Susan stayed; she and Betsy got the house ready for the mother's home−coming, put away Josephine's dresses, her tennis− racket, her music—−

"It's not right!" sobbed the rebellious little sister. "She was the best of us all—and we've had so much to bear! It isn't fair!"

"It's all wrong," Susan said, heavily.

Mrs. Carroll, brave and steady, if very tired, came home on the third day, and with her coming the atmosphere of the whole house changed. Anna had come back again; the sorrowing girls drew close about their mother, and Susan felt that she was not needed.

"Mrs. Carroll is the most wonderful woman in the world!" she said to Billy, going home after the funeral. "Yes," Billy answered frowningly. "She's too darn wonderful! She can't keep this up!"

Georgie and Joe came to Mrs. Lancaster's house for an afternoon visit on Thanksgiving Day, arriving in mid−afternoon with the two babies, and taking Myra and Helen home again before the day grew too cold. Virginia arrived, using her own eyes for the first time in years, and the sisters and their mother laughed and cried together over the miracle of the cure. When Alfie and Freda came there was more hilarity. Freda very prettily presented her mother−in−law, whose birthday chanced to fall on the day, with a bureau scarf. Alfred, urged,

Susan had no doubt, by his wife, gave his mother ten dollars, and asked her with a grin to buy herself some flowers. Virginia had a lace collar for Ma, and the white−coated O'Connor babies, with much pushing and urging, bashfully gave dear Grandma a tissue−wrapped bundle that proved to be a silk gown. Mary Lou unexpectedly brought down from her room a box containing six heavy silver tea−spoons.

Where Mary Lou ever got the money to buy this gift was rather a mystery to everyone except Susan, who had chanced to see the farewells that took place between her oldest cousin and Mr. Ferd Eastman, when the gentleman, who had been making a ten−days visit to the city, left a day or two earlier for Virginia City.

"Pretty soon after his wife's death!" Susan had accused Mary Lou, vivaciously.

"Ferd has often kissed me—like a brother—−" stammered Mary Lou, coloring painfully, and with tears in her kind eyes. And, to Susan's amazement, her aunt, evidently informed of the event by Mary Lou, had asked her not to tease her cousin about Ferd. Susan felt certain that the spoons were from Ferd.

She took great pains to make the holiday dinner unusually festive, decorated the table, and put on her prettiest evening gown. There were very few boarders left in the house on this day, and the group that gathered about the big turkey was like one large family. Billy carved, and Susan with two paper candle−shades pinned above her ears, like enormous rosettes, was more like her old silly merry self than these people who loved her had seen her for years.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Mrs. Lancaster, pushing back an untasted piece of mince pie, turned to Susan a strangely flushed and swollen face, and said thickly:

"Air—I think I must—air!"

She went out of the dining−room, and they heard her open the street door, in the hall. A moment later Virginia said "Mama!" in so sharp a tone that the others were instantly silenced, and vaguely alarmed.

"Hark!" said Virginia, "I thought Mama called!" Susan, after a half− minute of nervous silence, suddenly jumped up and ran after her aunt.

She never forgot the dark hall, and the sensation when her foot struck something soft and inert that lay in the doorway. Susan gave a great cry of fright as she knelt down, and discovered it to be her aunt.

Confusion followed. There was a great uprising of voices in the dining−room, chairs grated on the floor. Someone lighted the hall gas, and Susan found a dozen hands ready to help her raise Mrs. Lancaster from the floor.

"She's just fainted!" Susan said, but already with a premonition that it was no mere faint.

"We'd better have a doctor though—−" she heard Billy say, as they carried her aunt in to the dining−room couch. Mrs. Lancaster's breath was coming short and heavy, her eyes were shut, her face dark with blood.

"Oh, why did we let Joe go home!" Mary Lou burst out hysterically.

Her mother evidently caught the word, for she opened her eyes and whispered to Susan, with an effort:

"Georgia—good, good man—my love—−"

"You feel better, don't you, darling?" Susan asked, in a voice rich with love and tenderness.

"Oh, yes!" her aunt whispered, earnestly, watching her with the unwavering gaze of a child.

"Of course she's better—You're all right, aren't you?" said a dozen voices. "She fainted away!—Didn't you hear her fall?—I didn't hear a thing!—Well, you fainted, didn't you?—You felt faint, didn't you?"

"Air—−" said Mrs. Lancaster, in a thickened, deep voice. Her eyes moved distressedly from one face to another, and as Virginia began to unfasten the pin at her throat, she added tenderly, "Don't prick yourself, Bootsy!"

"Oh, she's very sick—she's very sick!" Susan whispered, with white lips, to Billy who was at the telephone.

"What do you think of sponging her face off with ice−water?" he asked in a low tone. Susan fled to the kitchen. Mary Lou, seated by the table where the great roast stood in a confusion of unwashed plates and criss−crossed silver, was sobbing violently.

"Oh, Sue—she's dying!" whispered Mary Lou, "I know it! Oh, my God, what will we do!"

Susan plunged her hand in a tall pitcher for a lump of ice and wrapped it in a napkin. A moment later she knelt by her aunt's side. The sufferer gave a groan at the touch of ice, but a moment later she caught Susan's wrist feverishly and muttered "Good!"

"Make all these fools go upstairs!" said Alfie's wife in a fierce whisper. She was carrying out plates and clearing a space about the couch. Virginia, kneeling by her mother, repeated over and over again, in an even and

toneless voice, "Oh God, spare her—Oh God, spare her!"

The doctor was presently among them, dragged, Susan thought, from the faint odor of wine about him, from his own dinner. He helped Billy carry the now unconscious woman upstairs, and gave Susan brisk orders.

"There has undoubtedly been a slight stroke," said he.

"Oh, doctor!" sobbed Mary Lou, "will she get well?"

"I don't anticipate any immediate change," said the doctor to Susan, after a dispassionate look at Mary Lou, "and I think you had better have a nurse."

"Yes, doctor," said Susan, very efficient and calm.

"Had you a nurse in mind?" asked the doctor.

"Well, no," Susan answered, feeling as if she had failed him.

"I can get one," said the doctor thoughtfully.

"Oh, doctor, you don't know what she's BEEN to us!" wailed Mary Lou.

"Don't, darling!" Susan implored her.

And now, for the first time in her life, she found herself really busy, and, under all sorrow and pain, there was in these sad hours for Susan a genuine satisfaction and pleasure. Capable, tender, quiet, she went about tirelessly, answering the telephone, seeing to the nurse's comfort, brewing coffee for Mary Lou, carrying a cup of hot soup to Virginia. Susan, slim, sympathetic, was always on hand,− −with clean sheets on her arm or with hot water for the nurse or with a message for the doctor. She penciled a little list for Billy to carry to the drugstore, she made Miss Foster's bed in the room adjoining Auntie's, she hunted up the fresh nightgown that was slipped over her aunt's head, put the room in order; hanging up the limp garments with a strange sense that it would be long before Auntie's hand touched them again.

"And now, why don't you go to bed, Jinny darling?" she asked, coming in at midnight to the room where her cousins were grouped in mournful silence. But Billy's foot touched hers with a significant pressure, and Susan sat down, rather frightened, and said no more of anyone's going to bed.

Two long hours followed. They were sitting in a large front bedroom that had been made ready for boarders, but looked inexpressibly grim and cheerless, with its empty mantel and blank, marble−topped bureau. Georgie cried constantly and silently, Virginia's lips moved, Mary Lou alone persisted that Ma would be herself again in three days.

Susan, sitting and staring at the flaring gas−lights, began to feel that in the midst of life was death, indeed, and that the term of human existence is as brief as a dream. "We will all have to die too," she said, awesomely to herself, her eyes traveling about the circle of faces.

At two o'clock Miss Foster summoned them and they went into the invalid's room; to Susan it was all unreal and unconvincing. The figure in the bed, the purple face, the group of sobbing watchers. No word was said: the moments slipped by. Her eyes were wandering when Miss Foster suddenly touched her aunt's hand.

A heavy, grating breath—a silence—Susan's eyes met Billy's in terror—but there was another breath—and another—and another silence.

Silence.

Miss Foster, who had been bending over her patient, straightened up, lowered the gray head gently into the pillow.

"Gone," said Dr. O'Connor, very low, and at the word a wild protest of grief broke out. Susan neither cried nor spoke; it was all too unreal for tears, for emotion of any kind.

"You stay," said Miss Foster when she presently banished the others. Susan, surprised, complied.

"Sorry to ask you to help me," said Miss Foster then briskly, "but I can't do this alone. They'll want to be coming back here, and we must be ready for them. I wonder if you could fix her hair like she wore it, and I'll have to get her teeth—−"

"Her what?" asked Susan.

"Her teeth, dear. Do you know where she kept them?"

Appalled, sickened, Susan watched the other woman's easy manipulation of what had been a loving, breathing woman only a few hours before. But she presently did her own share bravely and steadily, brushing and coiling the gray−brown locks as she had often seen her aunt coil them. Lying in bed, a small girl supposedly asleep, years before, she had seen these pins placed so—and so— seen this short end tucked under, this twist skilfully puffed.

This was not Auntie. So wholly had the soul fled that Susan could feel sure that Auntie—somewhere, was already too infinitely wise to resent this fussing little stranger and her ministrations. A curious lack of emotion in herself astonished her. She longed to grieve, as the others did, blamed herself that she could not. But before she left the room she put her lips to her aunt's forehead.

"You were always good to me!" Susan whispered.

"I guess she was always good to everyone," said the little nurse, pinning a clever arrangement of sheets firmly, "she has a grand face!" The room was bright and orderly now, Susan flung pillows and blankets into the big closet, hung her aunt's white knitted shawl on a hook.

"You're a dear good little girl, that's what YOU are!" said Miss Foster, as they went out. Susan stepped into her new role with characteristic vigor. She was too much absorbed in it to be very sorry that her aunt was dead. Everybody praised her, and a hundred times a day her cousins said truthfully that they could not see how these dreadful days would have been endurable at all without Susan. Susan could sit up all night, and yet be ready to brightly dispense hot coffee at seven o'clock, could send telegrams, could talk to the men from Simpson and Wright's, could go downtown with Billy to select plain black hats and simple mourning, could meet callers, could answer the telephone, could return a reassuring "That's all attended to, dear," to Mary Lou's distracted "I haven't given one THOUGHT to dinner!" and then, when evening came again, could quietly settle herself in a big chair, between Billy and Dr. O'Connor, for another vigil.

"Never a thought for her own grief!" said Georgie, to a caller. Susan felt a little prick of guilt. She was too busy and too absorbed to feel any grief. And presently it occurred to her that perhaps Auntie knew it, and understood. Perhaps there was no merit in mere grieving. "But I wish I had been better to her while she was here!" thought Susan more than once.

She saw her aunt in a new light through the eyes of the callers who came, a long, silent stream, to pay their last respect to Louisianna Ralston. All the old southern families of the city were represented there; the Chamberlains and the Lloyds, the Duvals and Fairfaxes and Carters. Old, old ladies came, stout matrons who spoke of the dead woman as "Lou," rosy−faced old men. Some of them Susan had never seen before.

To all of them she listened with her new pretty deference and dignity. She heard of her aunt's childhood, before the war, "Yo' dea' auntie and my Fanny went to they' first ball togethah," said one very old lady. "Lou was the belle of all us girls," contributed the same Fanny, now stout and sixty, with a smile. "I was a year or two younger, and, my laws, how I used to envy Miss Louis'anna Ralston, flirtin' and laughin' with all her beaux!"

Susan grew used to hearing her aunt spoken of as "your cousin," "your mother," even "your sister,"—her own relationship puzzled some of Mrs. Lancaster's old friends. But they never failed to say that Susan was "a dear, sweet girl—she must have been proud of you!"

She heard sometimes of her own mother too. Some large woman, wiping the tears from her eyes, might suddenly seize upon Susan, with:

"Look here, Robert, this is Sue Rose's girl—Major Calhoun was one of your Mama's great admirers, dear!"

Or some old lady, departing, would kiss her with a whispered "Knew your mother like my own daughter,—come and see me!"

They had all been young and gay and sheltered together, Susan thought, just half a century ago. Now some came in widow's black, and some with shabby gloves and worn shoes, and some rustled up from carriages, and patronized Mary Lou, and told Susan that "poor Lou" never seemed to be very successful!

"I sometimes think that it would be worth any effort in the first forty years of your life, to feel sure that you would at least not be an object of pity for the last twenty!" said Susan, upon whom these callers, with the contrasts they presented, had had a profound effect.

It was during an all−night vigil, in the room next to the one in which the dead woman lay. Dr. O'Connor lay asleep on a couch, Susan and Billy were in deep chairs. The room was very cold, and the girl had a big wrapper over her black dress. Billy had wrapped himself in an Indian blanket, and put his feet comfortably up on a chair.

"You bet your life it would be!" said Billy yawning. "That's what I tell the boys, over at the works," he went on, with awakening interest, "get INTO something, cut out booze and theaters and graphophones now,—don't care what your neighbors think of you now, but mind your own affairs, stick to your business, let everything else go, and then, some day, settle down with a nice little lump of stock, or a couple of flats, or a little plant of your own, and snap your fingers at everything!"

"You know I've been thinking," Susan said slowly, "For all the wise people that have ever lived, and all the goodness everywhere, we go through life like ships with sealed orders. Now all these friends of Auntie's, they thought she made a brilliant match when she married Uncle George. But she had no idea of management, and no training, and here she is, dying at sixty−three, leaving Jinny and Mary Lou practically helpless, and nothing but a lot of debts! For twenty years she's just been drifting and drifting,—it's only a chance that Alfie pulled out of it, and that Georgie really did pretty well. Now, with Mrs. Carroll somehow it's so different. You know that, before she's old, she's going to own her little house and garden, she knows where she stands. She's worked her financial problem out on paper, she says 'I'm a little behind this month, because of Jim's dentist. But there are five Saturdays in January, and I'll catch up then!'"

"She's exceptional, though," he asserted.

"Yes, but a training like that NEEDN'T be exceptional! It seems so strange that the best thing that school can give us is algebra and Caesar's Commentaries," Susan pursued thoughtfully. "When there's so MUCH else we don't know! Just to show you one thing, Billy,—when I first began to go to the Carrolls, I noticed that they never had to fuss with the building of a fire in the kitchen stove. When a meal was over, Mrs. Carroll opened the dampers, scattered a little wet coal on the top, and forgot about it until the next meal, or even overnight. She could start it up in two seconds, with no dirt or fuss, whenever she wanted to. Think what that means, getting breakfast! Now, ever since I was a little girl, we've built a separate fire for each meal, in this house. Nobody ever knew any better. You hear chopping of kindlings, and scratching of matches, and poor Mary Lou saying that it isn't going to burn, and doing it all over—−

"Gosh, yes!" he said laughing at the familiar picture. "Mary Lou always says that she has no luck with fires!"

"Billy," Susan stated solemnly, "sometimes I don't believe that there is such a thing as luck!"

"SOMETIMES you don't—why, Lord, of course there isn't!"

"Oh, Billy," Susan's eyes widened childishly, "don't you honestly think so?"

"No, I don't!" He smiled, with the bashfulness that was always noticeable when he spoke intimately of himself or his own ideas. "If you get a big enough perspective of things, Sue," he said, "everybody has the same chance. You to−day, and I to−morrow, and somebody else the day after that! Now," he cautiously lowered his voice, "in this house you've heard the Civil War spoken of as 'bad luck' and Alf's drinking spoken of as 'bad luck'"—−

Susan dimpled, nodded thoughtfully.

"—And if Phil Carroll hadn't been whipped and bullied and coaxed and amused and praised for the past six or seven years, and Anna pushed into a job, and Jim and Betsy ruled with an iron hand, you might hear Mrs. Carroll talking about 'bad luck,' too!"

"Well, one thing," said Susan firmly, "we'll do very differently from now on."

"You girls, you mean," he said.

"Jinny and Mary Lou and I. I think we'll keep this place going, Billy."

Billy scowled.

"I think you're making a big mistake, if you do. There's no money in it. The house is heavily mortgaged, half the rooms are empty."

"We'll fill the house, then. It's the only thing we can do, Billy. And I've got plenty of plans," said Susan vivaciously. "I'm going to market myself, every morning. I'm going to do at least half the cooking. I'm going to borrow about three hundred dollars—−"

"I'll lend you all you want," he said.

"Well, you're a darling! But I don't mean a gift, I mean at interest," Susan assured him. "I'm going to buy china and linen, and raise our rates. For two years I'm not going out of this house, except on business. You'll see!"

He stared at her for so long a time that Susan—even with Billy!— became somewhat embarrassed.

"But it seems a shame to tie you down to an enterprise like this, Sue," he said finally.

"No," she said, after a short silence, turning upon him a very bright smile. "I've made a pretty general failure of my own happiness, Bill. I've shown that I'm a pretty weak sort. You know what I was willing to do—−"

"Now you're talking like a damn fool!" growled Billy.

"No, I'm not! You may be as decent as you please about it, Billy," said Susan with scarlet cheeks, "but—a thing like that will keep me from ever marrying, you know! Well. So I'm really going to work, right here and now. Mrs. Carroll says that service is the secret of happiness, I'm going to try it. Life is pretty short, anyway,— doesn't

a time like this make it seem so!—and I don't know that it makes very much difference whether one's happy or not!"

"Well, go ahead and good luck to you!" said Billy, "but don't talk rot about not marrying and not being happy!"

Presently he dozed in his chair, and Susan sat staring wide−eyed before her, but seeing nothing of the dimly lighted room, the old steel−engravings on the walls, the blotched mirror above the empty grate. Long thoughts went through her mind, a hazy drift of plans and resolutions, a hazy wonder as to what Stephen Bocqueraz was doing to−night—what Kenneth Saunders was doing. Perhaps they would some day hear of her as a busy and prosperous boarding−house keeper; perhaps, taking a hard−earned holiday in Europe, twenty years from now, Susan would meet one of them again.

She got up, and went noiselessly into the hall to look at the clock. Just two. Susan went into the front room, to say her prayers in the presence of the dead.

The big dim room was filled with flowers, their blossoms dull blots of light in the gloom, their fragrance, and the smell of wet leaves, heavy on the air. One window was raised an inch or two, a little current of air stirred the curtain. Candles burned steadily, with a little sucking noise; a clock ticked; there was no other sound.

Susan stood, motionless herself, looking soberly down upon the quiet face of the dead. Some new dignity had touched the smooth forehead, and the closed eyes, a little inscrutable smile hovered over the sweet, firmly closed mouth. Susan's eyes moved from the face to the locked ivory fingers, lying so lightly,—yet with how terrible a weight!—upon spotless white satin and lace. Virginia had put the ivory−bound prayer−book and the lilies−of−the−valley into that quiet clasp, Georgie, holding back her tears, had laid at the coffin's foot the violets tied with a lavender ribbon that bore the legend, "From the Grandchildren."

Flowers—flowers—flowers everywhere. And auntie had gone without them for so many years!

"What a funny world it is," thought Susan, smiling at the still, wise face as if she and her aunt might still share in amusement. She thought of her own pose, "never gives a thought to her own grief!" everyone said. She thought of Virginia's passionate and dramatic protest, "Ma carried this book when she was married, she shall have it now!" and of Mary Lou's wail, "Oh, that I should live to see the day!" And she remembered Georgie's care in placing the lettered ribbon where it must be seen by everyone who came in to look for the last time at the dead.

"Are we all actors? Isn't anything real?" she wondered.

Yet the grief was real enough, after all. There was no sham in Mary Lou's faint, after the funeral, and Virginia, drooping about the desolate house, looked shockingly pinched and thin. There was a family council in a day or two, and it was at this time that Susan meant to suggest that the boarding−house be carried on between them all.

Alfred and his wife, and Georgie and the doctor came to the house for this talk; Billy had been staying there, and Mr. Ferd Eastman, in answer to a telegram, had come down for the funeral and was still in the city.

They gathered, a sober, black−dressed group, in the cold and dreary parlor, Ferd Eastman looking almost indecorously cheerful and rosy, in his checked suit and with his big diamond ring glittering on his fat hand. There was no will to read, but Billy had ascertained what none of the sisters knew, the exact figures of the mortgage, the value of the contents of Mrs. Lancaster's locked tin box, the size and number of various outstanding bills. He spread a great number of papers out before him on a small table; Alfred, who appeared to be sleepy, after the strain of the past week, yawned, started up blinking, attempted to take an intelligent interest in the conversation; Georgie, thinking of her nursing baby, was eager to hurry everything through.

"Now, about you girls," said Billy. "Sue feels that you might make a good thing of it if you stayed on here. What do you think?"

"Well, Billy—well, Ferd—−" Everyone turned to look at Mary Lou, who was stammering and blushing in a most peculiar way. Mr. Eastman put his arm about her. Part of the truth flashed on Susan.

"You're going to be married!" she gasped. But this was the moment for which Ferd had been waiting,

"We are married, good people," he said buoyantly. "This young lady and I gave you all the slip two weeks ago!"

Susan rushed to kiss the bride, but upon Virginia's bursting into hysterical tears, and Georgie turning faint, Mary Lou very sensibly set about restoring her sisters' composure, and, even on this occasion, took a secondary part.

"Perhaps you had some reason—−" said Georgie, faintly, turning reproachful eyes upon the newly wedded

pair.

"But, with poor Ma just gone!" Virginia burst into tears again.

"Ma knew," sobbed Mary Lou, quite overcome. "Ferd—Ferd—−" she began with difficulty, "didn't want to wait, and I WOULDN'T,—so soon after poor Grace!" Grace had been the first wife. "And so, just before Ma's birthday, he took us to lunch—we went to Swains—−"

"I remember the day!" said Virginia, in solemn affirmation.

"And we were quietly married afterward," said Ferd, himself, soothingly, his arm about his wife, "and Mary Lou's dear mother was very happy about it. Don't cry, dear—−"

Susan had disliked the man once, but she could find no fault with his tender solicitude for the long−neglected Mary Lou. And when the first crying and exclaiming were over, there was a very practical satisfaction in the thought of Mary Lou as a prosperous man's wife, and Virginia provided for, for a time at least. Susan seemed to feel fetters slipping away from her at every second.

Mr. Eastman took them all to lunch, at a modest table d'hote in the neighborhood, tipped the waiter munificently, asked in an aside for a special wine, which was of course not forthcoming. Susan enjoyed the affair with a little of her old spirit, and kept them all talking and friendly. Georgie, perhaps a little dashed by Mary Lou's recently acquired state, told Susan in a significant aside, as a doctor's wife, that it was very improbable that Mary Lou, at her age, would have children; "seems such a pity!" said Georgie, shrugging. Virginia, to her new brother−in−law's cheerful promise to find her a good husband within the year, responded, with a little resentful dignity, "It seems a little soon, to me, to be JOKING, Ferd!"

But on the whole it was a very harmonious meal. The Eastmans were to leave the next day for a belated honeymoon; to Susan and Virginia and Billy would fall the work of closing up the Fulton Street house.

"And what about you, Sue?" asked Billy, as they were walking home that afternoon.

"I'm going to New York, Bill," she answered. And, with a memory of the times she had told him that before, she turned to him a sudden smile. "—But I mean it this time!" said Susan cheerfully. "I went to see Miss Toland, of the Alexander Toland Settlement House, a few weeks ago, about working there. She told me frankly that they have all they need of untrained help. But she said, 'Miss Brown, if you COULD take a year's course in New York, you'd be a treasure!' And so I'm going to borrow the money from Ferd, Bill. I hate to do it, but I'm going to. And the first thing you know I'll be in the Potrero, right near your beloved Iron Works, teaching the infants of that region how to make buttonholes and cook chuck steak!"

"How much money do you want?" he asked, after a moment's silence.

"Three hundred."

"Three hundred! The fare is one hundred!"

"I know it. But I'm going to work my way through the course, Bill, even if I have to go out as a nurse−girl, and study at night."

Billy said nothing for awhile. But before they parted he went back to the subject.

"I'll let you have the three hundred, Sue, or five hundred, if you like. Borrow it from me, you know me a good deal better than you do Ferd Eastman!"

The next day the work of demolishing the boarding−house began. Susan and Virginia lived with Georgie for these days, but lunched in the confusion of the old home. It seemed strange, and vaguely sad, to see the long−crowded rooms empty and bare, with winter sunlight falling in clear sharp lines across the dusty, un−carpeted floors. A hundred old scars and stains showed on the denuded walls; there were fresher squares on the dark, faded old papers, where the pictures had been hung; Susan recognized the outline of Mary Lord's mirror, and Mrs. Parker's crucifix. The kitchen was cold and desolate, a pool of water on the cold stove, a smooth thin cake of yellow soap in a thick saucer, on the sink, a drift of newspapers on the floor, and old brooms assembled in a corner.

More than the mortgage, the forced sale of the old house had brought only a few hundreds of dollars. It was to be torn down at once, and Susan felt a curious stirring of sadness as she went through the strange yet familiar rooms for the last time.

"Lord, how familiar it all is!" said Billy, "the block and the bakery! I can remember the first time I saw it."

The locked house was behind them, they had come down the street steps, and turned for a last look at the blank windows.

"I remember coming here after my father died," Susan said. "You gave me a little cologne bottle filled with water, and one of those spools that one braids worsted through, do you remember?"

"Do you remember Miss Fish,—the old girl whose canary we hit with a ball? And the second−hand type−writer we were always saving up for?"

"And the day we marked up the steps with chalk and Auntie sent us out with wet rags?"

"Lord—Lord!" They were both smiling as they walked away.

"Shall you go to Nevada City with the Eastmans, Sue?"

"No, I don't think so. I'll stay with Georgie for a week, and get things straightened out."

"Well, suppose we go off and have dinner somewhere, to−morrow?"

"Oh, I'd love it! It's terribly gloomy at Georgie's. But I'm going over to see the Carrolls to−morrow, and they may want to keep me—−"

"They won't!" said Billy grimly.

"WON'T?" Susan echoed, astonished.

"No," Billy said with a sigh. "Mrs. Carroll's been awfully queer since—since Jo, you know—−"

"Why, Bill, she was so wonderful!"

"Just at first, yes. But she's gone into a sort of melancholia, now, Phil was telling me about it."

"But that doesn't sound a bit like her," Susan said, worriedly.

"No, does it? But go over and see them anyway, it'll do them all good. Well—look your last at the old block, Sue!"

Susan got on the car, leaning back for a long, goodbye look at the shabby block, duller than ever in the grimy winter light, and at the dirt and papers and chaff drifting up against the railings, and at the bakery window, with its pies and bread and Nottingham lace curtains. Fulton Street was a thing of the past.

CHAPTER III

The next day, in a whirling rainstorm, well protected by a trim raincoat, overshoes, and a close−fitting little hat about which spirals of bright hair clung in a halo, Susan crossed the ferry and climbed up the long stairs that rise through the very heart of Sausalito. The sky was gray, the bay beaten level by the rain, and the wet gardens that Susan passed were dreary and bare. Twisting oak trees gave vistas of wind−whipped vines, and of the dark and angry water; the steps she mounted ran a shallow stream.

The Carrolls' garden was neglected and desolate, chrysanthemum stalks lay across the wet flagging of the path, and wind screamed about the house. Susan's first knock was lost in a general creaking and banging, but a second brought Betsey, grave and tired−looking, to the door.

"Oh, hello. Sue," said Betsey apathetically. "Don't go in there, it's so cold," she said, leading her caller past the closed door of the sitting−room. "This hall is so dark that we ought to keep a light here," added Betsey fretfully, as they stumbled along. "Come out into the dining−room, Sue, or into the kitchen. I was trying to get a fire started. But Jim NEVER brings up enough wood! He'll talk about it, and talk about it, but when you want it I notice it's never there!"

Everywhere were dust and disorder and evidences of neglect. Susan hardly recognized the dining−room; it was unaired, yet chilly; a tall, milk−stained glass, and some crumbs on the green cloth, showed where little Betsey had had a lonely luncheon; there were paper bags on the sideboard and a litter of newspapers on a chair. Nothing suggested the old, exquisite order.

The kitchen was even more desolate, as it had been more inviting before. There were ashes sifting out of the stove, rings of soot and grease on the table−top, more soot, and the prints of muddy boots on the floor. Milk had soured in the bottles, odds and ends of food were everywhere, Betsey's book was open on the table, propped against the streaked and stained coffee−pot.

"Your mother's ill?" asked Susan. She could think of no other explanation.

"Doesn't this kitchen look awful?" said Betsey, resuming operations with books and newspapers at the range. "No, Mother's all right. I'm going to take her up some tea. Don't you touch those things, Sue. Don't you bother!"

"Has she been in bed?" demanded Susan.

"No, she gets up every day now," Betsey said impatiently. "But she won't come downstairs!"

"Won't! But why not!" gasped Susan.

"She—" Betsey glanced cautiously toward the hall door. "She hasn't come down at all," she said, softly. "Not—since!"

"What does Anna say?" Susan asked aghast.

"Anna comes home every Saturday, and she and Phil talk to Mother," the little sister said, "but so far it's not done any good! I go up two or three times a day, but she won't talk to me.—Sue, ought this have more paper?"

The clumsy, roughened little hands, the sad, patient little voice and the substitution of this weary little woman for the once−radiant and noisy Betsey sent a pang to Susan's heart.

"Well, you poor little old darling, you!" she burst out, pitifully. "Do you mean that you've been facing this for a month? Betsey—it's too dreadful—you dear little old heroic scrap!"

"Oh, I'm all right!" said Betsey, beginning to tremble. She placed a piece or two of kindling, fumbled for a match, and turned abruptly and went to a window, catching her apron to her eyes. "I'm all right—don't mind me!" sobbed Betsey. "But sometimes I think I'll go CRAZY! Mother doesn't love me any more, and everybody cried all Thanksgiving Day, and I loved Jo more than they think I did—they think I'm too young to care—but I just can't BEAR it!"

"Well, you poor little darling!" Susan was crying herself, but she put her arms about Betsey, and felt the little thing cling to her, as they cried together.

"And now, let me tackle this!" said Susan, when the worst of the storm was over a few moments later. She started the fire briskly, and tied an apron over her gown, to attack the disorder of the table. Betsey, breathing hard, but visibly cheered, ran to and fro on eager errands, fell upon the sink with a vigorous mop.

Susan presently carried a tea−tray upstairs, and knocked on Mrs. Carroll's door. "Come in," said the rich,

familiar voice, and Susan entered the dim, chilly, orderly room, her heart beyond any words daunted and dismayed. Mrs. Carroll, gaunt and white, wrapped in a dark wrapper, and idly rocking in mid−afternoon, was a sight to strike terror to a stouter heart than Susan's.

"Oh, Susan?" said she. She said no more. Susan knew that she was unwelcome.

"Betsey seems to have her hands full," said Susan gallantly, "so I brought up your tea."

"Betts needn't have bothered herself at all," said Mrs. Carroll. Susan felt as if she were in a bad dream, but she sat down and resolutely plunged into the news of Georgie and Virginia and Mary Lou. Mrs. Carroll listened attentively, and asked a few nervous questions; Susan suspected them asked merely in a desperate effort to forestall the pause that might mean the mention of Josephine's name.

"And what are your own plans, Sue?" she presently asked.

"Well, New York presently, I think," Susan said. "But I'm with Georgie now,—unless," she added prettily, "you'll let me stay here for a day or two?"

Instant alarm darkened the sick eyes.

"Oh, no, dear!" Mrs. Carroll said quickly. "You're a sweet child to think of it, but we mustn't impose on you. No, indeed! This little visit is all we must ask now, when you are so upset and busy—"

"I have nothing at all to do," Susan said eagerly. But the older woman interrupted her with all the cunning of a sick brain.

"No, dear. Not now! Later perhaps, later we should all love it. But we're better left to ourselves now, Sue! Anna shall write you—"

Susan presently left the room, sorely puzzled. But, once in the hall, she came quickly to a decision. Phil's door was open, his bed unaired, an odor of stale cigarette smoke still in the air. In Betsey's room the windows were wide open, the curtains streaming in wet air, everything in disorder. Susan found a little old brown gingham dress of Anna's, and put it on, hung up her hat, brushed back her hair. A sudden singing seized her heart as she went downstairs. Serving these people whom she loved filled her with joy. In the dining−room Betsey looked up from her book. Her face brightened.

"Oh, Sue—you're going to stay overnight!"

"I'll stay as long as you need me," said Susan, kissing her.

She did not need Betsey's ecstatic welcome; the road was clear and straight before her now. Preparing the little dinner was a triumph; reducing the kitchen to something like its old order, she found absorbing and exhilarating. "We'll bake to−morrow—we'll clean that thoroughly to−morrow—we'll make out a list of necessities to−morrow," said Susan.

She insisted upon Philip's changing his wet shoes for slippers when the boys came home at six o'clock; she gave little Jim a sisterly kiss.

"Gosh, this is something like!" said Jim simply, eyes upon the hot dinner and the orderly kitchen. "This house has been about the rottenest place ever, for I don't know how long!"

Philip did not say anything, but Susan did not misread the look in his tired eyes. After dinner they kept him a place by the fire while he went up to see his mother. When he came down twenty minutes later he seemed troubled.

"Mother says that we're imposing on you, Sue," he said. "She made me promise to make you go home tomorrow. She says you've had enough to bear!"

Betsey sat up with a rueful exclamation, and Jimmy grunted a disconsolate "Gosh!" but Susan only smiled.

"That's only part of her—trouble, Phil," she said, reassuringly. And presently she serenely led them all upstairs. "We've got to make those beds, Betts," said Susan.

"Mother may hear us," said Betsey, fearfully.

"I hope she will!" Susan said. But, if she did, no sound came from the mother's room. After awhile Susan noticed that her door, which had been ajar, was shut tight.

She lay awake late that night, Betts' tear−stained but serene little face close to her shoulder, Betts' hand still tight in hers. The wind shook the casements, and the unwearied storm screamed about the house. Susan thought of the woman in the next room, wondered if she was lying awake, too, alone with sick and sorrowful memories?

She herself fell asleep full of healthy planning for to−morrow's meals and house−cleaning, too tired and content for dreams.

Anna came quietly home on the next Saturday evening, to find the little group just ready to gather about the dinner−table. A fire glowed in the grate, the kitchen beyond was warm and clean and delightfully odorous. She said very little then, took her share, with obvious effort at first, in their talk, sat behind Betsey's chair when the four presently were coaxed by Jim into a game of "Hearts," and advised her little sister how to avoid the black queen.

But later, just before they went upstairs, when they were all grouped about the last of the fire, she laid her hands on Susan's shoulders, and stood Susan off, to look at her fairly.

"No words for it, Sue," said Anna steadily.

"Ah, don't, Nance—" Susan began. But in another instant they were in each other's arms, and crying, and much later that evening, after a long talk, Betsey confided to Susan that it was the first time Anna had cried.

"She told me that when she got home, and saw the way that you have changed things," confided Betsey, "she began to think for the first time that we might—might get through this, you know!"

Wonderful days for Susan followed, with every hour brimming full of working and planning. She was the first one up in the morning, the last one in bed at night, hers was the voice that made the last decision, and hers the hands for which the most critical of the household tasks were reserved. Always conscious of the vacant place in their circle, and always aware of the presence of that brooding and silent figure upstairs, she was nevertheless so happy sometimes as to think herself a hypocrite and heartless. But long afterward Susan knew that the sense of dramatic fitness and abiding satisfaction is always the reward of untiring and loving service.

She and Betsey read together, walked through the rain to market, and came back glowing and tired, to dry their shoes and coats at the kitchen fire. They cooked and swept and dusted, tried the furniture in new positions, sent Jimmy to the White House for a special new pattern, and experimented with house−dresses. Susan heard the first real laughter in months ring out at the dinner−table, when she and Betsey described their experiences with a crab, who had revived while being carried home in their market−basket. Jimmy, silent, rough−headed and sweet, followed Susan about like an affectionate terrier, and there was another laugh when Jimmy, finishing a bowl in which cake had been mixed, remarked fervently, "Gosh, why do you waste time cooking it?"

In the evening they played euchre, or hearts, or parchesi; Susan and Philip struggled with chess; there were talks about the fire, and they all straggled upstairs at ten o'clock. Anna, appreciative and affectionate and brave, came home for almost every Saturday night, and these were special occasions. Susan and Betsey wasted their best efforts upon the dinner, and filled the vases with flowers and ferns, and Philip brought home candy and the new magazines. It was Anna who could talk longest with the isolated mother, and Susan and she went over every word, afterwards, eager to find a ray of hope.

"I told her about to−day," Anna said one Saturday night, brushing her long hair, "and about Billy's walking with us to the ridge. Now, when you go in tomorrow, Betsey, I wish you'd begin about Christmas. Just say, 'Mother, do you realize that Christmas is a week from to− morrow?' and then, if you can, just go right on boldly and say, 'Mother, you won't spoil it for us all by not coming downstairs?'"

Betsey looked extremely nervous at this suggestion, and Susan slowly shook her head. She knew how hopeless the plan was. She and Betsey realized even better than the absent Anna how rooted was Mrs. Carroll's unhappy state. Now and then, on a clear day, the mother would be heard going softly downstairs for a few moments in the garden; now and then at the sound of luncheon preparations downstairs she would come out to call down, "No lunch for me, thank you, girls!" Otherwise they never saw her except sitting idle, black−clad, in her rocking−chair.

But Christmas was very close now, and must somehow be endured.

"When are you boys going to Mill Valley for greens?" asked Susan, on the Saturday before the holiday.

"Would you?" Philip asked slowly. But immediately he added, "How about to−morrow, Jimsky?"

"Gee, yes!" said Jim eagerly. "We'll trim up the house like always, won't we, Betts?"

"Just like always," Betts answered.

Susan and Betsey fussed with mince−meat and frosted cookies; Susan accomplished remarkably good, if rather fragile, pumpkin pies. The four decorated the down−stairs rooms with ropes of fragrant green. The expressman came and came and came again; Jimmy returned twice a day laden from the Post Office; everyone remembered the Carrolls this year.

Anna and Philip and Billy came home together, at midday, on Christmas Eve. Betsey took immediate charge

of the packages they brought; she would not let so much as a postal card be read too soon. Billy had spent many a Christmas Eve with the Carrolls; he at once began to run errands and carry up logs as a matter of course.

A conference was held over the turkey, lying limp in the center of the kitchen table. The six eyed him respectfully.

"Oughtn't this be firm?" asked Anna, fingering a flexible breast− bone.

"No−o—" But Susan was not very sure. "Do you know how to stuff them, Anna?"

"Look in the books," suggested Philip.

"We did," Betsey said, "but they give chestnut and mushroom and sweet potato—I don't know how Mother does it!"

"You put crumbs in a chopping bowl," began Susan, uncertainly, "at least, that's the way Mary Lou did—"

"Why crumbs in a chopping bowl, crumbs are chopped already?" William observed sensibly.

"Well—" Susan turned suddenly to Betsey, "Why don't you trot up and ask, Betts?" she suggested.

"Oh, Sue!" Betsey's healthy color faded. "I can't!" She turned appealing eyes to Anna. Anna was looking at her thoughtfully.

"I think that would be a good thing to do," said Anna slowly. "Just put your head in the door and say, 'Mother, how do you stuff a turkey?'"

"But—but—" Betsey began. She got down from the table and went slowly on her errand. The others did not speak while they waited for her return.

"Hot water, and butter, and herbs, and half an onion chopped fine!" announced Betts returning.

"Did she—did she seem to think it was odd, Betts?"

"No, she just answered—like she would have before. She was lying down, and she said 'I'm glad you're going to have a turkey—−'"

"What!" said Anna, turning white.

"Yes, she did! She said 'You're all good, brave children!'"

"Oh, Betts, she didn't!"

"Honest she did, Phil—" Betsey said aggrievedly, and Anna kissed her between laughter and tears.

"But this is quite the best yet!" Susan said, contentedly, as she ransacked the breadbox for crumbs.

Just at dinner−time came a great crate of violets. "Jo's favorites, from Stewart!" said Anna softly, filling bowls with them. And, as if the thought of Josephine had suggested it, she added to Philip in a low tone:

"Listen, Phil, are we going to sing to−night?"

For from babyhood, on the eve of the feast, the Carrolls had gathered at the piano for the Christmas songs, before they looked at their gifts.

"What do you think?" Philip returned, troubled.

"Oh, I couldn't—−" Betts began, choking.

Jimmy gave them all a disgusted and astonished look.

"Gee, why not?" he demanded. "Jo used to love it!"

"How about it, Sue?" Philip asked. Susan stopped short in her work, her hands full of violets, and pondered.

"I think we ought to," she said at last.

"I do, too!" Billy supported her unexpectedly. "Jo'd be the first to say so. And if we don't this Christmas, we never will again!"

"Your mother taught you to," Susan said, earnestly, "and she didn't stop it when your father died. We'll have other breaks in the circle some day, but we'll want to go right on doing it, and teaching our own children to do it!"

"Yes, you're right," said Anna, "that settles it."

Nothing more was said on the subject; the girls busied themselves with the dinner dishes. Phil and Billy drew the nails from the waiting Christmas boxes. Jim cracked nuts for the Christmas dinner. It was after nine o'clock when the kitchen was in order, the breakfast table set, and the sitting−room made ready for the evening's excitement. Then Susan went to the old square piano and opened it, and Phil, in absolute silence, found her the music she wanted among the long−unused sheets of music on the piano.

"If we are going to DO this," said Philip then, "we mustn't break down!"

"Nope," said Betts, at whom the remark seemed to be directed, with a gulp. Susan, whose hands were very cold, struck the opening chords, and a moment later the young voices rose together, through the silent house.

"Adeste, fideles,
Laeti triumphantes,
Venite, venite in Bethlehem...."

Josephine had always sung the little solo. Susan felt it coming, and she and Betts took it together, joined on the second phrase by Anna's rich, deep contralto. They were all too conscious of their mother's overhearing to think of themselves at all. Presently the voices became more natural. It was just the Carroll children singing their Christmas hymns, as they had sung them all their lives. One of their number was gone now; sorrow had stamped all the young faces with new lines, but the little circle was drawn all the closer for that. Phil's arm was tight about the little brother's shoulder, Betts and Anna were clinging to each other.

And as Susan reached the triumphant "Gloria—gloria!" a thrill shook her from head to foot. She had not heard a footstep, above the singing, but she knew whose fingers were gripping her shoulder, she knew whose sweet unsteady voice was added to the younger voices.

She went on to the next song without daring to turn around;—this was the little old nursery favorite,

"Oh, happy night, that brings the morn
To shine above the child new−born!
Oh, happy star! whose radiance sweet
Guided the wise men's eager feet...."

and after that came "Noel,"—surely never sung before, Susan thought, as they sang it then! The piano stood away from the wall, and Susan could look across it to the big, homelike, comfortable room, sweet with violets now, lighted by lamp and firelight, the table cleared of its usual books and games, and heaped high with packages. Josephine's picture watched them from the mantel; "wherever she is," thought Susan, "she knows that we are here together singing!"

"Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices!
Oh, night divine, oh night, when Christ was born!"

The glorious triumphant melody rose like a great rising tide of faith and of communion; Susan forgot where she was, forgot that there are pain and loss in the world, and, finishing, turned about on the piano bench with glowing cheeks and shining eyes.

"Gee, Moth', I never heard you coming down!" said Jim delightedly, as the last notes died away and the gap, his seniors had all been dreading, was bridged.

"I heard you," Betts said, radiant and clinging to her mother.

Mrs. Carroll was very white, and they could see her tremble.

"Surely, you're going to open your presents to−night, Nance?"

"Not if you'd rather we shouldn't, Mother!"

"Oh, but I want you to!" Her voice had the dull, heavy quality of a voice used in sleep, and her eyes clung to Anna's almost with terror. No one dared speak of the miracle; Susan spoke with nervousness, but Anna bustled about cheerfully, getting her established in her big chair by the fire. Billy and Phil returned from the cellar, gasping and bent under armfuls of logs. The fire flamed up, and Jimmy, with a bashful and deprecatory "Gosh!" attacked the string of the uppermost bundle.

So many packages, so beautifully tied! Such varied and wonderful gifts? Susan's big box from Virginia City was not for her alone, and from the other packages at least a dozen came to her. Betts, a wonderful embroidered kimono slipped on over her house dress, looked like a lovely, fantastic picture; and Susan must button her big, woolly field−coat up to her chin and down to her knees. "For ONCE you thought of a DANDY present, Billy!" said she. This must be shown to Mother; that must be shown to Mother; Mother must try on her black silk, fringed, embroidered Chinese shawl.

"Jimmy, DEAR, no more candy to−night!" said Mother, in just the old voice, and Susan's heart had barely time for a leap of joy when she added:

"Oh, Anna, dear, that is LOVELY. You must tell Dr. and Mrs. Jordan that is exactly what you've been wanting!"

"And what are your plans for to−morrow, girls?" she asked, just before they all went up−stairs, late in the evening.

"Sue and I to early ..." Anna said, "then we get back to get breakfast by nine, and all the others to ten o'clock."

"Well, will you girls call me? I'll go with you, and then before the others get home we can have everything done and the turkey in."

"Yes, Mother," was all that Anna said, but later she and Susan were almost ready to agree with Betts' last remark that night, delivered from bed:

"I bet to−morrow's going to be the happiest Christmas we ever had!"

This was the beginning of happier days, for Mrs. Carroll visibly struggled to overcome her sorrow now, and Susan and Betsey tried their best to help her. The three took long walks, in the wet wintry weather, their hats twisting about on their heads, their skirts ballooning in the gale. By the middle of March Spring was tucking little patches of grass and buttercups in all the sheltered corners, the sunshine gained in warmth, the twilights lengthened. Fruit blossoms scented the air, and great rain−pools, in the roadways, gave back a clear blue sky.

The girls dragged Mrs. Carroll with them to the woods, to find the first creamy blossoms of the trillium, and scented branches of wild lilac. One Sunday they packed a lunch basket, and walked, boys and girls and mother, up to the old cemetery, high in the hills. Three miles of railroad track, twinkling in the sun, and a mile of country road, brought them to the old sunken gate. Then among the grassy paths, under the oaks, it was easy to find the little stone that bore Josephine's name.

It was an April day, but far more like June. There was a wonderful silence in the air that set in crystal the liquid notes of the lark, and carried for miles the softened click of cowbells, far up on the ridges. Sunshine flooded buttercups and poppies on the grassy slopes, and where there was shade, under the oaks, "Mission bells" and scarlet columbine and cream and lavender iris were massed together. Everywhere were dazzling reaches of light, the bay far below shone blue as a turquoise, the marshes were threaded with silver ribbons, the sky was high and cloudless. Trains went by, with glorious rushes and puffs of rising, snowy smoke; even here they could hear the faint clang of the bell. A little flock of sheep had come up from the valley, and the soft little noises of cropping seemed only to underscore the silence.

Mrs. Carroll walked home between Anna and Phil; Susan and Billy and the younger two engaged in spirited conversation on ahead.

"Mother said 'Happiness comes back to us, doesn't it, Nance!'" Anna reported that night. "She said, 'We have never been happier than we have to−day!'"

"Never been so happy," Susan said sturdily. "When has Philip ever been such an unmitigated comfort, or Betts so thoughtful and good?"

"Well, we might have had that, and Jo too," Anna said wistfully.

"Yes, but one DOESN'T, Anna. That's just it!"

Susan had long before this again become a woman of business. When she first spoke of leaving the Carrolls, a violent protest had broken out from the younger members of the family. This might have been ignored, but there was no refusing the sick entreaty of their mother's eyes; Susan knew that she was still needed, and was content to delay her going indefinitely.

"It seems unfair to you, Sue," Anna protested. But Susan, standing at the window, and looking down at the early spring flood of blossoms and leaves in the garden, dissented a little sadly.

"No, it's not, Nance," she said. "I only wish I could stay here forever. I never want to go out into the world, and meet people again—"

Susan finished with a retrospective shudder.

"I think coming to you when I did saved my reason," she said presently, "and I'm in no hurry to go again. No, it would be different, Nance, if I had a regular trade or profession. But I haven't and, even if I go to New York, I don't want to go until after hot weather. Twenty−six," Susan went on, gravely, "and just beginning! Suppose somebody had cared enough to teach me something ten years ago!"

"Your aunt thought you would marry, and you WILL marry, Sue!" Anna said, coming to put her arm about her, and lay her cheek against Susan's.

"Ah, well!" Susan said presently with a sigh, "I suppose that if I had a sixteen−year−old daughter this minute I'd tell her that Mother wanted her to be a happy girl at home; she'd be married one of these days, and find enough to do!"

But it was only a few days after this talk that one Orville Billings, the dyspeptic and middle−aged owner and editor of the "Sausalito Weekly Democrat" offered her a position upon his editorial staff, at a salary of eight

dollars a week. Susan promptly accepted, calmly confident that she could do the work, and quite justified in her confidence. For six mornings a week she sat in the dingy little office on the water−front, reading proof and answering telephone calls, re−writing contributions and clipping exchanges. In the afternoons she was free to attend weddings, club−meetings or funerals, or she might balance books or send out bills, word advertisements, compose notices of birth and death, or even brew Mr. Billings a comforting cup of soup or cocoa over the gas−jet. Susan usually began the day by sweeping out the office. Sometimes Betsey brought down her lunch and they picnicked together. There was always a free afternoon or two in the week.

On the whole, it was a good position, and Susan enjoyed her work, enjoyed her leisure, enormously enjoyed the taste of life.

"For years I had a good home, and a good position, and good friends and was unhappy," she said to Billy. "Now I've got exactly the same things and I'm so happy I can scarcely sleep at night. Happiness is merely a habit."

"No, no," he protested, "the Carrolls are the most extraordinary people in the world, Sue. And then, anyway, you're different—you've learned."

"Well, I've learned this," she said, "There's a great deal more happiness, everywhere, than one imagines. Every baby brings whole tons of it, and roast chickens and apple−pies and new lamps and husbands coming home at night are making people happy all the time! People are celebrating birthdays and moving into bigger houses, and having their married daughters home for visits, right straight along. But when you pass a dark lower flat on a dirty street, somehow it doesn't occur to you that the people who live in it are saving up for a home in the Western Addition!"

"Well, Sue, unhappiness is bad enough, when there's a reason for it," William said, "but when you've taken your philanthropy course, I wish you'd come out and demonstrate to the women at the Works that the only thing that keeps them from being happy and prosperous is not having the sense to know that they are!"

"I? What could I ever teach anyone!" laughed Susan Brown.

Yet she was changing and learning, as she presently had reason to see. It was on a hot Saturday in July that Susan, leaving the office at two o'clock, met the lovely Mrs. John Furlong on the shore road. Even more gracious and charming than she had been as Isabel Wallace, the young matron quite took possession of Susan. Where had Susan been hiding—and how wonderfully well she was looking—and why hadn't she come to see Isabel's new house?

"Be a darling!" said Mrs. Furlong, "and come along home with me now! Jack is going to bring Sherwin Perry home to dinner with him, and I truly, truly need a girl! Run up and change your dress if you want to, while I'm making my call, and meet me on the four o'clock train!"

Susan hesitated, filled with unreasoning dread of a plunge back into the old atmosphere, but in the end she did go up to change her dress,—rejoicing that the new blue linen was finished, and did join Isabel at the train, filled with an absurd regret at having to miss a week−end at home, and Anna.

Isabel, very lovely in a remarkable gown and hat, chatted cheerfully all the way home, and led the guest to quite the smartest of the motor−cars that were waiting at the San Rafael station. Susan was amazed—a little saddened—to find that the beautiful gowns and beautiful women and lovely homes had lost their appeal; to find herself analyzing even Isabel's happy chatter with a dispassionate, quiet unbelief.

The new home proved to be very lovely; a harmonious mixture of all the sorts of doors and windows, porches and roofs that the young owners fancied. Isabel, trailing her frothy laces across the cool deep hallway, had some pretty, matronly questions to ask of her butler, before she could feel free for her guest. Had Mrs. Wallace telephoned—had the man fixed the mirror in Mr. Furlong's bathroom— had the wine come?

"I have no housekeeper," said Isabel, as they went upstairs, "and I sha'n't have one. I think I owe it to myself, and to the maids, Sue, to take that responsibility entirely!" Susan recognized the unchanged sweetness and dutifulness that had marked the old Isabel, who could with perfect simplicity and reason seem to make a virtue of whatever she did.

They went into the sitting−room adjoining the young mistress' bedroom, an airy exquisite apartment all colonial white and gay flowered hangings, with French windows, near which the girls settled themselves for tea.

"Nothing's new with me," Susan said, in answer to Isabel's smiling inquiry. What could she say to hold the interest of this radiant young princess? Isabel accordingly gave her own news, some glimpses of her European wedding journey, some happy descriptions of wedding gifts. The Saunders were abroad, she told Susan, Ella and

Emily and their mother with Kenneth, at a German cure. "And Mary Peacock—did you know her? is with them," said Isabel. "I think that's an engagement!"

"Doesn't that seem horrible? You know he's incurable—" Susan said, slowly stirring her cup. But she instantly perceived that the comment was not acceptable to young Mrs. Furlong. After all, thought Susan, Society is a very jealous institution, and Isabel was of its inner circle.

"Oh, I think that was all very much exaggerated!" Isabel said lightly, pleasantly. "At least, Sue," she added kindly, "you and I are not fair judges of it!" And after a moment's silence, for Susan kept a passing sensation of irritation admirably concealed, she added, "—But I didn't show you my pearls!"

A maid presently brought them, a perfect string, which Susan slipped through her fingers with real delight.

"Woman, they're the size of robins' eggs!" she said. Isabel was all sweet gaiety again. She touched the lovely chain tenderly, while she told of Jack's promise to give her her choice of pearls or a motor− car for her birthday, and of his giving her both! She presently called the maid again.

"Pauline, put these back, will you, please?" asked Isabel, smilingly. When the maid was gone she added, "I always trust the maids that way! They love to handle my pretty things,—and who can blame them?—and I let them whenever I can!"

They were still lingering over tea when Isabel heard her husband in the adjoining room, and went in, closing the door after her, to welcome him.

"He's all dirty from tennis," said the young wife, coming back and resuming her deep chair, with a smile, "and cross because I didn't go and pick him up at the courts!"

"Oh, that was my fault!" Susan exclaimed, remembering that Isabel could not always be right, unless innocent persons would sometimes agree to be wrong. Mrs. Furlong smiled composedly, a lovely vision in her loose lacy robe.

"Never mind, he'll get over it!" she said and, accompanying Susan to one of the handsome guest−rooms, she added confidentially, "My dear, when a man's first married, ANYTHING that keeps him from his wife makes him cross! It's no more your fault than mine!"

Sherwin Perry, the fourth at dinner, was a rosy, clean−shaven, stupid youth, who seemed absorbed in his food, and whose occasional violent laughter, provoked by his host's criticism of different tennis−players, turned his big ears red. John Furlong told Susan a great deal of his new yacht, rattling off technical terms with simple pride, and quoting at length one of the men at the ship− builders' yard.

"Gosh, he certainly is a marvelous fellow,—Haley is," said John, admiringly. "I wish you could hear him talk! He knows everything!"

Isabel was deeply absorbed in her new delightful responsibilities as mistress of the house.

"Excuse me just a moment, Susan——Jack, the stuff for the library curtains came, and I don't think it's the same," said Isabel or, "Jack, dear, I accepted for the Gregorys'," or "The Wilsons didn't get their card after all, Jack. Helen told Mama so!" All these matters were discussed at length between husband and wife, Susan occasionally agreeing or sympathizing. Lake Tahoe, where the Furlongs expected to go in a day or two, was also a good deal considered.

"We ought to sit out−of−doors this lovely night," said Isabel, after dinner. But conversation languished, and they began a game of bridge. This continued for perhaps an hour, then the men began bidding madly, and doubling and redoubling, and Isabel good− naturedly terminated the game, and carried her guest upstairs with her.

Here, in Susan's room, they had a talk, Isabel advisory and interested, Susan instinctively warding off sympathy and concern.

"Sue,—you won't be angry?" said Isabel, affectionately "but I do so hate to see you drifting, and want to have you as happy as I am! Is there somebody?"

"Not unless you count the proprietor of the 'Democrat,'" Susan laughed.

"It's no laughing matter, Sue—−" Isabel began, seriously. But Susan, laying a quick hand upon her arm, said smilingly:

"Isabel! Isabel! What do you, of all women, know about the problems and the drawbacks of a life like mine?"

"Well, I do feel this, Sue," Isabel said, just a little ruffled, but smiling, too, "I've had money since I was born, I admit. But money has never made any real difference with me. I would have dressed more plainly, perhaps, as a working woman, but I would always have had everything dainty and fresh, and Father says that I really have a

man's mind; that I would have climbed right to the top in any position! So don't talk as if I didn't know ANYTHING!"

Presently she heard Jack's step, and ran off to her own room. But she was back again in a few moments. Jack had just come up to find some cigars, it appeared. Jack was such a goose!

"He's a dear," said Susan. Isabel agreed. "Jack was wonderful," she said. Had Susan noticed him with older people? And with babies——

"That's all we need, now," said the happy Isabel.

"Babies are darling," agreed Susan, feeling elderly and unmarried.

"Yes, and when you're married," Isabel said dreamily, "they seem so− −so sacred—but you'll see yourself, some day, I hope. Hark!"

And she was gone again, only to come back. It was as if Isabel gained fresh pleasure in her new estate by seeing it afresh through Susan's eyes. She had the longing of the bride to give her less− experienced friend just a glimpse of the new, delicious relationship.

Left alone at last, Susan settled herself luxuriously in bed, a heap of new books beside her, soft pillows under her head, a great light burning over her shoulder, and the fragrance of the summer night stealing in through the wide−opened windows. She gave a great sigh of relief, wondered, between desultory reading, at how early an hour she could decently excuse herself in the morning.

"I SUPPOSE that, if I fell heir to a million, I might build a house like this, and think that a string of pearls was worth buying," said Susan to herself, "but I don't believe I would!"

Isabel would not let her hurry away in the morning; it was too pleasant to have so gracious and interested a guest, so sympathetic a witness to her own happiness. She and Susan lounged through the long morning, Susan admired the breakfast service, admired the rugs, admired her host's character. Nothing really interested Isabel, despite her polite questions and assents, but Isabel's possessions, Isabel's husband, Isabel's genius for housekeeping and entertaining. The gentlemen appeared at noon, and the four went to the near−by hotel for luncheon, and here Susan saw Peter Coleman again, very handsome and gay, in white flannels, and very much inclined toward the old relationship with her. Peter begged them to spend the afternoon with him, trying the new motor−car, and Isabel was charmed to agree. Susan agreed too, after a hesitation she did not really understand in herself. What pleasanter prospect could anyone have?

While they were loitering over their luncheon, in the shaded, delightful coolness of the lunch−room, suddenly Dolly Ripley, over− dressed, gay and talkative as always, came up to their table.

She greeted the others negligently, but showed a certain enthusiasm for Susan.

"Hello, Isabel," said Dolly, "I saw you all come in—'he seen that a mother and child was there!'"

This last was the special phrase of the moment. Susan had heard it forty times within the past twenty−four hours, and was at no pains to reconcile it to this particular conversation.

"But you, you villain—where've you been?" pursued Dolly, to Susan, "why don't you come down and spend a week with me? Do you see anything of our dear friend Emily in these days?"

"Emily's abroad," said Susan, and Peter added:

"With Ella and Mary Peacock—'he seen that a mother and child was there!'"

"Oh, you devil!" said Dolly, laughing. "But honestly," she added gaily to Susan, "'how you could put up with Em Saunders as long as you did was a mystery to ME! It's a lucky thing you're not like me, Susan van Dusen, people all tell me I'm more like a boy than a girl,—when I think a thing I'm going to SAY it or bust! Now, listen, you're coming down to me for a week—−"

Susan left the invitation open, to Isabel's concern.

"Of course, as you say, you have a position, Sue," said Isabel, when they were spinning over the country roads, in Peter's car, "but, my dear, Dolly Ripley and Con Fox don't speak now,—Connie's going on the stage, they say!—−"

"'A mother and child will be there', all right!" said John Furlong, leaning back from the front seat. Isabel laughed, but went on seriously,

"—−and Dolly really wants someone to stay with her, Sue, and think what a splendid thing that would be!"

Susan answered absently. They had taken the Sausalito road, to get the cool air from the bay, and it flashed across her that if she COULD persuade them to drop her at the foot of the hill, she could be at home in five

minutes,—back in the dear familiar garden, with Anna and Phil lazily debating the attractions of a walk and a row, and Betsey compounding weak, cold, too−sweet lemonade. Suddenly the only important thing in the world seemed to be her escape.

There they were, just as she had pictured them; Mrs. Carroll, gray− haired, dignified in her lacy light black, was in a deep chair on the lawn, reading aloud from the paper; Betsey, sitting at her feet, twisted and folded the silky ears of the setter; Anna was lying in a hammock, lazily watching her mother, and Billy Oliver had joined the boys, sprawling comfortably on the grass.

A chorus of welcome greeted Susan.

"Oh, Sue, you old duck!" said Betsey, "we've just been waiting for you to decide what we'd do!"

CHAPTER IV

These were serene and sweet days for them all, and if sometimes the old sorrow returned for awhile, and there were still bitter longing and grieving for Josephine, there were days, too, when even the mother admitted to herself that some new tender element had crept into their love for each other since the little sister's going, the invisible presence was the closest and strongest of the ties that bound them all. Happiness came back, planning and dreaming began again. Susan teased Anna and Betsey into wearing white again, when the hot weather came, Billy urged the first of the walks to the beach without Jo, and Anna herself it was who began to extend the old informal invitations to the nearest friends and neighbors for the tea−hour on Saturday. Susan was to have her vacation in August; Billy was to have at least a week; Anna had been promised the fortnight of Susan's freedom, and Jimmy and Betsey could hardly wait for the camping trip they planned to take all together to the little shooting box in the mountains.

One August afternoon Susan, arriving home from the office at one o'clock, found Mrs. Carroll waiting to ask her a favor.

"Sue, dear, I'm right in the middle of my baking," Mrs. Carroll said, when Susan was eating a late lunch from the end of the kitchen table, "and here's a special delivery letter for Billy, and Billy's not coming over here to−night! Phil's taking Jimmy and Betts to the circus—they hadn't been gone five minutes when this thing came!"

"Why a special delivery—and why here—and what is it?" asked Susan, wiping buttery fingers carefully before she took the big envelope in her hands. "It's from Edward Dean," she said, examining it with unaffected interest. "Oh, I know what this is—it's about that blue− print business!" Susan finished, enlightened. "Probably Mr. Dean didn't have Billy's new address, but wanted him to have these to work on, on Sunday."

"It feels as if something bulky was in there," Mrs. Carroll said. "I wish we could get him by telephone! As bad luck would have it, he's a good deal worried about the situation at the works, and told me he couldn't possibly leave the men this week. What ARE the blue− prints?"

"Why, it's some little patent of Billy's,—a deep−petticoat, double− groove porcelain insulator, if that means anyone to anyone!" laughed Susan. "He's been raving about it for weeks! And he and Mr. Dean have to rush the patent, because they've been using these things for some time, and they have to patent them before they've been used a year, it seems!"

"I was just thinking, Sue, that, if you didn't mind crossing to the city with them, you could put on a special−delivery stamp and then Billy would have them to−night. Otherwise, they won't leave here until tomorrow morning."

"Why, of course, that'll do!" Susan said willingly. "I can catch the two−ten. Or better yet, Aunt Jo, I'll take them right out there and deliver them myself."

"Oh, dearie, no! Not if there's any ugliness among the men, not if they are talking of a strike!" the older woman protested.

"Oh, they're always striking," Susan said easily. "And if I can't get him to bring me back," she added, "don't worry, for I may go stay with Georgie overnight, and come back with Bill in the morning!"

She was not sorry to have an errand on this exquisite afternoon. The water of the bay was as smooth as blue glass, gulls were flashing and dipping in the steamer's wake. Sailboats, waiting for the breeze, drifted idly toward the Golden Gate; there was not a cloud in the blue arch of the sky. The little McDowell whistled for her dock at Alcatraz. On the prison island men were breaking stone with a metallic clink—clink—clink.

Susan found the ferry−place in San Francisco hot and deserted; the tar pavements were softened under−foot; gongs and bells of cars made a raucous clamor. She was glad to establish herself on the front seat of a Mission Street car and leave the crowded water−front behind her.

They moved along through congested traffic, past the big docks, and turned in between the great ware−houses that line Mission Street. The hot streets were odorous of leather and machine−oils, ropes and coffee. Over the door of what had been Hunter, Baxter Hunter's hung a new bright sign, "Hunter, Hunter Brauer." Susan caught a glimpse, through the plaster ornamentation of the facade, of old Front Office, which seemed to be full of brightly nickeled samples now, and gave back a blinking flash of light to the afternoon sun.

"Bathroom fixtures," thought Susan. "He always wanted to carry them!" What a long two years since she had known or cared what pleased or displeased Mr. Brauer!

The car clanged out of the warehouse district, past cheap flats and cheap shops, and saloons, and second−hand stores, boiling over, at their dark doorways, with stoves and rocking−chairs, lamps and china ware. This neighborhood was sordid enough, but crowded, happy and full of life. Now the road ran through less populous streets; houses stood at curious angles, and were unpainted, or painted in unusual colors. Great ware−houses and factories shadowed little clusters of workingmen's homes; here and there were country−like strips of brown palings with dusty mallow bushes spraying about them, or a lean cow grazing near a bare little wooden farmhouse. Dumps, diffusing a dry and dreadful odor, blighted the prospect with their pyramids of cans and broken umbrellas; little grocery stores, each with its wide unrailed porch, country fashion, and its bar accessible through the shop, or by a side entrance, often marked the corners on otherwise vacant blocks.

Susan got off the car in the very shadow of the "works," and stood for a moment looking at the great foundries, the dark and dirty yards, with their interlacing tracks and loaded cars, the enormous brick buildings set with rows and rows of blank and dusty windows, the brick chimneys and the black pipes of the blast−furnaces, the heaps of twisted old iron and of ashes, the blowing dust and glare of the hot summer day. She had been here with Billy before, had peeped into the furnace rooms, all a glare of white heat and silhouetted forms, had breathed the ashy and choking air.

Now she turned and walked toward the rows of workingmen's cottages that had been built, solidly massed, nearby. Presenting an unbroken, two−story facade, the long buildings were divided into tiny houses that had each two flat−faced windows upstairs, and a door and one window downstairs. The seven or eight long buildings might have been as many gigantic German toys, dotted with apertures by some accurate brush, and finished with several hundred flights of wooden steps and several hundred brick chimneys. Ugly when they first were built, they were even uglier now, for the exterior was of some shallow plaster that chipped and cracked and stained and in nearly every dooryard dirt and disorder added a last touch to the unlovely whole.

Children swarmed everywhere this afternoon; heavy, dirty−faced babies sat in the doorways, women talked and laughed over the low dividing fences. Gates hung awry, and baby carriages and garbage tins obstructed the bare, trampled spaces that might have been little gardens.

Up and down the straight narrow streets, and loitering everywhere, were idle, restless men. A few were amusing babies, or joining in the idle chatter of the women, but for the most part they were silent, or talking in low tones among themselves.

"Strikers!" Susan said to herself, with a thrill.

Over the whole curious, exotic scene the late summer sunshine streamed generously; the street was hot, the talking women fanned themselves with their aprons.

Susan, walking slowly alone, found herself attracting a good deal of attention, and was amazed to find that it frightened her a little. She was conspicuously a newcomer, and could not but overhear the comments that some of the watching young men made as she went by.

"Say, what's that song about 'I'd leave my happy home for you,' Bert?" she heard them say. "Don't ask me! I'm expecting my gurl any minute!" and "Pretty good year for peaches, I hear!"

Susan had to pretend that she did not hear, but she heartily wished herself back on the car. However, there was nothing to do but walk senselessly on, or stop and ask her way. She began to look furtively about for a friendly face, and finally stopped beside a dooryard where a slim pretty young woman was sitting with a young baby in her arms.

"Excuse me," said Susan, "but do you know where Mr. William Oliver lives, now?"

The girl studied her quietly for a minute, with a closed, composed mouth. Then she said evenly:

"Joe!"

"Huh?" said a tall young man, lathered for shaving, who came at once to the door.

"I'm trying to find Mr. Oliver—William Oliver," Susan said smiling. "I'm a sort of cousin of his, and I have a special delivery letter for him."

Joe, who had been rapidly removing the lather from his face with a towel, took the letter and, looking at it, gravely conceded:

"Well, maybe that's right, too! Sure you can see him. We're haying a conference up at the office tonight," he

explained, "and I have to clean up or I'd take you to him myself! Maybe you'd do it, Lizzie?" he suggested to his wife, who was all friendliness to Susan now, and showed even a hint of respect in her friendliness.

"Well, I could nurse him later, Joe," she agreed willingly, in reference to the baby, "or maybe Mama—Mama!" she interrupted herself to call.

An immense, gray−haired old woman, who had been an interested auditor of this little conversation, got up from the steps of the next house, and came to the fence. Susan liked Ellan Cudahy at first sight, and smiled at her as she explained her quest.

"And you're Mr. Oliver's sister, I c'n see that," said Mrs. Cudahy shrewdly.

"No, I'm not!" Susan smiled. "My name is Brown. But Mr. Oliver was a sort of ward of my aunt's, and so we call ourselves cousins."

"Well, of course ye wud," agreed Mrs. Cudahy. "Wait till I pin on me hat wanst, and I'll take you up to the Hall. He's at the Hall, Joe, I dunno?" she asked.

Joseph assenting, they set out for the Hall, under a fire of curious eyes.

"Joe's cleaning up for the conference," said Mrs. Cudahy. "There's a committee going to meet tonight. The old man−that's Carpenter, the boss of the works, will be there, and some of the others."

Susan nodded intelligently, but Saturday evening seemed to her a curious time to select for a conference. They walked along in silence, Mrs. Cudahy giving a brief yet kindly greeting to almost every man they met.

"Hello, Dan, hello, Gene; how are ye, Jim?" said she, and one young giant, shouldering his scowling way home, she stopped with a fat imperative hand. "How's it going, Jarge?"

"It's going rotten," said George, sullenly evading her eyes.

"Well,—don't run by me that way—stand still!" said the old woman. "What d'ye mean by rotten?"

"Aw, I mean rotten!" said George ungraciously. "D'ye know what the old man is going to do now? He says that he'll give Billy just two or three days more to settle this damn thing, and then he'll wire east and get a carload of men right straight through from Philadelphia. He said so to young Newman, and Frank Harris was in the room, and heard him. He says they're picked out, and all ready to come!"

"And what does Mr. Oliver say?" asked Mrs. Cudahy, whose face had grown dark.

"I don't know! I went up to the Hall, but at the first word he says, 'For God's sake, George—None of that here! They'll mob the old man if they hear it!' They was all crowding about him, so I quit."

"Well," said Mrs. Cudahy, considering, "there's to be a conference at six−thirty, but befoor that, Mr. Oliver and Clem and Rassette and Weidermeyer are going to meet t'gether in Mr. Oliver's room at Rassette's house. Ye c'n see them there."

"Well, maybe I will," said George, softening, as he left them.

"What's the conference about?" asked Susan pleasantly.

"What's the—don't tell me ye don't know THAT!" Mrs. Cudahy said, eying her shrewdly.

"I knew there was a strike—−" Susan began ashamedly.

"Sure, there's a strike," Mrs. Cudahy agreed, with quiet grimness, and under her breath she added heavily, "Sure there is!"

"And are Mr. Oliver's—are the men out?" Susan asked.

"There's nine hundred men out," Mrs. Cudahy told her, coldly.

"Nine hundred!" Susan stopped short. "But Billy's not responsible for all that!" she added, presently.

"I don't know who is, then," Mrs. Cudahy admitted grimly.

"But—but he never had more than thirty or forty men under him in his life!" Susan said eagerly.

"Oh? Well, maybe he doesn't know anything about it, thin!" Mrs. Cudahy agreed with magnificent contempt.

But her scorn was wasted upon another Irishwoman. Susan stared at her for a moment, then the dimples came into view, and she burst into her infectious laughter.

"Aren't you ashamed to be so mean!" laughed Susan. "Won't you tell me about it?"

Mrs. Cudahy laughed too, a little out of countenance.

"I misdoubt me you're a very bad lot!" said she, in high good humor, "but 'tis no joke for the boys," she went on, sobering quickly. "They wint on strike a week ago. Mr. Oliver presided at a meeting two weeks come Friday night, and the next day the boys went out!"

"What for?" asked Susan.

"For pay, and for hours," the older woman said. "They want regular pay for overtime, wanst−and−a−half regular rates. And they want the Chinymen to go,—sure, they come in on every steamer," said Mrs. Cudahy indignantly, "and they'll work twelve hours for two bits! Bether hours," she went on, checking off the requirements on fat, square fingers, "overtime pay, no Chinymen, and—and—oh, yes, a risin' scale of wages, if you know what that is? And last, they want the union recognized!"

"Well, that's not much!" Susan said generously. "Will they get it?"

"The old man is taking his time," Mrs. Cudahy's lips shut in a worried line. "There's no reason they shouldn't," she resumed presently, "We're the only open shop in this part of the world, now. The big works has acknowledged the union, and there's no reason why this wan shouldn't!"

"And Billy, is he the one they talk to, the Carpenters I mean—the authorities?" asked Susan.

"They wouldn't touch Mr. William Oliver wid a ten−foot pole," said Mrs. Cudahy proudly. "Not they! Half this fuss is because they want to get rid of him—they want him out of the way, d'ye see? No, he talks to the committee, and thin they meet with the committee. My husband's on it, and Lizzie's Joe goes along to report what they do."

"But Billy has a little preliminary conference in his room first?" Susan asked.

"He does," the other assented, with a chuckle. "He'll tell thim what to say! He's as smart as old Carpenter himself!" said Mrs. Cudahy, "he's prisidint of the local; Clem says he'd ought to be King!" And Susan was amazed to notice that the strong old mouth was trembling with emotion, and the fine old eyes dimmed with tears. "The crowd av thim wud lay down their lives for him, so they would!" said Mrs. Cudahy.

"And—and is there much suffering yet?" Susan asked a little timidly. This cheery, sun−bathed scene was not quite her idea of a labor strike.

"Well, some's always in debt and trouble annyway," Mrs. Cudahy said, temperately, "and of course 'tis the worse for thim now!"

She led Susan across an unpaved, deeply rutted street, and opened a stairway door, next to a saloon entrance.

Susan was glad to have company on the bare and gloomy stairs they mounted. Mrs. Cudahy opened a double−door at the top, and they looked into the large smoke−filled room that was the "Hall."

It was a desolate and uninviting room, with spirals of dirty, colored tissue−paper wound about the gas−fixtures, sunshine streaming through the dirty, specked windows, chairs piled on chairs against the long walls, and cuspidors set at regular intervals along the floor. There was a shabby table set at a platform at one end.

About this table was a group of men, talking eagerly and noisily to Billy Oliver, who stood at the table looking abstractedly at various letters and papers.

At the entrance of the women, the talk died away. Mrs. Cudahy was greeted with somewhat sheepish warmth; the vision of an extremely pretty girl in Mrs. Cudahy's care seemed to affect these vociferous laborers profoundly. They began confused farewells, and melted away.

"All right, old man, so long!" "I'll see you later, Oliver," "That was about all, Billy, I must be getting along," "Good−night, Billy, you know where I am if you want me!" "I'll see you later,—good− night, sir!"

"Hello, Mrs. Cudahy—hello, Susan!" said Billy, discovering them with the obvious pleasure a man feels when unexpectedly confronted by his womenkind. "I think you were a peach to do that, Sue!" he said gratefully, when the special delivery letter had been read. "Now I can get right at it, to−morrow!—Say, wait a minute, Clem—−"

He caught by the arm an old man,—larger, more grizzled, even more blue of eye than was Susan's new friend, his wife,—and presented her to Mr. Cudahy.

"—−My adopted sister, Clem! Sue, he's about as good as they come!"

"Sister, is it?" asked Mrs. Cudahy, "Whin I last heard it was cousin! What do you know about that, Clem?"

"Well, that gives you a choice!" said Susan, laughing.

"Then I'll take the Irishman's choice, and have something different entirely!" the old woman said, in great good spirits, as they all went down the stairs.

"I'll take me own gir'rl home, and give you two a chanst," said Clem, in the street. "That'll suit you, Wil'lum, I dunno?"

"You didn't ask if it would suit ME," sparkled Susan Brown.

"Well, that's so!" he said delightedly, stopping short to scratch his head, and giving her a rueful smile. "Sure, I'm that popular that there never was a divvle like me at all!"

"You get out, and leave my girl alone!" said William, with a shove. And his tired face brightened wonderfully, as he slipped his hand under Susan's arm.

"Now, Sue," he said contentedly, "we'll go straight to Rassette's— but wait a minute—I've got to telephone!"

Susan stood alone on the corner, quite as a matter of course, while he dashed into a saloon. In a moment he was back, introducing her to a weak−looking, handsome young man, who, after a few wistful glances back toward the swinging door, walked away with them, and was presently left in the care of a busily cooking little wife and a fat baby. Billy was stopped and addressed on all sides. Susan found it pleasantly exciting to be in his company, and his pleasure in showing her this familiar environment was unmistakable.

"Everything's rotten and upset now," said Billy, delighted with her friendly interest and sympathy. "You ought to see these people when they aren't on strike! Now, let's see, it's five thirty. I'll tell you, Sue, if you'll miss the seven−five boat, I'll just wait here until we get the news from the conference, then I'll blow you to Zink's best dinner, and take you home on the ten−seventeen."

"Oh, Bill, forget me!" she said, concerned for his obvious fatigue, for his face was grimed with perspiration and very pale. "I feel like a fool to have come in on you when you're so busy and so distressed! Anything will be all right—−"

"Sue, I wouldn't have had you miss this for a million, if you can only get along, somehow!" he said eagerly. "Some other time—−"

"Oh, Billy, DON'T bother about me!" Susan dismissed herself with an impatient little jerk of her head. "Does this new thing worry you?" she asked.

"What new thing?" he asked sharply.

"Why, this—this plan of Mr. Carpenter's to bring a train−load of men on from Philadelphia," said Susan, half−proud and half− frightened.

"Who said so?" he demanded abruptly.

"Why, I don't know his name, Billy—yes I do, too! Mrs. Cudahy called him Jarge—−"

"George Weston, that was!" Billy's eyes gleamed. "What else did he say?"

"He said a man named Edward Harris—−" "Sure it wasn't Frank Harris?" "Frank Harris—that was it! He said Harris overheard him— or heard him say so!"

"Harris didn't hear anything that the old man didn't mean to have him hear," said Billy grimly. "But that only makes it the more probably true! Lord, Lord, I wonder where I can get hold of Weston!"

"He's going to be at that conference, at half−past five," Susan assured him. He gave her an amused look.

"Aren't you the little Foxy−Quiller!" he said. "Gosh, I do love to have you out here, Sue!" he added, grinning like a happy small boy. "This is Rassette's, where I'm staying," he said, stopping before the very prettiest and gayest of little gardens. "Come in and meet Mrs. Rassette."

Susan went in to meet the blonde, pretty, neatly aproned little lady of the house.

"The boys already are upstairs, Mr. Oliver," said Mrs. Rassette, and as Billy went up the little stairway with flying leaps, she led Susan into her clean little parlor. Susan noticed a rug whose design was an immense brown dog, a lamp with a green, rose−wreathed shade, a carved wooden clock, a little mahogany table beautifully inlaid with white holly, an enormous pair of mounted antlers, and a large concertina, ornamented with a mosaic design in mother−of−pearl. The wooden floor here, and in the hall, was unpainted, but immaculately clean and the effect of the whole was clean and gay and attractive.

"You speak very wonderful English for a foreigner, Mrs. Rassette."

"I?" The little matron showed her white teeth. "But I was born in New Jersey," she explained, "only when I am seven my Mama sends me home to my Grandma, so that I shall know our country. It is a better country for the working people," she added, with a smile, and added apologetically, "I must look into my kitchen; I am afraid my boy shall fall out of his chair."

"Oh, let's go out!" Susan followed her into a kitchen as spotless as the rest of the house, and far more attractive. The floor was cream− white, the woodwork and the tables white, and immaculate blue saucepans hung above an immaculate sink.

Three babies, the oldest five years old, were eating their supper in the evening sunshine, and now fixed their solemn blue eyes upon the guest. Susan thought they were the cleanest babies she had ever seen; through their flaxen mops she could see their clean little heads, their play−dresses were protected by checked gingham aprons

worked in cross−stitch designs. Marie and Mina and Ernie were kissed in turn, after their mother had wiped their rosy little faces with a damp cloth.

"I am baby−mad!" said Susan, sitting down with the baby in her lap. "A strike is pretty hard, when you have these to think of, isn't it?" she asked sympathetically.

"Yes, we don't wish that we should move," Mrs. Rassette agreed placidly, "We have been here now four years, and next year it is our hope that we go to our ranch."

"Oh, have you a ranch?" asked Susan.

"We are buying a little ranch, in the Santa Clara valley," the other woman said, drawing three bubbling Saucepans forward on her shining little range. "We have an orchard there, and there is a town nearby where Joe shall have a shop of his own. And there is a good school! But until my Marie is seven, we think we shall stay here. So I hope the strike will stop. My husband can always get work in Los Angeles, but it is so far to move, if we must come back next year!"

Susan watched her, serenely beginning to prepare the smallest girl for bed; the helpful Marie trotting to and fro with nightgowns and slippers. All the while the sound of men's voices had been rising and falling steadily in an upstairs room. Presently they heard the scraping of chairs on a bare floor, and a door slammed.

Billy Oliver put his head into the kitchen. He looked tired, but smiled when he saw Susan with the sleepy baby in her lap.

"Hello, Sue, that your oldest? Come on, woman, the Cudahys expect us to dinner, and we've not got much time!"

Susan kissed the baby, and walked with him to the end of the block, and straight through the open door of the Cudahy cottage, and into the kitchen. Here they found Mrs. Cudahy, dashing through preparations for a meal whose lavishness startled Susan. Bottles of milk and bottles of cream stood on the table, Susan fell to stripping ears of corn; there were pop−overs in the oven; Mrs. Cudahy was frying chickens at the stove. Enough to feed the Carroll family, under their mother's exquisite management, for a week!

There was no management here. A small, freckled and grinning boy known as "Maggie's Tim" came breathless from the grocery with a great bottle of fancy pickles; Billy brought up beer from the cellar; Clem Cudahy cut a thick slice of butter from a two−pound square, and helped it into the serving−dish with a pudgy thumb. A large fruit pie and soda crackers were put on the table with the main course, when they sat down, hungry and talkative.

"Well, what do you think of the Ironworks Row?" asked Billy, at about seven o'clock, when the other men had gone off to the conference, and Susan was helping Mrs. Cudahy in the kitchen.

"Oh, I like it!" Susan assured him, enthusiastically. "Only," she added in a lowered tone, with a glance toward Mrs. Cudahy, who was out in the yard talking to Lizzie, "only I prefer the Rassette establishment to any I've seen!"

"The Rassettes," he told her, significantly, "are trained for their work; she just as much as he is! Do you wonder I think it's worth while to educate people like that?"

"But Billy—everyone seems so comfortable. The Cudahys, now,—why, this dinner was fit for a king—if it had been served a little differently!"

"Oh, Clem's a rich man, as these men go," Billy said. "He's got two flats he rents, and he's got stock! And they've three married sons, all prosperous."

"Well, then, why do they live here?"

"Why wouldn't they? You think that it's far from clubs and shops and theaters and libraries, but they don't care for these things. They've never had time for them, they've never had time to garden, or go to clubs, and consequently they don't miss them. But some day, Sue," said Billy, with a darkening face, "some day, when these people have the assurance that their old age is to be protected and when they have easier hours, and can get home in daylight, then you'll see a change in laborers' houses!"

"And just what has a strike like this to do with that, Billy?" said Susan, resting her cheek on her broom handle.

"Oh, it's organization; it's recognition of rights; it's the beginning!" he said. "We have to stand before we can walk!"

"Here, don't do that!" said Mrs. Cudahy, coming in to take away the broom. "Take her for a walk, Billy," said she, "and show her the neighborhood." She laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Now, don't ye worry about the

men coming back," said she kindly, "they'll be back fast enough, and wid good news, too!"

"I'm going to stay overnight with Mrs. Cudahy," said Susan, as they walked away.

"You are!" he stopped short, in amazement.

"Yes, I am I" Susan returned his smile with another. "I could no more go home now than after the first act of a play!" she confessed.

"Isn't it damned interesting?" he said, walking on.

"Why, yes," she said. "It's real at last—it's the realest thing I ever saw in my life! Everything's right on the surface, and all kept within certain boundaries. In other places, people come and go in your lives. Here, everybody's your neighbor. I like it! It could be perfect; just fancy if the Carrolls had one house, and you another, and I a third, and Phil and his wife a fourth—wouldn't it be like children playing house! And there's another thing about it, Billy," Susan went on enthusiastically, "it's honest! These people are really worried about shoes and rent and jobs—there's no money here to keep them from feeling everything! Think what a farce a strike would be if every man in it had lots of money! People with money CAN'T get the taste of really living!"

"Ah, well, there's a lot of sin and wretchedness here now!" he said sadly. "Women drinking—men acting like brutes! But some day, when the liquor traffic is regulated, and we have pension laws, and perhaps the single tax—−"

"And the Right−Reverend William Lord Oliver, R. I., in the Presidential Chair, hooray and Glory be to God—−!" Susan began.

"Oh, you dry up, Susan," Billy said laughing. "I don't care," he added contentedly. "I like to be at the bottom of things, shoving up. And my Lord, if we only pull this thing off—−!"

"It's not my preconceived idea of a strike," Susan said, after a moment's silence. "I thought one had to throw coal, and run around the streets with a shawl over one's head—−"

"In the east, where the labor is foreign, that's about it," he said, "but here we have American−born laborers, asking for their rights. And I believe it's all coming!"

"But with ignorance and inefficiency on one hand, and graft and cruelty on the other, and drink and human nature and poverty adding their complications, it seems rather a big job!" Susan said. "Now, look at these small kids out of bed at this hour of night, Bill! And what are they eating?—Boiled crabs! And notice the white stockings− −I never had a pair in my life, yet every kidlet on the block is wearing them. And look upstairs there, with a bed still airing!"

"The wonder is that it's airing at all," Billy said absently. "Is that the boys coming back?" he asked sharply.

"Now, Bill, why do you worry—−?" But Susan knew it was useless to scold him. They went quietly back, and sat on Mrs. Cudahy's steps, and waited for news. All Ironworks Row waited. Down the street Susan could see silent groups on nearly every door−step. It grew very dark; there was no moon, but the sky was thickly strewn with stars.

It was after ten o'clock when the committee came back. Susan knew, the moment that she saw the three, moving all close together, silently and slowly, that they brought no good news.

As a matter of fact, they brought almost no news at all. They went into Clem Cudahy's dining−room, and as many men and women as could crowded in after them. Billy sat at the head of the table.

Carpenter, the "old man" himself, had stuck to his guns, Clem Cudahy said. He was the obstinate one; the younger men would have conceded something, if not everything, long ago. But the old man had said that he would not be dictated to by any man alive, and if the men wanted to listen to an ignorant young enthusiast—−

"Three cheers for Mr. Oliver!" said a strong young voice, at this point, and the cheers were given and echoed in the street, although Billy frowned, and said gruffly, "Oh, cut it out!"

It was a long evening. Susan began to think that they would talk forever. But, at about eleven o'clock, the men who had been streaming in and out of the house began to disperse, and she and Mrs. Cudahy went into the kitchen, and made a pot of coffee.

Susan, sitting at the foot of the table, poured it, and seasoned it carefully.

"You are going to be well cared for, Mr. Oliver," said Ernest Rassette, in his careful English.

"No such luck!" Billy said, smiling at Susan, as he emptied his cup at a draught. "Well! I don't know that we do any good sitting here. Things seem to be at a deadlock."

"What do they concede, Bill?" Susan asked.

"Oh, practically everything but the recognition of the union. At least, Carpenter keeps saying that if this local agitation was once wiped out,—which is me!—then he'd talk. He doesn't love me, Sue."

"Damn him!" said one of his listeners, a young man who sat with his head in his hands.

"It's after twelve," Billy said, yawning. "Me to the hay! Goodnight, everyone; goodnight, Sue!"

"And annywan that cud get a man like that, and doesn't," said Mrs. Cudahy when he was gone, "must be lookin' for a saint right out av the lit'ny!"

"I never heard of any girl refusing Mr. Oliver," Susan said demurely.

She awoke puzzled, vaguely elated. Sunshine was streaming in at the window, an odor of coffee, of bacon, of toast, drifted up from below. Susan had slept well. She performed the limited toilet necessitated by a basin and pitcher, a comb somewhat beyond its prime, and a mirror too full of sunlight to be flattering.

But it was evidently satisfactory, for Clem Cudahy told her, as she went smiling into the kitchen, that she looked like a streak of sunlight herself. Sunlight was needed; it was a worried and anxious day for them all.

Susan went with Lizzie to see the new Conover baby, and stopped on the way back to be introduced to Mrs. Jerry Nelson, who had been stretched on her bed for eight long years. Mrs. Nelson's bright little room was easily accessible from the street; the alert little suffering woman was never long alone.

"I have to throw good soup out, the way it spoils on me," said Mrs. Nelson's daughter to Susan, "and there's nobody round makes cake or custard but what Mama gets some!"

"I'm a great one for making friends," the invalid assured her happily. "I don't miss nothing!"

"And after all I don't see why such a woman isn't better off than Mary Lord," said Susan later to Billy, "so much nearer the center of things! Of course," she told him that afternoon, "I ought to go home today. But I'm too interested. I simply can't! What happens next?"

"Oh, waiting," he said wearily. "We have a mass meeting this afternoon. But there's nothing to do but wait!"

Waiting was indeed the order of the day. The whole colony waited. It grew hotter and hotter; flies buzzed in and out of the open doorways, children fretted and shouted in the shade. Susan had seen no drinking the night before; but now she saw more than one tragedy. The meeting at three o'clock ended in a more grim determination than ever; the men began to seem ugly. Sunset brought a hundred odors of food, and unbearable heat.

"I've got to walk some of this off," said Billy, restlessly, just before dark. "Come on up and see the cabbage gardens!"

Susan pinned on her wide hat, joined him in silence, and still in silence they threaded the path that led through various dooryards and across vacant lots, and took a rising road toward the hills.

The stillness and soft dusk were very pleasant to Susan; she could find a beauty in carrot−tops and beet greens, and grew quite rapturous over a cow.

"Doesn't the darling look comfortable and countryish, Bill?"

Billy interrupted his musing to give her an absent smile. They sat down on a pile of lumber, and watched the summer moon rise gloriously over the hills.

"Doesn't it seem FUNNY to you that we're right in the middle of a strike, Bill?" Susan asked childishly.

"Funny—! Oh, Lord!"

"Well—−" Susan laughed at herself, "I didn't mean funny! But I'll tell you what I'd do in your place," she added thoughtfully.

Billy glanced at her quickly.

"What YOU'D do?" he asked curiously.

"Certainly! I've been thinking it over, as a dispassionate outsider," Susan explained calmly.

"Well, go on," he said, grinning indulgently.

"Well, I will," Susan said, firing, "if you'll treat me seriously, and not think that I say this merely because the Carrolls want you to go camping with us! I was just thinking—−" Susan smiled bashfully, "I was wondering why you don't go to Carpenter—−"

"He won't see me!"

"Well, you know what I mean!" she said impatiently. "Send your committee to him, and make him this proposition. Say that if he'll recognize the union—that's the most important thing, isn't it?"

"That's by far the most important! All the rest will follow if we get that. But he's practically willing to grant all the rest, EXCEPT the union. That's the whole point, Sue!"

"I know it is, but listen. Tell him that if he'll consent to all the other conditions—why," Susan spread open her hands with a shrug, "you'll get out! Bill, you know and I know that what he hates more than anything or anybody is Mr. William Oliver, and he'd agree to almost ANY terms for the sake of having you eliminated from his future consideration!"

"I—get out?" Billy repeated dazedly. "Why, I AM the union!"

"Oh, no you're not, Bill. Surely the principles involved are larger than any one man!" Susan said pleasantly.

"Well, well—yes—that's true!" he agreed, after a second's silence. "To a certain extent—I see what you mean!—that is true. But, Sue, this is an unusual case. I organized these boys, I talked to them, and for them. They couldn't hold together without me—they'll tell you so themselves!"

"But, Billy, that's not logic. Suppose you died?"

"Well, well, but by the Lord Harry I'm not going to die!" he said heatedly. "I propose to stick right here on my job, and if they get a bunch of scabs in here they can take the consequences! The hour of organized labor has come, and we'll fight the thing out along these lines—−"

"Through your hat—that's the way you're talking now!" Susan said scornfully. "Don't use those worn−out phrases, Bill; don't do it! I'm sick of people who live by a bunch of expressions, without ever stopping to think whether they mean anything or not! You're too big and too smart for that, Bill! Now, here you've given the cause a splendid push up, you've helped these particular men! Now go somewhere else, and stir up more trouble. They'll find someone to carry it on, don't you worry, and meanwhile you'll be a sort of idol—all the more influential for being a martyr to the cause!"

Billy did not answer. He got up and walked away from her, turned, and came slowly back.

"I've been here ten years," he said then, and at the sound of pain in his voice the girl's heart began to ache for him. "I don't believe they'd stand for it," he added presently, with more hope. And finally, "And I don't know what I'd do!"

"Well, that oughtn't to influence you," Susan said bracingly.

"No, you're quite right. That's not the point," he agreed quickly.

Presently she saw him lean forward in the darkness, and put his head in his hands. Susan longed to put her arm about him, and draw the rough head to her shoulder and comfort him.

At breakfast time the next morning, Billy walked into Mrs. Cudahy's dining−room, very white, very serious, determined lines drawn about his firm young mouth. Susan looked at him, half−fearful, half− pitying.

"How late did you walk, Bill?" she asked, for he had gone out again after bringing her back to the house the night before.

"I didn't go to bed," he said briefly. He sat down by the table. "Well, I guess Miss Brown put her finger on the very heart of the matter, Clem," said he.

"And how's that?" asked Clem Cudahy. His wife, in the very act of pouring the newcomer a cup of coffee, stopped with arrested arm. Susan experienced a sensation of panic.

"Oh, but I didn't mean anything!" she said eagerly. "Don't mind what I said, Bill!"

But the matter had been taken out of her hands now, and in less than an hour the news spread over the entire settlement. Mr. Oliver was going to resign!

The rest of the morning and the early afternoon went by in a confused rush. At three o'clock Billy, surrounded by vociferous allies, walked to the hall, for a stormy and exhausting meeting.

"The boys wouldn't listen to him at all at first," said Clem, in giving the women an account of it, later. "But eventually they listened, and eventually he carried the day. It was all too logical to be ignored and turned aside, he told them. They had not been fighting for any personal interest, or any one person. They had asked for this change, and that, and the other,—and these things they might still win. He, after all, had nothing to do with the issue; as a recognized labor union they might stand on their own feet."

After that the two committees met, in old Mr. Carpenter's office, and Billy came home to Susan and Mrs. Cudahy, and sat for a tense hour playing moodily with Lizzie's baby.

Then the committee came back, almost as silently as it had come last night. But this time it brought news. The strike was over.

Very quietly, very gravely, they made it known that terms had been reached at last. Practically everything had been granted, on the single condition that William Oliver resign from his position in the Iron Works, and his

presidency of the union.

Billy congratulated them. Susan knew that he was so emotionally shaken, and so tired, as to be scarcely aware of what he was doing and saying. Men and women began to come in and discuss the great news. There were some tears; there was real grief on more than one of the hard young faces.

"I'll see all you boys again in a day or two," Billy said. "I'm going over to Sausalito to−night,—I'm all in! We've won, and that's the main thing, but I want you to let me off quietly to−night,—we can go over the whole thing later.

"Gosh, about one cheer, and I would have broken down like a kid!" he said to Susan, on the car. Rassette and Clem had escorted them thither; Mrs. Cudahy and Lizzie walking soberly behind them, with Susan. Both women kissed Susan good−bye, and Susan smiled through her tears as she saw the last of them.

"I'll take good care of him," she promised the old woman. "He's been overdoing it too long!"

"Lord, it will be good to get away into the big woods," said Billy. "You're quite right, I've taken the whole thing too hard!"

"At the same time," said Susan, "you'll want to get back to work, sooner or later, and, personally, I can't imagine anything else in life half as fascinating as work right there, among those people, or people like them!"

"Then you can see how it would cut a fellow all up to leave them?" he asked wistfully.

"See!" Susan echoed. "Why, I'm just about half−sick with homesickness myself!"

CHAPTER V

The train went on and on and on; through woods wrapped in dripping mist, and fields smothered in fog. The unseasonable August afternoon wore slowly away. Betsey, fitting her head against the uncomfortable red velvet back of the seat, dozed or seemed to doze. Mrs. Carroll opened her magazine over and over again, shut it over and over again, and stared out at the landscape, eternally slipping by. William Oliver, seated next to Susan, was unashamedly asleep, and Susan, completing the quartette, looked dreamily from face to face, yawned suppressedly, and wrestled with "The Right of Way."

They were making the six hours' trip to the big forest for a month's holiday, and it seemed to each one of the four that they had been in the train a long, long time. In the racks above their heads were coats and cameras, suit−cases and summer hats, and a long cardboard box, originally intended for "Gents' medium, ribbed, white," but now carrying fringed napkins and the remains of a luncheon.

It had all been planned a hundred times, under the big lamp in the Sausalito sitting−room. The twelve o'clock train—Farwoods Station at five—an hour's ride in the stage—six o'clock. Then they would be at the cabin, and another hour—say—would be spent in the simplest of housewarming. A fire must be built to dry bedding after the long months, and to cook bacon and eggs, and just enough unpacking to find night−wear and sheets. That must do for the first night.

"But we'll sit and talk over the fire," Betsey would plead. "Please, Mother! We'll be all through dinner at eight o'clock I"

The train however was late, nearly half−an−hour late, when they reached Farwoods. The stage, pleasant enough in pleasant weather, was disgustingly cramped and close inside. Susan and Betsey were both young enough to resent the complacency with which Jimmy climbed up, with his dog, beside the driver.

"You let him stay in the baggage−car with Baloo all the way, Mother," Betts reproached her, flinging herself recklessly into the coach, "and now you're letting him ride in the rain!"

"Well, stop falling over everything, for Heaven's sake, Betts!" Susan scolded. "And don't step on the camera! Don't get in, Billy,— I say DON'T GET IN! Well, why don't you listen to me then! These things are all over the floor, and I have to—−"

"I have to get in, it's pouring,—don't be such a crab, Sue!" Billy said pleasantly. "Lord, what's that! What did I break?"

"That's the suitcase with the food in it," Susan snapped. "PLEASE wait a minute, Betts!—All right," finished Susan bitterly, settling herself in a dark corner, "tramp over everything, I don't care!"

"If you don't care, why are you talking about it?" asked Betts.

"He says that we'll have to get out at the willows, and walk up the trail," said Mrs. Carroll, bending her tall head, as she entered the stage, after a conversation with the driver. "Gracious sakes, how things have been tumbled in! Help me pile these things up, girls!"

"I was trying to," Susan began stiffly, leaning forward to do her share. A sudden jolt of the starting stage brought her head against Betts with a violent concussion. After that she sat back in magnificent silence for half the long drive.

They jerked and jolted on the uneven roads, the rain was coming down more steadily now, and finally even Jimmy and the shivering Baloo had to come inside the already well−filled stage.

It was quite dark when they were set down at the foot of the overgrown trail, and started, heavily loaded, for the cabin. Wind sighed and swept through the upper branches of the forest, boughs creaked and whined, the ground underfoot was spongy with moisture, and the air very cold.

The cabin was dark and deserted looking; a drift of tiny redwood branches carpeted the porch. The rough steps ran water. Once inside, they struck matches and lighted a candle.

Cold, darkness and disorder everybody had expected to find. But it was a blow to discover that the great stone fireplace, the one real beauty of the room, and the delight of every chilly evening, had been brought down by some winter gale. A bleak gap marked its once hospitable vicinity, cool air rushed in where the breath of dancing flames had so often rushed out, and, some in a great heap on the hearth, and some flung in muddy confusion to the

four corners of the room, the sooty stones lay scattered.

It was a bad moment for everyone. Betsey began to cry, her weary little head on her mother's shoulder.

"This won't do!" Mrs. Carroll said perplexedly. "B−r−r−r−r! How cold it is!"

"This is rotten," Jimmy said bitterly. "And all the fellows are going to the Orpheum to−night too!" he added enviously.

"It's warm here compared to the bedroom," Susan, who had been investigating, said simply. "The blankets feel wet, they're so cold!"

"And too wet for a camp−fire—" mused the mother.

"And the stage gone!" Billy added.

A cold draught blew open the door and set the candle guttering.

"Oh, I'm so COLD!" Susan said, hunching herself like a sick chicken.

The rest of the evening became family history. How they took their camping stove and its long tin pipe from the basement, and set it up in the woodshed that, with the little bedroom, completed the cabin, how wood from the cellar presently crackled within, how suitcases were opened by maddening candle−light, and wet boots changed for warm slippers, and wet gowns for thick wrappers. How the kettle sang and the bacon hissed, and the coffee−pot boiled over, and everybody took a turn at cutting bread. Deep in the heart of the rain−swept, storm−shaken woods, they crowded into the tiny annex, warm and dry, so lulled by the warm meal and the warm clothes that it was with great difficulty that Mrs. Carroll roused them all for bed at ten o'clock.

"I'm going to sleep with you, Sue," announced Betsey, shivering, and casting an envious glance at her younger brother who, with Billy, was to camp for that night in the kitchen, "and if it's like this to−morrow, I vote that we all go home!"

But they awakened in all the fragrant beauty and stillness of a great forest, on a heavenly August morning. Sunshine flooded the cabin, when Susan opened her eyes, and the vista of redwood boughs beyond the window was shot with long lines of gold. Everywhere were sweetness and silence; blots of bright gold on feathery layers of soft green. High−arched aisles stretched all about the cabin like the spokes of a great wheel; warm currents, heavy with piney sweetness, drifted across the crystal and sparkling brightness of the air. The rain was gone; the swelled creek rushed noisily down a widened course; it was cool now, but the day would be hot. Susan, dressing with her eyes on the world beyond the window, was hastened by a sudden delicious odor of boiling coffee, and the delightful sound of a crackling wood fire.

Delightful were all the sights and sounds and duties of the first days in camp. There must be sweeping, airing, unpacking in the little domicile. Someone must walk four miles to the general store for salt, and more matches, and pancake flour. Someone must take the other direction, and climb a mile of mountain every day or two for milk and eggs and butter. The spring must be cleared, and a board set across the stream; logs dragged in for the fire, a pantry built of boxes, for provisions, and ship−shape disposition made of mugs and plates.

Billy sharpened cranes for their camp−kitchen, swung the kettles over a stone−lined depression, erected a protection of flat redwood boughs. And under his direction the fireplace was rebuilt.

"It just shows what you can do, if you must!" said Susan, complacently eying the finished structure.

"It's handsomer than ever!" Mrs. Carroll said. The afternoon sunlight was streaming in across the newly swept hearth, and touching to brighter colors the Navajo blanket stretched on the floor. "And now we have one more happy association with the camp!' she finished contentedly.

"Billy is wishing he could transfer all his strikers up here," said Susan dimpling. "He thinks that a hundred miles of forest are too much for just a few people!"

"They wouldn't enjoy it," he answered seriously, "they have had no practice in this sort of life. They'd hate it. But of course it's a matter of education—−"

"Help! He's off!" said the irreverent Susan, "now he'll talk for an hour! Come on, Betts, I have to go for milk!"

Exquisite days these for them all, days so brimming with beauty as to be forever memorable. Susan awoke every morning to a rushing sense of happiness, and danced to breakfast looking no more than a gay child, in her bluejacket's blouse, with her bright hair in a thick braid. Busy about breakfast preparations, and interrupted by a hundred little events in the forest or stream all about her, Billy would find her. There was always a moment of heat and hurry, when toast and oatmeal and coffee must all be brought to completion at once, and then they might loiter over their breakfast as long as they liked.

Afterward, Susan and Mrs. Carroll put the house in order, while the others straightened and cleaned the camp outside. Often the talks between the two women ran far over the time their work filled, and Betsey would come running in to ask Mother and Susan why they were laughing. Laughter was everywhere, not much was needed to send them all into gales of mirth.

Usually they packed a basket, gathered the stiff, dry bathing suits from the grass, and lunched far up in the woods. Fishing gear was carried along, although the trout ran small, and each fish provided only a buttery, delicious mouthful. Susan learned to swim and was more proud of her first breathless journey across the pool than were the others with all their expert diving and racing. Mrs. Carroll swam well, and her daughters were both splendid swimmers.

After the first dip, they lunched on the hot shingle, and dozed and talked, and skipped flat stones on the water, until it was time to swim again. All about them the scene was one of matchless beauty. Steep banks, aquiver with ferns, came down on one side of the pool, to the very edge of the crystal water; on the other, long arcades, shot with mellow sunlight, stretched away through the forest. Bees went by on swift, angry journeys, and dragon−flies rested on the stones for a few dazzling palpitating seconds, and were gone again. Black water−bugs skated over the shallows, throwing round shadows on the smooth floor of the pool.

Late in the afternoon, the campers would saunter home, crossing hot strips of meadow, where they started hundreds of locusts into flight, or plunging into the cool green of twilight woods. Back at the camp, there would be the crackle of wood again, with all the other noises of the dying forest day. Good odors drifted about, broiling meat and cooking wild berries, chipmunks and gray squirrels and jays chattered from the trees overhead; there was a whisking of daring tails, a flutter of bold wings.

Daylight lasted for the happy meal, and stars came out above their camp−fire. And while they talked or sang, or sat with serious young eyes watching the flames, owls called far away through the wood, birds chuckled sleepily in the trees, and, where moonlight touched the stream, sometimes a trout rose and splashed.

When was it that Billy always began to take his place at Susan's side, at the campfire, their shoulders almost touching in the dark? When was it that, through all the careless, happy companionship that bound them all, she began to know, with a thrill of joy and pain at her heart, that there were special looks for her, special glad tones for her? She did not know.

But she did know that suddenly all the world seemed Billy,—Billy's arm to cross a stream, Billy's warning beside the swimming pool, Billy's laughter at her nonsense, and Billy's eyes when she looked up from musing over her book or turned, on a trail, to call back to the others, following her. She knew why the big man stumbled over words, grew awkward and flushed when she turned upon him the sisterly gaze of her blue eyes.

And with the knowledge life grew almost unbearably sweet. Susan was enveloped in some strange golden glory; the mere brushing of her hair, or shaking out of her bathing−suit became a rite, something to be done with an almost suffocating sense of significance. Everything she did became intensified, her laughter and her tears were more ready, her voice had new and sweeter notes in it, she glowed like a rose in the knowledge that he thought her beautiful, and because he thought her sweet and capable and brave she became all of these things.

She did not analyze him; he was different from all other men, he stood alone among them, simply because he was Billy. He was tall and strong and clean of heart and sunny of temper, yes—but with these things she did not concern herself,—he was poor, too, he was unemployed, he had neither class nor influence to help him,—that mattered as little.

He was Billy,—genial and clever and good, unconventional, eager to learn, full of simple faith in human nature, honest and unaffected whether he was dealing with the president of a great business, or teaching Jim how to play his reel for trout,—and he had her whole heart. Whether she was laughing at his arguments, agreeing with his theories, walking silently at his side through the woods, or watching the expressions that followed each other on his absorbed face, while he cleaned his gun or scrutinized the detached parts of Mrs. Carroll's coffee−mill, Susan followed him with eyes into which a new expression had crept. She watched him swimming, flinging back an arc of bright drops with every jerk of his sleek wet head; she bent her whole devotion on the garments he brought her for buttons, hoping that he did not see the trembling of her hands, or the rush of color that his mere nearness brought to her face. She thrilled with pride when he came to bashfully consult her about the long letters he wrote from time to time to Clem Cudahy or Joseph Rassette, listened eagerly to his talks with the post−office clerk, the store−keeper, the dairymen and ranchers up on the mountain.

And always she found him good. "Too good for me," said Susan sadly to herself. "He has made the best of everything that ever came his way, and I have been a silly fool whenever I had half a chance."

The miracle was worked afresh for them, as for all lovers. This was no mere attraction between a man and a maid, such as she had watched all her life, Susan thought. This was some new and rare and wonderful event, as miraculous in the eyes of all the world as it was to her.

"I should be Susan Oliver," she thought with a quick breath. An actual change of name—how did other women ever survive the thrill and strangeness of itl "We should have to have a house," she told herself, lying awake one night. A house—she and Billy with a tiny establishment of their own, alone over their coffee−cups, alone under their lamp! Susan's heart went out to the little house, waiting for them somewhere. She hung a dream apron on the door of a dream kitchen, and went to meet a tired dream−Billy at the door—−

He would kiss her. The blood rushed to her face and she shut her happy eyes.

A dozen times a day she involved herself in some enterprise from which she could not extricate herself without his help. Billy had to take heavy logs out of her arms, had to lay a plank across the stretch of creek she could not cross, had to help her down from the crotch of a tree with widespread brotherly arms.

"I thought—I—could—make—it!" gasped Susan, laughing, when he swam after her, across the pool, and towed her ignominiously home.

"Susan, you're a fool!" scolded Billy, when they were safe on the bank, and Susan, spreading her wet hair about her, siren−wise, answered meekly: "Oh, I know it!"

On a certain Saturday Anna and Philip climbed down from the stage, and the joys of the campers were doubled as they related their adventures and shared all their duties and delights. Susan and Anna talked nearly all night, lying in their canvas beds, on a porch flooded with moonlight, and if Susan did not mention Billy, nor Anna allude to the great Doctor Hoffman, they understood each other for all that.

The next day they all walked up beyond the ranch−house, and followed the dripping flume to the dam. And here, beside a wide sheet of blue water, they built their fire, and had their lunch, and afterward spent a long hour in the water. Quail called through the woods, and rabbits flashed out of sight at the sound of human voices, and once, in a silence, a doe, with a bright−eyed fawn clinking after her on the stones, came down to the farther shore for a drink.

"You ought to live this sort of life all the time, Sue!" Billy said idly, as they sat sunning themselves on the wide stone bulkhead that held back the water.

"I? Why?" asked Susan, marking the smooth cement with a wet forefinger.

"Because you're such a kid, Sue—you like it all so much!"

"Knowing what you know of me, Bill, I wonder that you can think of me as young at all," the girl answered drily, suddenly somber and raising shamed eyes to his.

"How do you mean?" he stammered, and then, suddenly enlightened, he added scornfully, "Oh, Lord!"

"That—−" Susan said quietly, still marking the hot cement, "will keep me from ever—ever being happy, Bill—−" Her voice thickened, and she stopped speaking.

"I don't look at that whole episode as you do, Sue," Billy said gruffly after a moment's embarrassed silence. "I don't believe chance controls those things. I often think of it when some man comes to me with a hard−luck story. His brother cheated him, and a factory burned down, and he was three months sick in a hospital— yes, that may all be true! But follow him back far enough and you'll find he was a mean man from the very start, ruined a girl in his home town, let his wife support his kids. It's years ago now perhaps, but his fate is simply working out its natural conclusion. Somebody says that character IS fate, Sue,—you've always been sweet and decent and considerate of other people, and your fate saved you through that. You couldn't have done anything wrong—it's not IN you!"

He looked up with his bright smile but Susan could hear no more. She had scrambled to her feet while he was speaking, now she stopped only long enough to touch his shoulder with a quick, beseeching pressure. The next instant she was walking away, and he knew that her face was wet with tears. She plunged into the pool, and swam steadily across the silky expanse, and when he presently joined her, with Anna and Betts, she was quite herself again.

Quite her old self, and the life and heart of everything they did. Anna laughed until the tears stood in her eyes, the others, more easily moved, went from one burst of mirth to another. They were coming home past the lumber

mill when Billy fell in step just beside her, and the others drifted on without them. There was nothing in that to startle Susan, but she did feel curiously startled, and a little shy, and managed to keep a conversation going almost without help.

"Stop here and watch the creek," said Billy, at the mill bridge. Susan stopped, and they stood looking down at the foaming water, tumbling through barriers, and widening, in a ruffled circle, under the great wheel.

"Was there ever such a heavenly place, Billy?"

"Never," he said, after a second. Susan had time to think his voice a little deep and odd before he added, with an effort, "We'll come back here often, won't we? After we're married?"

"Oh, are we going to be married?" Susan said lightly.

"Well, aren't we?" He quietly put his arm about her, as they stood at the rail, so that in turning her innocent, surprised eyes, she found his face very near. Susan held herself away rigidly, dropped her eyes. She could not answer.

"How about it, Sue?" he asked, very low and, looking up, she found that he was half−smiling, but with anxious eyes. Suddenly she found her eyes brimming, and her lip shook. Susan felt very young, a little frightened.

"Do you love me, Billy?" she faltered. It was too late to ask it, but her heart suddenly ached with a longing to hear him say it.

"Love you I" he said scarcely above his breath. "Don't you know how I love you! I think I've loved you ever since you came to our house, and I gave you my cologne bottle!"

There was no laughter in his tone, but the old memory brought laughter to them both. Susan clung to him, and he tightened his arms about her. Then they kissed each other.

Half an hour behind the others they came slowly down the home trail. Susan had grown shy now and, although she held his hand childishly, she would not allow him to kiss her again. The rapid march of events had confused her, and she amused him by a plea for time "to think."

"Please, please don't let them suspect anything tonight, Bill!" she begged. "Not for months! For we shall probably have to wait a long, long time!"

"I have a nerve to ask any girl to do it!" Billy said gloomily.

"You're not asking any girl. You're asking me, you know!"

"But, darling, you honestly aren't afraid? We'll have to count every cent for awhile, you know!"

"It isn't as if I had been a rich girl," Susan reminded him.

"But you've been a lot with rich people. And we'll have to live in some place in the Mission, like Georgie, Sue!"

"In the Mission perhaps, but not like Georgie! Wait until you eat my dinners, and see my darling little drawing−room! And we'll go to dinner at Coppa's and Sanguinetti's, and come over to Sausalito for picnics,—we'll have wonderful times! You'll see!"

"I adore you," said Billy, irrevelantly.

"Well," Susan said, "I hope you do! But I'll tell you something I've been thinking, Billy," she resumed dreamily, after a silence.

"And pwhats dthat, me dar−r−rlin'?"

"Why, I was thinking that I'd rather—−" Susan began hesitatingly, "rather have my work cut out for me in this life! That is, I'd rather begin at the bottom of the ladder, and work up to the top, than be at the top, through no merit of my own, and live in terror of falling to the bottom! I believe, from what I've seen of other people, that we'll succeed, and I think we'll have lots of fun doing it!"

"But, Sue, you may get awfully tired of it!"

"Everybody gets awfully tired of everything!" sang Susan, and caught his hand for a last breathless run into camp.

At supper they avoided each other's eyes, and assumed an air of innocence and gaiety. But in spite of this, or because of it, the meal moved in an unnatural atmosphere, and everyone present was conscious of a sense of suspense, of impending news.

"Betts dear, do listen!—the SALT," said Mrs. Carroll. "You've given me the spoons and the butter twice! Tell me about to−day," she added, in a desperate effort to start conversation. "What happened?"

But Jimmy choked at this, Betsey succumbed to helpless giggling, and even Philip reddened with suppressed

laughter.

"Don't, Betts!" Anna reproached her.

"You're just as bad yourself!" sputtered Betsey, indignantly.

"I?" Anna turned virtuous, outraged eyes upon her junior, met Susan's look for a quivering second, and buried her flushed and laughing face in her napkin.

"I think you're all crazy!" Susan said calmly.

"She's blushing!" announced Jimmy.

"Cut it out now, kid," Billy growled. "It's none of your business!"

"WHAT'S none of his business?" carroled Betsey, and a moment later joyous laughter and noise broke out,—Philip was shaking William's hand, the girls were kissing Susan, Mrs. Carroll was laughing through tears. Nobody had been told the great news, but everybody knew it.

Presently Susan sat in Mrs. Carroll's lap, and they all talked of the engagement; who had suspected it, who had been surprised, what Anna had noticed, what had aroused Jimmy's suspicions. Billy was very talkative but Susan strangely quiet to−night.

It seemed to make it less sacred, somehow, this open laughter and chatter about it. Why she had promised Billy but a few hours ago, and here he was threatening never to ask Betts to "our house," unless she behaved herself, and kissing Anna with the hilarious assurance that his real reason for "taking" Susan was because she, Anna, wouldn't have him! No man who really loved a woman could speak like that to another on the very night of his engagement, thought Susan. A great coldness seized her heart, and pity for herself possessed her. She sat next to Mrs. Carroll at the camp−fire, and refused Billy even the little liberty of keeping his fingers over hers. No liberties to−night!

And later, tucked by Mrs. Carroll's motherly hands into her little camp bed on the porch, she lay awake, sick at heart. Far from loving Billy Oliver, she almost disliked him! She did not want to be engaged this way, she wanted, at this time of all times in her life, to be treated with dignity, to be idolized, to have her every breath watched. How she had cheapened everything by letting him blurt out the news this way! And now, how could she in dignity draw back—−

Susan began to cry bitterly. She was all alone in the world, she said to herself, she had never had a chance, like other girls! She wanted a home to−night, she wanted her mother and father—−!

Her handkerchief was drenched, she tried to dry her eyes on the harsh hem of the sheet. Her tears rushed on and on, there seemed to be no stopping them. Billy did not care for her, she sobbed to herself, he took the whole thing as a joke! And, beginning thus, what would he feel after a few years of poverty, dark rooms and unpaid bills?

Even if he did love her, thought Susan bursting out afresh, how was she to buy a trousseau, how were they to furnish rooms, and pay rent, "one always has to pay a month's rent in advance!" she thought gloomily.

"I believe I am going to be one of those weepy, sensitive women, whose noses are always red," said Susan, tossing restlessly in the dark. "I shall go mad if I can't get to sleep!" And she sat up, reached for her big, loose Japanese wrapper and explored with bare feet for her slippers.

Ah—that was better! She sat on the top step, her head resting against the rough pillar of the porch, and felt a grateful rush of cool air on her flushed face. Her headache lessened suddenly, her thoughts ran more quietly.

There was no moon yet. Susan stared at the dim profile of the forest, and at the arch of the sky, spattered with stars. The exquisite beauty of the summer night soothed and quieted her. After a time she went noiselessly down the dark pathway to the spring− house for a drink.

The water was deliciously cool and fresh. Susan, draining a second cup of it, jumped as a voice nearby said quietly:

"Don't be frightened—it's me, Billy!"

"Heaven alive—how you scared me!" gasped Susan, catching at the hand he held out to lead her back to the comparative brightness of the path. "Billy, why aren't you asleep?"

"Too happy, I guess," he said simply, his eyes on her.

She held his hands at arm's length, and stared at him wistfully.

"Are you so happy, Bill?" she asked.

"Well, what do you think?" The words were hardly above a whisper, he wrenched his hands suddenly free

from her, and she was in his arms, held close against his heart. "What do you think, my own girl?" said Billy, close to her ear.

"Heavens, I don't want him to care THIS much!" said the terrified daughter of Eve, to herself. Breathless, she freed herself, and held him at arm's length again.

"Billy, I can't stay down here—even for a second—unless you promise not to!"

"But darling—however, I won't! And will you come over here to the fence for just a minute—the moon's coming up!"

Billy Oliver—the same old Billy!—trembling with eagerness to have Susan Brown—the unchanged Susan!—come and stand by a fence, and watch the moon rise! It was very extraordinary, it was pleasant, and curiously exciting, too.

"Well—−" conceded Susan, as she gathered her draperies about her, and went to stand at the fence, and gaze childlishly up at the stars. Billy, also resting elbows on the old rail, stood beside her, and never moved his eyes from her face.

The half−hour that followed both of them would remember as long as they lived. Slowly, gloriously, the moon climbed up the dark blue dome of the sky, and spread her silver magic on the landscape; the valley below them swam in pale mist, clean−cut shadows fell from the nearby forest.

The murmur of young voices rose and fell—rose and fell. There were little silences, now and then Susan's subdued laughter. Susan thought her lover magnificent in the moonlight; what Billy thought of the lovely downcast face, the loose braid of hair that caught a dull gleam from the moon, the slender elbows bare on the rail, the breast that rose and fell, under her light wraps, with Susan's quickened breathing, perhaps he tried to tell her.

"But I must go in!" she protested presently. "This has been wonderful, but I must go in!"

"But why? We've just begun talking—and after all, Sue, you're going to be my wife!"

The word spurred her. In a panic Susan gave him a swift half−kiss, and fled, breathless and dishevelled, back to the porch. And a moment later she had fallen into a sleep as deep as a child's, her prayer of gratitude half−finished.

CHAPTER VI

The days that followed were brightened or darkened with moods so intense, that it was a real, if secret, relief to Susan when the forest visit was over, and sun−burned and shabby and loaded with forest spoils, they all came home again. Jim's first position awaited him, and Anna was assistant matron in the surgical hospital now,—fated to see the man she loved almost every day, and tortured afresh daily by the realization of his greatness, his wealth, his quiet, courteous disregard of the personality of the dark−eyed, deft little nurse. Dr. Conrad Hoffman was seventeen years older than Anna. Susan secretly thought of Anna's attachment as quite hopeless.

Philip and Betts and Susan were expected back at their respective places too, and Billy was deeply interested in the outcome of the casual, friendly letters he had written during the month in camp to Joseph Rassette. These letters had been passed about among the men until they were quite worn out; Clem Cudahy had finally had one or two printed, for informal distribution, and there had been a little sensation over them. Now, eastern societies had written asking for back numbers of the "Oliver Letter," and a labor journal had printed one almost in full. Clement Cudahy was anxious to discuss with Billy the feasibility of printing such a letter weekly for regular circulation, and Billy thought well of the idea, and was eager to begin the enterprise.

Susan was glad to get back to the little "Democrat," and worked very hard during the fall and winter. She was not wholly happy, or, rather, she was not happy all the time. There were times, especially when Billy was not about, when it seemed very pleasant to be introduced as an engaged girl, and to get the respectful, curious looks of other girls. She liked to hear Mrs. Carroll and Anna praise Billy, and she liked Betts' enthusiasm about him.

But little things about him worried her inordinately, sometimes she resented, for a whole silent evening, his absorption in other people, sometimes grew pettish and unresponsive and offended because he could keep neither eyes nor hands from her. And there were evenings when they seemed to have nothing to talk about, and Billy, too tired to do anything but drowse in his big chair, was confronted with an alert and horrified Susan, sick with apprehension of all the long evenings, throughout all the years. Susan was fretted by the financial barrier to the immediate marriage, too, it was humiliating, at twenty−six, to be affected by a mere matter of dollars and cents.

They quarreled, and came home silently from a dinner in town, Susan's real motive in yielding to a reconciliation being her disinclination to confess to Mrs. Carroll,—and those motherly eyes read her like a book,—that she was punishing Billy for asking her not to "show off" before the waiter!

But early in the new year, they were drawn together by rapidly maturing plans. The "Oliver Letter," called the "Saturday Protest" now, was fairly launched. Billy was less absorbed in the actual work, and began to feel sure of a moderate success. He had rented for his office half of the lower floor of an old house in the Mission. Like all the old homes that still stand to mark the era when Valencia Street was as desired an address as California Street is to−day, it stood upon bulkheaded ground, with a fat−pillared wooden fence bounding the wide lawns.

The fence was full of gaps, and the house, with double bay−windows, and with a porch over its front door, was shabby and bare. Its big front door usually stood open; opposite Billy, across a wide hall, was a modest little millinery establishment, upstairs a nurses' home, and a woman photographer occupied the top floor. The "Protest," a slim little sheet, innocent of contributed matter or advertising, and written, proofed and set up by Billy's own hands, was housed in what had been the big front drawing−room. Billy kept house in the two back rooms that completed the little suite.

Susan first saw the house on a Saturday in January, a day that they both remembered afterwards as being the first on which their marriage began to seem a definite thing. It was in answer to Billy's rather vague suggestion that they must begin to look at flats in the neighborhood that Susan said, half in earnest:

"We couldn't begin here, I suppose? Have the office downstairs in the big front room, and clean up that old downstairs kitchen, and fix up these three rooms!"

Billy dismissed the idea. But it rose again, when they walked downtown, in the afternoon sunlight, and kept them in animated talk over a happy dinner.

"The rent for the whole thing is only twenty dollars!" said Susan, "and we can fix it all up, pretty old−fashioned papers, and white paint! You won't know it!"

"I adore you, Sue—isn't this fun?" was William's somewhat indirect answer. They missed one boat, missed

another, finally decided to leave it to Mrs. Carroll.

Mrs. Carroll's decision was favorable. "Loads of sunlight and fresh air, Sue, and well up off the ground!" she summarized it.

The decision made all sorts of madness reasonable. If they were to live there, would this thing fit—would that thing fit—why not see paperers at once, why not look at stoves? Susan and Billy must "get an idea" of chairs and tables, must "get an idea" of curtains and rugs.

"And when do you think, children?" asked Mrs. Carroll.

"June," said Susan, all roses.

"April," said the masterful male.

"Oh, doesn't it begin to seem exciting!" burst from Betsey. The engagement was an old story now, but this revived interest in it.

"Clothes!" said Anna rapturously. "Sue, you must be married in another pongee, you NEVER had anything so becoming!"

"We must decide about the wedding too," Mrs. Carroll said. "Certain old friends of your mother, Sue—−"

"Barrows can get me announcements at cost," Philip contributed.

After that Susan and Billy had enough to talk about. Love−making must be managed at odd moments; Billy snatched a kiss when the man who was selling them linoleums turned his back for a moment; Susan offered him another as she demurely flourished the coffee−pot, in the deep recesses of a hardware shop.

"Do let me have my girl for two seconds together!" Billy pleaded, when between Anna, with samples of gowns, Betts, wild with excitement over an arriving present, and Mrs. Carroll's anxiety that they should not miss a certain auction sale, he had only distracted glimpses of his sweetheart.

It is an undeniable and blessed thing that, to the girl who is buying it, the most modest trousseau in the world seems wonderful and beautiful and complete beyond dreams. Susan's was far from being the most modest in the world, and almost every day brought her beautiful additions to it. Georgie, kept at home by a delicate baby, sent one delightful box after another; Mary Lou sent a long strip of beautiful lace, wrapped about Ferd's check for a hundred dollars.

"It was Aunt Sue Rose's lace," wrote Mary Lou, "and I am going to send you a piece of darling Ma's, too, and one or two of her spoons,"

This reminded Georgie of "Aunt Sue Rose's box," which, unearthed, brought forth more treasures; a thin old silver ladle, pointed tea− spoons connected with Susan's infant memories of castor−oil. Virginia had a blind friend from whom she ordered a wonderful knitted field−coat. Anna telephoned about a patient who must go into mourning, and wanted to sell at less than half its cost, the loveliest of rose−wreathed hats.

Susan and Anna shopped together, Anna consulting a shabby list, Susan rushing off at a hundred tangents. Boxes and boxes and boxes came home, the engagement cups had not stopped coming when the wedding presents began. The spareroom closet was hung with fragrant new clothes, its bed was heaped with tissue−wrapped pieces of silver.

Susan crossed the bay two or three times a week to rush through some bit of buying, and to have dinner with Billy. They liked all the little Spanish and French restaurants, loitered over their sweet black coffee, and dry cheese, explored the fascinating dark streets of the Chinese Quarter, or went to see the "Marionettes" next door to the old Broadway jail. All of it appealed to Susan's hunger for adventure, she wove romances about the French families among whom they dined,—stout fathers, thin, nervous mothers, stolid, claret− drinking little girls, with manes of black hair,—about the Chinese girls, with their painted lips, and the old Italian fishers, with scales glittering on their rough coats.

"We've got to run for it, if we want it!" Billy would say, snatching her coat from a chair. Susan after jabbing in her hatpins before a mirror decorated with arabesques of soap, would rush with him into the street. Fog and pools of rain water all about, closed warehouses and lighted saloons, dark crossings—they raced madly across the ferry place at last, with the clock in the tower looking down on them.

"We're all right now!" Billy would gasp. But they still ran, across the long line of piers, and through the empty waiting−room, and the iron gates.

"That was the closest yet!" Susan, reaching the upper deck, could stop to breathe. There were seats facing the water, under the engine−house, where Billy might put his arm about her unobserved. Their talk went on.

Usually they had the night boat to themselves, but now and then Susan saw somebody that she knew on board. One night she went in to talk for a moment with Ella Saunders. Ella was gracious, casual. Ken was married, as Susan knew,—the newspapers had left nothing to be imagined of the most brilliant of the season's matches, and pictures of the fortunate bride, caught by the cameras as she made her laughing way to her carriage, a white blur of veil and flowers, had appeared everywhere. Emily was not well, said Ella, might spend the summer in the east; Mama was not very well. She asked Susan no questions, and Susan volunteered nothing.

And on another occasion they were swept into the company of the Furlongs. Isabel was obviously charmed with Billy, and Billy, Susan thought, made John Furlong seem rather stupid and youthful.

"And you MUST come and dine with us!" said Isabel. Obviously not in the month before the wedding, Isabel's happy excuses, in an aside to Susan, were not necessary, "—−But when you come back," said Isabel.

"And you with us in our funny little rooms in the Mission," Susan said gaily. Isabel took her husband's arm, and gave it a little squeeze.

"He'd love to!" she assured Susan. "He just loves things like that. And you must let us help get the dinner!"

On Sundays the old walks to the beach had been resumed, and the hills never had seemed to Susan as beautiful as they did this year, when the first spring sweetness began to pierce the air, and the breeze brought faint odors of grass, and good wet earth, and violets. Spring this year meant to the girl's glowing and ardent nature what it meant to the birds, with apple−blossoms and mustard− tops, lilacs and blue skies, would come the mating time. Susan was the daughter of her time; she did not know why all the world seemed made for her now; her heritage of ignorance and fear was too great. But Nature, stronger than any folly of her children, made her great claim none the less. Susan thrilled in the sunshine and warm air, dreamed of her lover's kisses, gloried in the fact that youth was not to pass her by without youth's hour.

By March all Sausalito was mantled with acacia bloom, and the silent warm days were sweet with violets. The sunshine was soft and warm, if there was still chill in the shade. The endless weeks had dragged themselves away; Susan and Billy were going to be married.

Susan walked in a radiant dream, curiously wrapped away from reality, yet conscious, in a new and deep and poignant way, of every word, of every waking instant.

"I am going to be married next week," she heard herself saying. Other women glanced at her; she knew they thought her strangely unmoved. She thought herself so. But she knew that running under the serene surface of her life was a dazzling great river of joy! Susan could not look upon it yet. Her eyes were blinded.

Presents came in, more presents. A powder box from Ella, candle− sticks from Emily, a curiously embroidered tablecloth from the Kenneth Saunders in Switzerland. And from old Mrs. Saunders a rather touching note, a request that Susan buy herself "something pretty," with a check for fifty dollars, "from her sick old friend, Fanny Saunders."

Mary Lou, very handsomely dressed and prosperous, and her beaming husband, came down for the wedding. Mary Lou had a hundred little babyish, new mannerisms, she radiated the complacency of the adored woman, and, when Susan spoke of Billy, Mary Lou was instantly reminded of Ferd, the salary Ferd made at twenty, the swiftness of his rise in the business world, his present importance. Mary Lou could not hide the pity she felt for Susan's very modest beginning. "I wish Ferd could find Billy some nice, easy position," said Mary Lou. "I don't like you to live out in that place. I don't believe Ma would!"

Virginia was less happy than her sister. The Eastmans were too busy together to remember her loneliness. "Sometimes it seems as if Mary Lou just likes to have me there to remind her how much better off she is," said Virginia mildly, to Susan. "Ferd buys her things, and takes her places, and all I can do is admire and agree! Of course they're angels," added Virginia, wiping her eyes, "but I tell you it's hard to be dependent, Sue!"

Susan sympathized, laughed, chattered, stood still under dressmakers' hands, dashed off notes, rushed into town for final purchases, opened gifts, consulted with everyone,—all in a golden, whirling dream. Sometimes a cold little doubt crossed her mind, and she wondered whether she was taking all this too much for granted, whether she really loved Billy, whether they should not be having serious talks now, whether changes, however hard, were not wiser "before than after"?

But it was too late for that now. The big wheels were set in motion, the day was coming nearer and more near. Susan's whole being was tuned to the great event; she felt herself the pivot upon which all her world turned. A hundred things a day brought the happy color to her face, stopped her heart−beats for a second. She had a little

nervous qualm over the announcements; she dreamed for a moment over the cards that bore the new name of Mrs. William Jerome Oliver. "It seems so—so funny to have these things here in my trunk, before I'm married!" said Susan.

Anna came home, gravely radiant; Betsy exulted in a new gown of flimsy embroidered linen; Philip, in the character of best man, referred to a list of last−moment reminders.

Three days more—two days more—then Susan was to be married to− morrow. She and Billy had enough that was practical to discuss the last night, before he must run for his boat. She went with him to the door.

"I'm going to be crazy about my wife!" whispered Billy, with his arms about her. Susan was not in a responsive mood.

"I'm dead!" she said wearily, resting her head against his shoulder like a tired child.

She went upstairs slowly to her room. It was strewn with garments and hats and cardboard boxes; Susan's suitcase, with the things in it that she would need for a fortnight in the woods, was open on the table. The gas flared high, Betsey at the mirror was trying a new method of arranging her hair. Mrs. Carroll was packing Susan's trunk, Anna sat on the bed.

"Sue, dear," said the mother, "are you going to be warm enough up in the forest? It may be pretty cold."

"Oh, we'll have fires!" Susan said.

"Well, you are the COOLEST!" ejaculated Betsey. "I should think you'd feel so FUNNY, going up there alone with Billy—−"

"I'd feel funnier going up without him," Susan said equably. She got into a loose wrapper, braided her hair. Mrs. Carroll and Betsey kissed her and went away; Susan and Anna talked for a few minutes, then Susan went to sleep. But Anna lay awake for a long time thinking,—thinking what it would be like to know that only a few hours lay between the end of the old life and the beginning of the new.

"My wedding day." Susan said it slowly when she awakened in the morning. She felt that the words should convey a thrill, but somehow the day seemed much like any other day. Anna was gone, there was a subdued sound of voices downstairs.

A day that ushered in the full glory of the spring. All the flowers were blooming at once, at noon the air was hot and still, not a leaf stirred. Before Susan had finished her late breakfast Billy arrived; there was talk of tickets and train time before she went upstairs. Mary Lou had come early to watch the bride dress; good, homely, happy Miss Lydia Lord must run up to Susan's room too,—the room was full of women. Isabel Furlong was throned in the big chair, John was to take her away before the wedding, but she wanted to kiss Susan in her wedding gown.

Susan presently saw a lovely bride, smiling in the depths of the mirror, and was glad for Billy's sake that she looked "nice." Tall and straight, with sky−blue eyes shining under a crown of bright hair, with the new corsets setting off the lovely gown to perfection, her mother's lace at her throat and wrists, and the rose−wreathed hat matching her cheeks, she looked the young and happy woman she was, stepping bravely into the world of loving and suffering.

The pretty gown must be gathered up safely for the little walk to church. "Are we all ready?" asked Susan, running concerned eyes over the group.

"Don't worry about us!" said Philip. "You're the whole show to−day!"

In a dream they were walking through the fragrant roads, in a dream they entered the unpretentious little church, and were questioned by the small Spanish sexton at the door. No, that was Miss Carroll,— this was Miss Brown. Yes, everyone was here. The groom and his best man had gone in the other door. Who would give away the bride? This gentleman, Mr. Eastman, who was just now standing very erect and offering her his arm. Susan Ralston Brown—William Jerome Oliver— quite right. But they must wait a moment; the sexton must go around by the vestry for some last errand.

The little organ wheezed forth a march; Susan walked slowly at Ferd Eastman's side,—stopped,—and heard a rich Italian voice asking questions in a free and kindly whisper. The gentleman this side—and the lady here—so!

The voice suddenly boomed out loud and clear and rapid. Susan knew that this was Billy beside her, but she could not raise her eyes. She studied the pattern that fell on the red altar−carpet through a sun−flooded window. She told herself that she must think now seriously; she was getting married. This was one of the great moments of her life.

She raised her head, looked seriously into the kind old face so near her, glanced at Billy, who was very pale.

"I will," said Susan, clearing her throat. She reflected in a panic that she had not been ready for the question, and wondered vaguely if that invalidated her marriage, in the eyes of Heaven at least. Getting married seemed a very casual and brief matter. Susan wished that there was more form to it; pages, and heralds with horns, and processions. What an awful carpet this red one must be to sweep, showing every speck! She and Billy had painted their floors, and would use rugs—−

This was getting married. "I wish my mother was here!" said Susan to herself, perfunctorily. The words had no meaning for her.

They knelt down to pray. And suddenly Susan, whose ungloved hand, with its lilies−of−the−valley, had dropped by her side, was thrilled to the very depth of her being by the touch of Billy's cold fingers on hers.

Her heart flooded with a sudden rushing sense of his goodness, his simplicity. He was marrying his girl, and praying for them both, his whole soul was filled with the solemn responsibility he incurred now.

She clung to his hand, and shut her eyes.

"Oh, God, take care of us," she prayed, "and make us love each other, and make us good! Make us good—−"

She was deep in her prayer, eyes tightly closed, lips moving fast, when suddenly everything was over. Billy and she were walking down the aisle again, Susan's ringed hand on the arm that was hers now, to the end of the world.

"Billy, you didn't kiss her!" Betts reproached him in the vestibule.

"Didn't I? Well, I will!" He had a fragrant, bewildered kiss from his wife before Anna and Mrs. Carroll and all the others claimed her.

Then they walked home, and Susan protested that it did not seem right to sit at the head of the flower trimmed table, and let everyone wait on her. She ran upstairs with Anna to get into her corduroy camping−suit, and dashing little rough hat, ran down for kisses and good−byes. Betsey—Mary Lou—Philip—Mary Lou again.

"Good−bye, adorable darling!" said Betts, laughing through tears.

"Good−bye, dearest," whispered Anna, holding her close.

"Good−bye, my own girl!" The last kiss was for Mrs. Carroll, and Susan knew of whom the mother was thinking as the first bride ran down the path.

"Well, aren't they all darlings?" said young Mrs. Oliver, in the train.

"Corkers!" agreed the groom. "Don't you want to take your hat off, Sue?"

"Well, I think I will," Susan said pleasantly. Conversation languished.

"Tired, dear?"

"Oh, no!" Susan said brightly.

"I wonder if you can smoke in here," Billy observed, after a pause.

"I don't believe you can!" Susan said, interestedly.

"Well, when he comes through I'll ask him—−"

Susan felt as if she should never speak spontaneously again. She was very tired, very nervous, able, with cold dispassion, to wonder what she and Billy Oliver were doing in this close, dirty train,—to wonder why people ever spoke of a wedding−day as especially pleasant,—what people found in life worth while, anyway!

She thought that it would be extremely silly in them to attempt to reach the cabin to−night; far more sensible to stay at Farwoods, where there was a little hotel, or, better yet, go back to the city. But Billy, although a little regretful for the darkness in which they ended their journey, suggested no change of plan, and Susan found herself unable to open the subject. She made the stage trip wedged in between Billy and the driver, climbed down silently at the foot of the familiar trail, and carried the third suitcase up to the cabin.

"You can't hurt that dress, can you, Sue?" said Billy, busy with the key.

"No!" Susan said, eager for the commonplace. "It's made for just this!"

"Then hustle and unpack the eats, will you? And I'll start a fire!"

"Two seconds!" Susan took off her hat, and enveloped herself in a checked apron. There was a heavy chill in the room; there was that blank forbidding air in the dusty, orderly room that follows months of unuse. Susan unpacked, went to and fro briskly; the claims of housekeeping reassured and soothed her.

Billy made thundering journeys for wood. Presently there was a flare of lighted papers in the fireplace, and the heartening snap and crackle of wood. The room was lighted brilliantly; delicious odors of sap mingled with the fragrance from Susan's coffee pot.

"Oh, keen idea!" said Billy, when she brought the little table close to the hearth. "Gee, that's pretty!" he added, as she shook over it the little fringed tablecloth, and laid the blue plates neatly at each side.

"Isn't this fun?" It burst spontaneously from the bride.

"Fun!" Billy flung down an armful of logs, and came to stand beside her, watching the flames. "Lord, Susan," he said, with simple force, "if you only knew how perfect you seem to me! If you only knew how many years I've been thinking how beautiful you were, and how clever, and how far above me——−I"

"Go right on thinking so, darling!" said Susan, practically, escaping from his arm, and taking her place behind the cold chicken. "Do ye feel like ye could eat a little mite, Pa?" asked she.

"Well, I dunno, mebbe I could!" William answered hilariously. "Say, Sue, oughtn't those blankets be out here, airing?" he added suddenly.

"Oh, do let's have dinner first. They make everything look so horrid," said young Mrs. Oliver, composedly carving. "They can dry while we're doing the dishes."

"You know, until we can afford a maid, I'm going to help you every night with the dishes," said Billy.

"Well, don't put on airs about it," Susan said briskly. "Or I'll leave you to do them entirely alone, while I run over the latest songs on the PIARNO. Here now, deary, chew this nicely, and when I've had all I want, perhaps I'll give you some more!"

"Sue, aren't we going to have fun—doing things like this all our lives?"

"*I* think we are," said Susan demurely. It was strange, it had its terrifying phases, but it was curiously exciting and wonderful, too, this wearing of a man's ring and his name, and being alone with him up here in the great forest.

"This is life—this is all good and right," the new−made wife said to herself, with a flutter at her heart. And across her mind there flitted a fragment of the wedding−prayer, "in shamefacedness grave." "I will be grave," thought Susan. "I will be a good wife, with God's help!"

Again morning found the cabin flooded with sunlight, and for all their happy days there the sun shone, and summer silences made the woods seem like June.

"Billum, if only we didn't have to go back!" said William's wife, seated on a stump, and watching him clean trout for their supper, in the soft close of an afternoon.

"Darling, I love to have you sitting there, with your little feet tucked under you, while I work," said William enthusiastically.

"I know," Susan agreed absently. "But don't you wish we didn't?" she resumed, after a moment.

"Well, in a way I do," Billy answered, stooping to souse a fish in the stream beside which he was kneeling. "But there's the 'Protest' you know,—there's a lot to do! And we'll come back here, every year. We'll work like mad for eleven months, and then come up here and loaf."

"But, Bill, how do we know we can manage it financially?" said Susan prudently.

"Oh, Lord, we'll manage it!" he answered comfortably. "Unless, of course, you want to have all the kids brought up in white stockings," grinned Billy, "and have their pictures taken every month!"

"Up here," said Susan dreamily, yet very earnestly too, "I feel so sure of myself! I love the simplicity, I love the work, I could entertain the King of England right here in this forest and not be ashamed! But when we go back, Bill, and I realize that Isabel Wallace may come in and find me pressing my window curtains, or that we honestly can't afford to send someone a handsome wedding present, I'll begin to be afraid. I know that now and then I'll find myself investing in finger−bowls or salted almonds, just because other people do."

"Well, that's not actionable for divorce, woman!"

Susan laughed, but did not answer. She sat looking idly down the long aisles of the forest, palpitating to−day with a rush of new fragrance, new color, new song. Far above, beyond the lacing branches of the redwoods, a buzzard hung motionless in a blue, blue sky.

"Bill," she said presently, "I could live at a settlement house, and be happy all my life showing other women how to live. But when it comes to living down among them, really turning my carpets and scrubbing my own kitchen, I'm sometimes afraid that I'm not big enough woman to be happy!"

"Why, but, Sue dear, there's a decent balance at the bank. We'll build on the Panhandle lots some day, and something comes in from the blue−prints, right along. If you get your own dinner five nights a week, we'll be trotting downtown on other nights, or over at the Carrolls', or up here." Billy stood up. "There's precious little real

poverty in the world," he said, cheerfully, "we'll work out our list of expenses, and we'll stick to it! But we're going to prove how easy it is to prosper, not how easy it is to go under. We're the salt of the earth!"

"You're big; I'm not," said Susan, rubbing her head against him as he sat beside her on the stump. But his nearness brought her dimples back, and the sober mood passed.

"Bill, if I die and you remarry, promise me, oh, promise! that you won't bring her here!"

"No, darling, my second wife is going to choose Del Monte or Coronado!" William assured her.

"I'll bet she does, the cat!" Susan agreed gaily, "You know when Elsie Rice married Jerry Philips," she went on, in sudden recollection, "they went to Del Monte. They were both bridge fiends, even when they were engaged everyone who gave them dinners had to have cards afterwards. Well, it seems they went to Del Monte, and they moped about for a day or two, and, finally, Jerry found out that the Joe Carrs were at Santa Cruz,—the Carrs play wonderful bridge. So he and Elsie went straight up there, and they played every afternoon and every night for the next two weeks,—and all went to the Yosemite together, even playing on the train all the way!"

"What a damn fool class for any nation to carry!" Billy commented, mildly.

"Ah, well," Susan said, joyfully, "we'll fix them all! And when there are model poorhouses and prisons, and single tax, and labor pensions, and eight−hour days, and free wool—THEN we'll come back here and settle down in the woods for ever and ever!"

CHAPTER VII

In the years that followed they did come back to the big woods, but not every year, for in the beginning of their life together there were hard times, and troubled times, when even a fortnight's irresponsibility and ease was not possible. Yet they came often enough to keep fresh in their hearts the memory of great spaces and great silences, and to dream their old dreams.

The great earthquake brought them home hurriedly from their honeymoon, and Susan had her work to do, amid all the confusion that followed the uprooting of ten thousand homes. Young Mrs. Oliver listened to terrible stories, while she distributed second−hand clothing, and filed cards, walked back to her own little kitchen at five o'clock to cook her dinner, and wrapped and addressed copies of the "Protest" far into the night.

With the deeper social problems that followed the days of mere physical need,—what was in her of love and charity rushed into sudden blossoming,—she found that her inexperienced hands must deal. She, whose wifehood was all joy and sanity, all sweet and mysterious deepening of the color of life, encountered now the hideous travesty of wifehood and motherhood, met by immature, ill− nourished bodies, and hearts sullen and afraid.

"You ought not be seeing these things now," Billy warned her. But Susan shook her head.

"It's good for me, Billy. And it's good for the little person, too. It's no credit to him that he's more fortunate than these—he needn't feel so superior!" smiled Susan.

Every cent must be counted in these days. Susan and Billy laughed long afterward to remember that on many a Sunday they walked over to the little General Post Office in Mission Street, hoping for a subscription or two in the mail, to fan the dying fires of the "Protest" for a few more days. Better times came; the little sheet struck roots, carried a modest advertisement or two, and a woman's column under the heading "Mary Jane's Letter" whose claims kept the editor's wife far too busy.

As in the early days of her marriage all the women of the world had been simply classified as wives or not wives, so now Susan saw no distinction except that of motherhood or childlessness. When she lay sick, feverish and confused, in the first hours that followed the arrival of her first−born, she found her problem no longer that of the individual, no longer the question merely of little Martin's crib and care and impending school and college expenses. It was the great burden of the mothers of the world that Susan took upon her shoulders. Why so much strangeness and pain, why such ignorance of rules and needs, she wondered. She lay thinking of tired women, nervous women, women hanging over midnight demands of colic and croup, women catching the little forms back from the treacherous open window, and snatching away the dangerous bottle from little hands—−!

"Miss Allen," said Susan, out of a silence, "he doesn't seem to be breathing. The blanket hasn't gotten over his little face, has it?"

So began the joyous martyrdom. Susan's heart would never beat again only for herself. Hand in hand with the rapture of owning the baby walked the terror of losing him. His meals might have been a special miracle, so awed and radiant was Susan's face when she had him in her arms. His goodness, when he was good, seemed to her no more remarkable than his badness, when he was bad. Susan ran to him after the briefest absences with icy fear at her heart. He had loosened a pin—gotten it into his mouth, he had wedged his darling little head in between the bars of his crib—−!

But she left him very rarely. What Susan did now must be done at home. Her six−days−old son asleep beside her, she was discovered by Anna cheerfully dictating to her nurse "Mary Jane's Letter" for an approaching issue of the "Protest." The young mother laughed joyfully at Anna's concern, but later, when the trained nurse was gone, and the warm heavy days of the hot summer came, when fat little Martin was restless through the long, summer nights with teething, Susan's courage and strength were put to a hard test.

"We ought to get a girl in to help you," Billy said, distressedly, on a night when Susan, flushed and excited, refused his help everywhere, and attempted to manage baby and dinner and house unassisted.

"We ought to get clothes and china and linen and furniture,—we ought to move out of this house and this block!" Susan wanted to say. But with some effort she refrained from answering at all, and felt tears sting her eyes when Billy carried the baby off, to do with his big gentle fingers all the folding and pinning and buttoning that preceded Martin's disappearance for the evening.

"Never mind!" Susan said later, smiling bravely over the dinner table, "he needs less care every day! He'll soon be walking and amusing himself."

But Martin was only staggering uncertainly and far from self− sufficient when Billy Junior came laughing into the family group. "How do women DO it!" thought Susan, recovering slowly from a second heavy drain on nerves and strength.

No other child, of course, would ever mean to her quite what the oldest son meant. The first−born is the miracle, brought from Heaven itself through the very gates of death, a pioneer, merciless and helpless, a little monarch whose kingdom never existed before the day he set up his feeble little cry. All the delightful innovations are for him,—the chair, the mug, the little airings, the remodeled domestic routine.

"Pain in his poor little tum!" Susan said cheerfully and tenderly, when the youthful Billy cried. Under exactly similar circumstances, with Martin, she had shed tears of terror and despair, while Billy, shivering in his nightgown, had hung at the telephone awaiting her word to call the doctor. Martin's tawny, finely shaped little head, the grip of his sturdy, affectionate little arms, his early voyages into the uncharted sea of English speech,—these were so many marvels to his mother and father.

But it had to be speedily admitted that Billy had his own particular charm too. The two were in everything a sharp contrast. Martin's bright hair blew in loose waves, Billy's dark curls fitted his head like a cap. Martin's eyes were blue and grave, Billy's dancing and brown. Martin used words carefully, with a nice sense of values, Billy achieved his purposes with stamping and dimpling, and early coined a tiny vocabulary of his own. Martin slept flat on his small back, a muscular little viking drifting into unknown waters, but drowsiness must always capture Billy alive and fighting. Susan untangled him nightly from his covers, loosened his small fingers from the bars of his crib.

She took her maternal responsibilities gravely. Billy Senior thought it very amusing to see her, buttering a bowl for bread−pudding, or running small garments through her machine, while she recited "The Pied Piper" or "Goblin Market" to a rapt audience of two staring babies. But somehow the sight was a little touching, too.

"Bill, don't you honestly think that they're smarter than other children, or is it just because they're mine?" Susan would ask. And Billy always answered in sober good faith, "No, it's not you, dear, for I see it too! And they really ARE unusual!"

Susan sometimes put both boys into the carriage and went to see Georgie, to whose group a silent, heavy little boy had now been added. Mrs. O'Connor was a stout, complacent little person; the doctor's mother was dead, and Georgie spoke of her with sad affection and reverence. The old servant stayed on, tirelessly devoted to the new mistress, as she had been to the old, and passionately proud of the children. Joe's practice had grown enormously; Joe kept a runabout now, and on Sundays took his well− dressed wife out with him to the park. They had a circle of friends very much like themselves, prosperous young fathers and mothers, and there was a pleasant rivalry in card−parties, and the dressing of little boys and girls. Myra and Helen, colored ribbons tying their damp, straight, carefully ringletted hair, were a nicely mannered little pair, and the boy fat and sweet and heavy.

"Georgie is absolutely satisfied," Susan said wistfully. "Do you think we will ever reach our ideals, Aunt Jo, as she has hers?"

It was a summer Saturday, only a month or two after the birth of William Junior. Susan had not been to Sausalito for a long time, and Mrs. Carroll was ending a day's shopping with a call on mother and babies. Martin, drowsy and contented, was in her arms. Susan, luxuriating in an hour's idleness and gossip, sat near the open window, with the tiny Billy. Outside, a gusty August wind was sweeping chaff and papers before it; passers−by dodged it as if it were sleet.

"I think there's no question about it, Sue," Mrs. Carroll's motherly voice said, cheerfully. "This is a hard time; you and Billy are both doing too much,—but this won't last! You'll come out of it some day, dear, a splendid big experienced woman, ready for any big work. And then you'll look back, and think that the days when the boys needed you every hour were short enough. Character is the one thing that you have to buy this way, Sue,—by effort and hardship and self−denial!"

"But after all," Susan said somberly, so eager to ease her full heart that she must keep her voice low to keep it steady, "after all, Aunt Jo, aren't there lots of women who do this sort of thing year in and year out and DON'T achieve anything? As a means to an end," said Susan, groping for words, "as a road—this is comprehensible, but—but one hates to think of it as a goal!"

"Hundreds of women reach their highest ambitions, Sue," the other woman answered thoughtfully, "without necessarily reaching YOURS. It depends upon which star you've selected for your wagon, Sue! You have just been telling me that the Lords, for instance, are happier than crowned kings, in their little garden, with a state position assured for Lydia. Then there's Georgie; Georgie is one of the happiest women I ever saw! And when you remember that the first thirty years of her life were practically wasted, it makes you feel very hopeful of anyone's life!"

"Yes, but I couldn't be happy as Mary and Lydia are, and Georgie's life would drive me to strong drink!" Susan said, with a flash of her old fire.

"Exactly. So YOUR fulfilment will come in some other way,—some way that they would probably think extremely terrifying or unconventional or strange. Meanwhile you are learning something every day, about women who have tiny babies to care for, about housekeeping as half the women of the world have to regard it. All that is extremely useful, if you ever want to do anything that touches women. About office work you know, about life downtown. Some day just the use for all this will come to you, and then I'll feel that I was quite right when I expected great things of my Sue!"

"Of me?" stammered Susan. A lovely color crept into her thin cheeks and a tear splashed down upon the cheek of the sleeping baby.

Anna's dearest dream was suddenly realized that summer, and Anna, lovelier than ever, came out to tell Sue of the chance meeting with Doctor Hoffmann in the laboratory that had, in two short minutes, turned the entire current of her life. It was all wonderful and delightful beyond words, not a tiny cloud darkened the sky.

Conrad Hoffmann was forty−five years old, seventeen years older than his promised wife, but splendidly tall and strong, and—Anna and Susan agreed—STRIKINGLY handsome. He was at the very top of his profession, managed his own small surgical hospital, and maintained one of the prettiest homes in the city. A musician, a humanitarian, rich in his own right, he was so conspicuous a figure among the unmarried men of San Francisco that Anna's marriage created no small stir, and the six weeks of her engagement were packed with affairs in her honor.

Susan's little sons were presently taken to Sausalito to be present at Aunt Anna's wedding. Susan was nervous and tired before she had finished her own dressing, wrapped and fed the beribboned baby, and slipped the wriggling Martin into his best white clothes. But she forgot everything but pride and pleasure when Betsey, the bride and "Grandma" fell with shrieks of rapture upon the children, and during the whole happy day she found herself over and over again at Billy's side, listening to him, watching him, and his effect on other people, slipping her hand into his. It was as if, after quiet months of taking him for granted, she had suddenly seen her big, clever, gentle husband as a stranger again, and fallen again in love with him.

Susan felt strangely older than Anna to−day; she thought of that other day when she and Billy had gone up to the big woods; she remembered the odor of roses and acacia, the fragrance of her gown, the stiffness of her rose−crowned hat.

Anna and Conrad were going away to Germany for six months, and Susan and the babies spent a happy week in Anna's old room. Betsey was filling what had been Susan's position on the "Democrat" now, and cherished literary ambitions.

"Oh, why must you go, Sue?" Mrs. Carroll asked, wistfully, when the time for packing came. "Couldn't you stay on awhile, it's so lovely to have you here!"

But Susan was firm. She had had her holiday; Billy could not divide his time between Sausalito and the "Protest" office any longer. They crossed the bay in mid−afternoon, and the radiant husband and father met them at the ferry. Susan sighed in supreme relief as he lifted the older boy to his shoulder, and picked up the heavy suitcase.

"We could send that?" submitted Susan, but Billy answered by signaling a carriage, and placing his little family inside.

"Oh, Bill, you plutocrat!" Susan said, sinking back with a great sigh of pleasure.

"Well, my wife doesn't come home every day!" Billy said beaming.

Susan felt, in some subtle climatic change, that the heat of the summer was over. Mission Street slept under a soft autumn haze; the hint of a cool night was already in the air.

In the dining−room, as she entered with her baby in her arms, she saw that a new table and new chairs

replaced the old ones, a ruffled little cotton house−gown was folded neatly on the table. A new, hooded baby−carriage awaited little Billy.

"Oh, BILLY!" The baby was bundled unceremoniously into his new coach, and Susan put her arms about her husband's neck. "You OUGHTN'T!" she protested.

"Clem and Mrs. Cudahy sent the carriage," Billy beamed.

"And you did the rest! Bill, dear—when I am such a tired, cross apology for a wife!" Susan found nothing in life so bracing as the arm that was now tight about her. She had a full minute's respite before the boys' claims must be met.

"What first, Sue?" asked Billy. "Dinner's all ordered, and the things are here, but I guess you'll have to fix things—−"

"I'll feed baby while you give Mart his milk and toast," Susan said capably, "then I'll get into something comfortable and we'll put them off, and you can set the table while I get dinner! It's been a heavenly week, Billy dear," said Susan, settling herself in a low rocker, "but it does seem good to get home!"

The next spring all four did indeed go up to the woods, but it was after a severe attack of typhoid fever on Billy Senior's part, and Susan was almost too much exhausted in every way to trust herself to the rough life of the cabin. But they came back after a month's gypsying so brown and strong and happy that even Susan had forgotten the horrors of the winter, and in mid−summer the "Protest" moved into more dignified quarters, and the Olivers found the comfortable old house in Oakland that was to be a home for them all for a long time.

Oakland was chosen because it is near the city, yet country−like enough to be ideal for children. The house was commonplace, shabby and cheaply built, but to Susan it seemed delightfully roomy and comfortable, and she gloried in the big yards, the fruit trees, and the old−fashioned garden. She cared for her sweet−pea vines and her chickens while the little boys tumbled about her, or connived against the safety of the cat, and she liked her neighbors, simple women who advised her about her plants, and brought their own babies over to play with Mart and Billy.

Certain old interests Susan found that she must sacrifice for a time at least. Even with the reliable, capable, obstinate personage affectionately known as "Big Mary" in the kitchen, they could not leave the children for more than a few hours at a time. Susan had to let some of the old friends go; she had neither the gowns nor the time for afternoon calls, nor had she the knowledge of small current events that is more important than either. She and Billy could not often dine in town and go to the theater, for running expenses were heavy, the "Protest" still a constant problem, and Big Mary did not lend herself readily to sudden changes and interruptions.

Entertaining, in any formal sense, was also out of the question, for to be done well it must be done constantly and easily, and the Oliver larder and linen closet did not lend itself to impromptu suppers and long dinners. Susan was too concerned in the manufacture of nourishing puddings and soups, too anxious to have thirty little brown stockings and twenty little blue suits hanging on the line every Monday morning to jeopardize the even running of her domestic machinery with very much hospitality. She loved to have any or all of the Carrolls with her, welcomed Billy's business associates warmly, and three times a year had Georgie and her family come to a one o'clock Sunday dinner, and planned for the comfort of the O'Connors, little and big, with the greatest pleasure and care. But this was almost the extent of her entertaining in these days.

Isabel Furlong had indeed tried to bridge the gulf that lay between their manners of living, with a warm and sweet insistence that had conquered even the home−loving Billy. Isabel had silenced all of Susan's objections—Susan must bring the boys; they would have dinner with Isabel's own boy, Alan, then the children could all go to sleep in the Furlong nursery, and the mothers have a chat and a cup of tea before it was time to dress for dinner. Isabel's car should come all the way to Oakland for them, and take them all home again the next day.

"But, angel dear, I haven't a gown!" protested Susan.

"Oh, Sue, just ourselves and Daddy and John's mother!"

"I could freshen up my black—−" mused Susan.

"Of course you could!" triumphed Isabel. And her enthusiasm carried the day. The Olivers went to dine and spend the night with the Furlongs, and were afterward sorry.

In the first place, it was expensive. Susan indeed "freshened up" the black gown, but slippers and gloves, a belt and a silk petticoat were new for the occasion. The boys' wardrobes, too, were supplemented with various

touches that raised them nearer the level of young Alan's clothes; Billy's dress suit was pressed, and at the last moment there seemed nothing to be done but buy a new suitcase— his old one was quite too shabby.

The children behaved well, but Susan was too nervous about their behavior to appreciate that until the visit was long over, and the exquisite ease and order of Isabel's home made her feel hopelessly clumsy, shabby and strange. Her mood communicated itself somewhat to Billy, but Billy forgot all lesser emotions in the heat of a discussion into which he entered with Isabel's father during dinner. The old man was interested, tolerant, amused. Susan thought Billy nothing short of rude, although the meal finished harmoniously enough, and the men made an engagement the next morning to see each other again, and thresh out the subject thoroughly.

Isabel kept Susan until afternoon, and strolled with her across the road to show her the pretty house that had been the Wallaces' home, in her mother's lifetime, empty now, and ready to lease.

Susan had forgotten what a charming house it really was, bowered in gardens, flooded with sunshine, old−fashioned, elegant, comfortable and spacious. The upper windows gave on the tree−hidden roofs of San Rafael's nicest quarter, the hotel, the tennis−courts were but a few minutes' walk away.

"Oh, if only you dear people could live here, what bliss we'd have!" sighed Isabel.

"Isabel—it's out of the question! But what's the rent?"

"Eighteen hundred—−" submitted Isabel dubiously. "What do you pay?"

"We're buying, you know. We pay six per cent, on a small mortgage."

"Still, you could rent that house?" Isabel suggested, brightening.

"Well, that's so!" Susan let her fancy play with it. She saw Mart and Billy playing here, in this sheltered garden, peeping through the handsome iron fence at horsemen and motor−cars passing by. She saw them growing up among such princely children as little Alan, saw herself the admired center of a group of women sensible enough to realize that young Mrs. Oliver was of no common clay.

Then she smiled and shook her head. She went home depressed and silent, vexed at herself because the question of tipping or not tipping Isabel's chauffeur spoiled the last half of the trip, and absent−minded over Billy's account of the day, and the boys' prayers.

Other undertakings, however, terminated more happily. Susan went with Billy to various meetings, somehow found herself in charge of a girls' dramatic club, and meeting in a bare hall with a score or two of little laundry−workers, waitresses and factory girls on every Tuesday evening. Sometimes it was hard to leave the home lamp−light, and come out into the cold on Tuesday evenings, but Susan was always glad she had made the effort when she reached the hall and when her own particular friends among the "Swastika Hyacinth Club" girls came to meet her.

She had so recently been a working girl herself that it was easy to settle down among them, easy to ask the questions that brought their confidence, easy to discuss ways and means from their standpoint. Susan became very popular; the girls laughed with her, copied her, confided in her. At the monthly dances they introduced her to their "friends," and their "friends" were always rendered red and incoherent with emotion upon learning that Mrs. Oliver was the wife of Mr. Oliver of the "Protest."

Sometimes Susan took the children to see Virginia, who had long ago left Mary Lou's home to accept a small position in the great institution for the blind. Virginia, with her little class to teach, and her responsibilities when the children were in the refectory and dormitory, was a changed creature, busy, important, absorbed. She showed the toddling Olivers the playroom and conservatory, and sent them home with their fat hands full of flowers.

"Bless their little hearts, they don't know how fortunate they are!" said Virginia, saying good−bye to Mart and Billy. "But *I* know!" And she sent a pitiful glance back toward her little charges.

After such a visit, Susan went home with a heart too full of gratitude for words. "God has given us everything in the world!" she would say to Billy, looking across the hearth at him, in the silent happy evening.

Walking with the children, in the long spring afternoons, Susan liked to go in for a moment to see Lydia Lord in the library. Lydia would glance up from the book she was stamping, and at the sight of Susan and the children, her whole plain face would brighten. She always came out from behind her little gates and fences to talk in whispers to Susan, always had some little card or puzzle or fan or box for Mart and Billy.

"And Mary's well!"

"Well—−! You never saw anything like it. Yesterday she was out in the garden from eight o'clock until ten at night! And she's never alone, everyone in the neighborhood loves her—−!" Miss Lord would accompany them to

the door when they went, wave to the boys through the glass panels, and go back to her desk still beaming.

Happiest of all the times away from home were those Susan spent with the Carrolls, or with Anna in the Hoffmanns' beautiful city home. Anna did not often come to Oakland, she was never for more than a few hours out of her husband's sight, but she loved to have Susan and the boys with her. The doctor wanted a glimpse of her between his operations and his lectures, would not eat his belated lunch unless his lovely wife sat opposite him, and planned a hundred delights for each of their little holidays. Anna lived only for him, her color changed at his voice, her only freedom, in the hours when Conrad positively must be separated from her, was spent in doing the things that pleased him, visiting his wards, practicing the music he loved, making herself beautiful in some gown that he had selected for her.

"It's idolatry, mon Guillaume," said Mrs. Oliver, briskly, when she was discussing the case of the Hoffmanns with her lord. "Now, I'm crazy enough about you, as you well know," continued Susan, "but, at the same time, I don't turn pale, start up, and whisper, 'Oh, it's Willie!' when you happen to come home half an hour earlier than usual. I don't stammer with excitement when I meet you downtown, and I don't cry when you—well, yes, I do! I feel pretty badly when you have to be away overnight!" confessed Susan, rather tamely.

"Wait until little Con comes!" Billy predicted comfortably. "Then they'll be less strong on the balcony scene!"

"They think they want one," said Susan wisely, "but I don't believe they really do!"

On the fifth anniversary of her wedding day Susan's daughter was born, and the whole household welcomed the tiny Josephine, whose sudden arrival took all their hearts by storm.

"Take your slangy, freckled, roller−skating, rifle−shooting boys and be off with you!" said Susan, over the hour−old baby, to Billy, who had come flying home in mid−morning. "Now I feel like David Copperfield's landlady, 'at last I have summat I can love!' Oh, the mistakes that you WON'T make, Jo!" she apostrophized the baby. "The smart, capable, self−sufficient way that you'll manage everything!"

"Do you really want me to take the boys away for a few days?" asked Billy, who was kneeling down for a better view of mother and child.

Susan's eyes widened with instant alarm.

"Why should you?" she asked, cool fingers tightening on his.

"I thought you had no further use for the sex," answered Billy meekly.

"Oh—−?" Susan dimpled. "Oh, she's too little to really absorb me yet," she said. "I'll continue a sort of superficial interest in the boys until she's eighteen or so!"

Sometimes echoes of the old life came to her, and Susan, pondering them for an hour or two, let them drift away from her again. Billy showed her the headlines one day that told of Peter Coleman's narrow escape from death, in his falling airship, and later she learned that he was well again and had given up aeronautics, and was going around the world to add to his matchless collection of semi−precious stones. Susan was sobered one day to hear of Emily Saunders' sudden death. She sat for a long time wondering over the empty and wasted life. Mrs. Kenneth Saunders, with a smartly clad little girl, was caught by press cameras at many fashionable European watering− places; Kenneth spent much of his time in institutions and sanitariums, Susan heard. She heard that he worshipped his little girl.

And one evening a London paper, at which she was carelessly glancing in a library, while Billy hunted through files nearby for some lost reference, shocked her suddenly with the sight of Stephen Bocqueraz's name. Susan had a sensation of shame and terror; she shut the paper quickly.

She looked about her. Two or three young men, hard−working young men to judge from appearance, were sitting with her at the long, magazine−strewn table. Gas−lights flared high above them, soft footfalls came and went in the warm, big room. At the desk the librarian was whispering with two nervous−looking young women. At one of the file−racks, Billy stood slowly turning page after page of a heap of papers. Susan looked at him, trying to see the kind, keen face from an outsider's viewpoint, but she had to give up the attempt. Every little line was familiar now, every little expression. William looked up and caught her smile and his lips noiselessly formed, "I love you!"

"Me?" said Susan, also without a voice, and with her hand on her heart.

And when he said "Fool!" and returned grinning to his paper, she opened her London sheet and turned to the paragraph she had seen.

Not sensational. Mr. Stephen Bocqueraz, the well−known American writer, and Mrs. Bocqueraz, said the

paragraph, had taken the house of Mrs. Bromley Rose−Rogers for the season, and were being extensively entertained. Mr. and Mrs. Bocqueraz would thus be near their daughter, Miss Julia Bocqueraz, whose marriage to Mr. Guy Harold Wetmore, second son of Lord Westcastle, would take place on Tuesday next.

Susan told Billy about it late that night, more because not telling him gave the thing the importance inseparable from the fact withheld than because she felt any especial pang at the opening of the old wound.

They had sauntered out of the library, well before closing time, Billy delighted to have found his reference, Susan glad to get out into the cool summer night.

"Oysters?" asked William. Susan hesitated.

"This doesn't come out of my expenses," she stipulated. "I'm hard−up this week!"

"Oh, no—no! This is up to me," Billy said. So they went in to watch the oyster−man fry them two hot little panfuls, and sat over the coarse little table−cloth for a long half−hour, contentedly eating and talking. Fortified, they walked home, Susan so eager to interrogate Big Mary about the children that she reached the orderly kitchen quite breathless.

Not a sound out of any of them was Big Mary's satisfactory report. Still their mother ran upstairs. Children had been known to die while parents and guardians supposed them to be asleep.

However the young Olivers were slumbering safely, and were wide− awake in a flash, the boys clamoring for drinks, from the next room, Josephine wide−eyed and dewy, through the bars of her crib. Susan sat down with the baby, while Billy opened windows, wound the alarm clock, and quieted his sons.

A full half−hour passed before everything was quiet. Susan found herself lying wakeful in the dark. Presently she said:

"Billy?"

"What is it?" he asked, roused instantly.

"Why, I saw something funny in the London 'News' to−night," Susan began. She repeated the paragraph. Billy speculated upon it interestedly.

"Sure, he's probably gone back to his wife," said Billy. "Circumstances influence us all, you know."

"Do you mean that you don't think he ever meant to get a divorce?"

"Oh, no, not necessarily! Especially if there was any reason for him to get it. I think that, if it had been possible, he would have gotten it. If not, he wouldn't have. Selfish, you know, darned selfish!"

Susan pondered in silence.

"I was to blame," she said finally.

"Oh, no, you weren't, not as much as he was—and he knew it!" Billy said.

"All sensation has so entirely died out of the whole thing," Susan said presently, "that it's just like looking at a place where you burned your hand ten years ago, and trying to remember whether the burn hurt worst, or dressing the burn, or curing the burn! I know it was all wrong, but at the time I thought it was only convention I was going against—I didn't realize that one of the advantages of laws is that you can follow them blind, when you've lost all your moorings. You can't follow your instincts, but you can remember your rule. I've thought a lot about Stephen Bocqueraz in the past few years, and I don't believe he meant to do anything terribly wrong and, as things turned out, I think he really did me more good than harm! I'm confident that but for him I would have married Kenneth, and he certainly did teach me a lot about poetry, Billy, about art and music, and more than that, about the SPIRIT of art and music and poetry, the sheer beauty of the world. So I've let all the rest go, like the fever out of a burn, and I believe I could meet him now, and like him almost. Does that seem very strange to you? Have you any feeling of resentment?"

Billy was silent.

"Billy!" Susan said, in quick uneasiness, "ARE you angry?"

After a tense moment the regular sound of deep and placid breathing answered her. Billy lay on his back sound asleep.

Susan stared at him a moment in the dimness. Then the absurdity of the thing struck her, and she began to laugh.

"I wonder if, when we get to another world, EVERYTHING we do here will seem just ridiculous and funny?" speculated Susan.

CHAPTER VIII

For their daughter's first Thanksgiving Day the Olivers invited a dozen friends to their Oakland house for dinner; the first really large gathering of their married lives.

"We have always been too poor, or I haven't been well, or there's been some other good reason for lying low," wrote Mrs. Oliver to Mrs. Carroll, "but this year the stork is apparently filling previous orders, and our trio is well, and we have been blessed beyond all rhyme and reason, and want to give thanks. Anna and Conrad and the O'Connors have promised, Jinny will be here, and I'm only waiting to hear from you three to write and ask Phil and Mary and Pillsey and the baby. So DO come—for next year Anna says that it's her turn, and by the year after we may be so prosperous that I'll have to keep two maids, and miss half the fun—it will certainly break my heart if I ever have to say, 'We'll have roast turkey, Jane, and mince pies,' instead of making them myself. PLEASE come, we are dying to see the little cousins together, they will be simply heavenly—−"

"There's more than wearing your best dress and eating too much turkey to Thanksgiving," said Susan to Billy, when they were extending the dining−table to its largest proportions on the day before Thanksgiving. "It's just one of those things, like having a baby, that you have to DO to appreciate. It's old−fashioned, and homelike, and friendly. Perhaps I have a commonplace, middle−class mind, but I do love all this! I love the idea of everyone arriving, and a big fire down here, and Betts and her young man trying to sneak away to the sun−room, and the boys sitting in Grandma's lap, and being given tastes of white meat and mashed potato at dinnertime. Me to the utterly commonplace, every time!"

"When you are commonplace, Sue," said her husband, coming out from under the table, where hasps had been absorbing his attention, "you'll be ready for the family vault at Holy Cross, and not one instant before!"

"No, but the consolation is," Susan reflected, "that if this is happiness,—if it makes me feel like the Lord Mayor's wife to have three children, a husband whom most people think is either a saint or a fool,—I think he's a little of both, myself!—and a new sun− room built off my dining−room,—why, then there's an unexpected amount of happiness in this world! In me—a plain woman, sir, with my hands still odorous of onion dressing, and a safety−pin from my daughter's bathing−struggle still sticking into my twelve−and−a− half−cent gingham,—in me, I say, you behold a contented human creature, who confidently hopes to live to be ninety−seven!"

"And then we'll have eternity together!" said the dusty Billy, with an arm about her.

"And not a minute too long!" answered his suddenly serious wife.

"You absolutely radiate content, Sue," Anna said to her wistfully, the next day.

Anna had come early to Oakland, to have luncheon and a few hours' gossip with her hostess before the family's arrival for the six o'clock dinner. The doctor's wife reached the gate in her own handsome little limousine, and Susan had shared her welcome of Anna with enthusiasm for Anna's loose great sealskin coat.

"Take the baby and let me try it on," said Susan. "Woman—it is the most gorgeous thing I ever saw!"

"Conrad says I will need it in the east,—we go after Christmas," Anna said, her face buried against the baby.

Susan, having satisfied herself that what she really wanted, when Billy's ship came in, was a big sealskin coat, had taken her guest upstairs, to share the scuffle that preceded the boys' naps, and hold Josephine while Susan put the big bedroom in order, and laid out the little white suits for the afternoon.

Now the two women were sitting together, Susan in a rocker, with her sleepy little daughter in the curve of her arm, Anna in a deep low chair, with her head thrown back, and her eyes on the baby.

"Radiate happiness?" Susan echoed briskly, "My dear, you make me ashamed. Why, there are whole days when I get really snappy and peevish,—truly I do! running from morning until night. As for getting up in the dead of night, to feed the baby, Billy says I look like desolation—'like something the cat dragged in,' was his latest pretty compliment. But no," Susan interrupted herself honestly, "I won't deny it. I AM happy. I am the happiest woman in the world."

"Yet you always used to begin your castles in Spain with a million dollars," Anna said, half−wistfully, half−curiously. "Everything else being equal, Sue," she pursued, "wouldn't you rather be rich?"

"Everything else never IS equal," Susan answered thoughtfully. "I used to think it was—but it's not! Now, for instance, take the case of Isabel Wallace. Isabel is rich and beautiful, she has a good husband,—to me he's rather

tame, but probably she thinks of Billy as a cave−man, so that doesn't count!—she has everything money can buy, she has a gorgeous little boy, older than Mart, and now she has a girl, two or three months old. And she really is a darling, Nance, you never liked her particularly—−"

"Well, she was so perfect," pleaded Anna smiling, "so gravely wise and considerate and low−voiced, and light−footed—−!"

"Only she's honestly and absolutely all of that!" Susan defended her eagerly, "there's no pose! She really is unspoiled and good—my dear, if the other women in her set were one−tenth as good as Isabel! However, to go back. She came over here to spend the day with me, just before Jo was born, and we had a wonderful day. Billy and I were taking our dinners at a boarding−house, for a few months, and Big Mary had nothing else to do but look out for the boys in the afternoon. Isabel watched me giving them their baths, and feeding them their lunches, and finally she said, 'I'd like to do that for Alan, but I never do!' 'Why don't you?' I said. Well, she explained that in the first place there was a splendid experienced woman paid twenty−five dollars a week to do it, and that she herself didn't know how to do it half as well. She said that when she went into the nursery there was a general smoothing out of her way before her, one maid handing her the talcum, another running with towels, and Miss Louise, as they call her, pleasantly directing her and amusing Alan. Naturally, she can't drive them all out; she couldn't manage without them! In fact, we came to the conclusion that you have to be all or nothing to a baby. If Isabel made up her mind to put Alan to bed every night say, she'd have to cut out a separate affair every day for it, rush home from cards, or from the links, or from the matinee, or from tea—Jack wouldn't like it, and she says she doubts if it would make much impression on Alan, after all!"

"I'd do it, just the same!" said Anna, "and I wouldn't have the nurse standing around, either—and yet, I suppose that's not very reasonable," she went on, after a moment's thought, "for that's Conrad's free time. We drive nearly every day, and half the time dine somewhere out of town. And his having to operate at night so much makes him want to sleep in the morning, so that we couldn't very well have a baby in the room. I suppose I'd do as the rest do, pay a fine nurse, and grab minutes with the baby whenever I could!"

"You have to be poor to get all the fun out of children," Susan said. "They're at their very sweetest when they get their clothes off, and run about before their nap, or when they wake up and call you, or when you tell them stories at night."

"But, Sue, a woman like Mrs. Furlong does NOT have to work so hard," Anna said decidedly, "you must admit that! Her life is full of ease and beauty and power—doesn't that count? Doesn't that give her a chance for self−development, and a chance to make herself a real companion to her husband?" "Well, the problems of the world aren't answered in books, Nance. It just doesn't seem INTERESTING, or worth while to me! She could read books, of course, and attend lectures, and study languages. But—did you see the 'Protest' last week?"

"No, I didn't! It comes, and I put it aside to read—"

"Well, it was a corking number. Bill's been asserting for months, you know, that the trouble isn't any more in any special class, it's because of misunderstanding everywhere. He made the boys wild by saying that when there are as many people at the bottom of the heap reaching up, as there are people at the top reaching down, there'll be no more trouble between capital and labor! And last week he had statistics, he showed them how many thousands of rich people are trying—in their entirely unintelligent ways!—to reach down, and— my dear, it was really stirring! You know Himself can write when he tries!—and he spoke of the things the laboring class doesn't do, of the way it educates its children, of the way it spends its money,— it was as good as anything he's ever done, and it made no end of talk!

"And," concluded Susan contentedly, "we're at the bottom of the heap, instead of struggling up in the world, we're struggling down! When I talk to my girls' club, I can honestly say that I know some of their trials. I talked to a mothers' meeting the other day, about simple dressing and simple clothes for children, and they knew I had three children and no more money than they. And they know that my husband began his business career as a puddler, just as their sons are beginning now. In short, since the laboring class can't, seemingly, help itself, and the upper class can't help it, the situation seems to be waiting for just such people as we are, who know both sides!"

"A pretty heroic life, Susan!" Anna said shaking her head.

"Heroic? Nothing!" Susan answered, in healthy denial. "I like it! I've eaten maple mousse and guinea−hen at the Saunders', and I've eaten liver−and−bacon and rice pudding here, and I like this best. Billy's a hero, if you like," she added, suddenly, "Did I tell you about the fracas in August?"

"Not between you and Billy?" Anna laughed.

"No−o−o! We fight," said Susan modestly, "when he thinks Mart ought to be whipped and I don't, or when little Billums wipes sticky fingers on his razor strop, but he ain't never struck me, mum, and that's more than some can say! No, but this was really quite exciting," Susan resumed, seriously. "Let me see how it began—oh, yes!—Isabel Wallace's father asked Billy to dinner at the Bohemian Club,—in August, this was. Bill was terribly pleased, old Wallace introduced him to a lot of men, and asked him if he would like to be put up—−"

"Conrad would put him up, Sue—−" Anna said jealously.

"My dear, wait—wait until you hear the full iniquity of that old divil of a Wallace! Well, he ordered cocktails, and he 'dear boyed' Bill, and they sat down to dinner. Then he began to taffy the 'Protest,' he said that the railroad men were all talking about it, and he asked Bill what he valued it at. Bill said it wasn't for sale. I can imagine just how graciously he said it, too! Well, old Mr. Wallace laughed, and he said that some of the railroad men were really beginning to enjoy the way Billy pitched into them; he said he had started life pretty humbly himself; he said that he wanted some way of reaching his men just now, and he thought that the 'Protest' was the way to do it. He said that it was good as far as it went, but that it didn't go far enough. He proposed to work its circulation up into hundreds of thousands, to buy it at Billy's figure, and to pay him a handsome salary,—six thousand was hinted, I believe,—as editor, under a five−year contract! Billy asked if the policy of the paper was to be dictated, and he said, no, no, everything left to him! Billy came home dazed, my dear, and I confess I was dazed too. Mr. Wallace had said that he wanted Billy, as a sort of side−issue, to live in San Rafael, so that they could see each other easily,—and I wish you could see the house he'd let us have for almost nothing! Then there would be a splendid round sum for the paper, thirty or forty thousand probably, AND the salary! I saw myself a lady, Nance, with a 'rising young man' for a husband—− "

"But, Sue—but, Sue," Anna said eagerly, "Billy would be editor— Billy would be in charge—there would be a contract—nobody could call that selling the paper, or changing the policy of the 'Protest'—−"

"Exactly what I said!" laughed Susan. "However, the next morning we rushed over to the Cudahys—you remember that magnificent old person you and Conrad met here? That's Clem. And his wife is quite as wonderful as he is. And Clem of course tore our little dream to rags—−"

"Oh, HOW?" Anna exclaimed regretfully.

"Oh, in every way. He made it betrayal, and selling the birthright. Billy saw it at once. As Clem said, where would Billy be the minute they questioned an article of his, or gave him something for insertion, or cut his proof? And how would the thing SOUND—a railroad magnate owning the 'Protest'?"

"He might do more good that way than in any other," mourned Anna rebelliously, "and my goodness, Sue, isn't his first duty to you and the children?"

"Bill said that selling the 'Protest' would make his whole life a joke," Susan said. "And now I see it, too. Of course I wept and wailed, at the time, but I love greatness, Nance, and I truly believe Billy is great!" She laughed at the artless admission. "Well, you think Conrad is great," finished Susan, defending herself.

"Yes, sometimes I wish he wasn't—yet," Anna said, sighing. "I never cooked a meal for him, or had to mend his shirts!" she added with a rueful laugh. "But, Sue, shall you be content to have Billy slave as he is slaving now," she presently went on, "right on into middle− age?"

"He'll always slave at something," Susan said, cheerfully, "but that's another funny thing about all this fuss—the boys were simply WILD with enthusiasm when they heard about old Wallace and the 'Protest,' trust Clem for that! And Clem assured me seriously that they'd have him Mayor of San Francisco yet!—However," she laughed, "that's way ahead! But next year Billy is going east for two months, to study the situation in different cities, and if he makes up his mind to go, a newspaper syndicate has offered him enough money, for six articles on the subject, to pay his expenses! So, if your angel mother really will come here and live with the babies, and all goes well, I'm going, too!"

"Mother would do anything for you," Anna said, "she loves you for yourself, and sometimes I think that she loves you for—for Jo, you know, too! She's so proud of you, Sue—−"

"Well, if I'm ever anything to be proud of, she well may be!" smiled Susan, "for, of all the influences of my life—a sentence from a talk with her stands out clearest! I was moping in the kitchen one day, I forget what the especial grievance was, but I remember her saying that the best of life was service—that any life's happiness may be measured by how much it serves!"

Anna considered it, frowning.

"True enough of her life, Sue!"

"True of us all! Georgie, and Alfie, and Virginia! And Mary Lou,— did you know that they had a little girl? And Mary Lou just divides her capacity for adoration into two parts, one for Ferd and one for Marie−Louise!"

"Well, you're a delicious old theorist, Sue! But somehow you believe in yourself, and you always do me good!" Anna said laughing. "I share with Mother the conviction that you're rather uncommon—one watches you to see what's next!"

"Putting this child in her crib is next, now," said Susan flushing, a little embarrassed. She lowered Josephine carefully on the little pillow. "Best—girl—her—mudder—ever—did—HAB!" said Susan tenderly as the transfer was accomplished. "Come on, Nance!" she whispered, "we'll go down and see what Bill is doing."

So they went down, to add a score of last touches to the orderly, homelike rooms, to cut grape−fruit and taste cranberry sauce, to fill vases with chrysanthemums and ferns, and count chairs for the long table.

"This is fun!" said Susan to her husband, as she filled little dishes with nuts and raisins in the pantry and arranged crackers on a plate.

"You bet your life it's fun!" agreed Billy, pausing in the act of opening a jar of olives. "You look so pretty in that dress, Sue," he went on, contentedly, "and the kids are so good, and it seems dandy to be able to have the family all here! We didn't see this coming when we married on less than a hundred a month, did we?"

He put his arm about her, they stood looking out of the window together.

"We did not! And when you were ill, Billy—and sitting up nights with Mart's croup!" Susan smiled reminiscently.

"And the Thanksgiving Day the milk−bill came in for five months— when we thought we'd been paying it!"

"We've been through some TIMES, Bill! But isn't it wonderful to—to do it all together—to be married?"

"You bet your life it's wonderful," agreed the unpoetic William.

"It's the loveliest thing in the world," his wife said dreamily. She tightened his arm about her and spoke half aloud, as if to herself. "It IS the Great Adventure!" said Susan.