High Fences

GRACE S. RICHMOND

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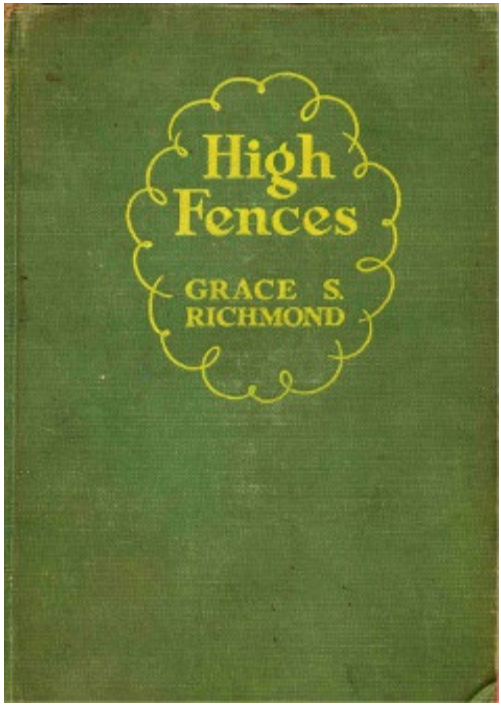
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By

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A GUEST *coming to the country falls almost instantly asleep. She had always known that there was nothing in the country to keep one awake.*

X

MORE *sleep. Merciful heavens!--is that what she came for? Precisely, though she didn't know it.*

XI

A TOWN-BRED *writer views a country-bred writer's attic workshop. She is unable to understand how chips can fly in such a spot. Too many views from the windows. She knows that real work can only be accomplished in small dark rooms, with artificial lights.*

XII

ASTONISHING, *how much fun may be had in the country, and at a dance with people who mostly never have seen the Big Town. Who ever supposed country people could dance so that one would care to join them*?

XIII

AFTER *all, a borrowed notebook and pencil go into action up here in the country. There actually is something to record--something that has come right down out of the Blue*!

XIV

WELL! *The country proves positively dangerous! High explosives are stored there, which let go unexpectedly. The train can't bear us back too fast to the town and safety.*

XV

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XVI

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XVII

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XVIII

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XIX

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power. What is to be done?

XX

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XXI

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XXII

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XXIII

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XXIV

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XXV

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XXVI

Much *discussion of books lately out, and a report is made upon the author of one of them. It seems that all authors are not frumps--and how strange that is! Remarkable how David is able to preserve his attitude of entire detachment.*

XXVII

Will *Ross go to the country again--again?--for business reasons, this time? And stay four interminable months? How can it be thought of? Still, she thinks of it.*

XXVIII

Other *people's opinions, dissuasions, attempts to decide questions of moment which one can only decide for oneself. Why will they put in their oars? But they always do.*

XXIX

David *and Susan attempt to spend a day together, as of old. The only trouble is that their ideas as to how to enjoy a holiday have by now become dissimilar.*

XXX

David *notes that substitutions cannot always be made to substitute. Everybody has to find that out, sooner or later.*

XXXI

Susan *plays a high card which seems to have been up her sleeve all the time. David is amazed at her, but what can he do? Certainly he can't put her out of the game.*

XXXII

A train *goes into the country, inexorably this time. The die is cast for the summer. Well, after all, why not cast a die, now and then, and see what comes of it?*

XXXIII

Letters ... *Now letters look innocent enough, but there's seldom any knowing what they contain--if addressed to other people. Once in a while somebody reads one aloud, which may or may not help things.*

XXXIV

Tragedy *is always lurking somewhere. As much of it--in proportion--in the country as in the town.*

XXXV

The *country doctor speaks his mind over the long-distance telephone. It's a wonder he isn't heard a hundred miles away without any connection by wire whatever.*

XXXVI

David's *affairs exclusively. He has never heard of the Country Bookshop, therefore he hasn't been bothered with thoughts about it.*

XXXVII

The *bookshop does a rushing business, as might be expected on Saturday evening. But not many books are bought.*

XXXVIII

There's *nothing like having things out, no matter how the discussion turns. Let's get right down to absolute frankness--it's the only way.*

XXXIX

If the *bookshop makes a million in one short season, there's nobody more pleased than Charlie Higgins, who keeps the village inn. He wasn't important enough to go into the list of Characters, but he's been looking on with interest for a good while.*

CHARACTERS

David MacRoss--*He lives in the country, but has been known to leave it, rather often. Wherever he is, he carries a notebook.*

Ross Collins--*She knows nothing of the country, and cares less. Why should she? She has a tremendous lot to do, right where she is.*

William and Lucille Drummond--*They have taken pains to forget the country as fast as possible. So we don't bother with them much.*

Kendall and Ethel Cheney--*They wouldn't recognize the country if they saw it. Necessarily this fact narrows their understanding of life, though they would laugh loudly at such an idea.*

Madge Winthrop--*She is essentially of the Big Town. Her address is one which salespeople note respectfully.*

Thomas Thayer--*He comes from Maine, but prefers sixty-story buildings and the sounds of heavy traffic. He keeps his origin so well disguised one would think he had been born to the noise of steel riveting. He also carries a notebook, but its contents differ radically from those in David MacRoss's.*

Jimmy French--*He is as familiar as his senior, Thayer, with newspaper offices, but admits a touch of homesickness now and then for Wisconsin.*

Hester MacRoss--*She has made a remarkably sane adjustment of her life between town and country. She is a real person--admirably real.*

Susan Sylvester--*She prefers whichever region offers most excitement at the moment, and being young and gay she can usually stir up some wherever she is.*

Eleanor Hallam--*She is probably the least prejudiced of them all, in favor of either habitat, because she knows both extraordinarily well.*

Dr. Sam Reade--*He practises his profession in the country, but has always seen beyond its horizons. He can't be caught by the camera, but a portrait of him is to be found in many memories.*

> Note.--*Notebooks seem to figure over much in this story. They are prying things, and one never knows in whose pockets they may be found. So it isn't strange that parts of the contents of them frequently get printed.*

HIGH FENCES

I

David goes reluctantly whither he would not. His entrance into the story is therefore not voluntary, and he may turn out hard to deal with. But once in, he's here to stay, because he's that sort.

When he came into town that night on the six-ten David MacRoss had had no idea of going to anybody's dinner party. It was the last thing he would have wanted to do if he had known of it beforehand, and had foreseen that there would be no decent and kindly way of getting out of it. But there wasn't, or he would have found it.

His cousin William was lying shivering on the couch, his face flushed, his head aching. William's wife, Lucille, was standing over him, herself dressed for the dinner. By contrast with William's disordered aspect Lucille seemed more than beautifully done for the coming evening. When David came in, his own face ruddy--not with fever but from December rain in the face--Lucille had her brilliant idea, the idea that promised to spoil David's evening. She turned upon him as though he were the only means of rescue from a desperate situation.

"Oh, Davy! Thank heaven! You can go in Billy's place!"

"No, I can't," replied David MacRoss firmly. "Wherever it is, I can't go."

"Don't blame you," muttered William, turning his head so that his nose burrowed still further into his hot pillow. "You can't make him go, Lu, right off the bat like that. Call up Ethel and say it's off."

"I simply can't. She's counting on us--somebody else has failed her at the last minute. I promised her absolutely. Oh, Davy! When you know Billy's clothes fit you like paper on the wall! *Please!*"

"My plans are made for the evening." David set down his bag and went over to his cousin. He and William had been great chums all through their country boyhood, and were still, though their interests were now far apart, the best of friends. "What is it? Influenza?" He laid a sympathetic hand upon a red-hot forehead. "You ought to be in bed. I'll stay half an hour and put you to bed. Run along, Lu."

"I can't run along alone to a dinner party, Davy. Oh, please!"

It really was of no use to resist. William wasn't as ill as that. There was nothing important to do for him--he could take his hot bath and put himself to bed. As for David's plans, he had made them, of course, but they didn't include anybody else; no tickets had been bought; nothing was going to be dislocated past help if he gave them up. And he liked Lucille--it was a pity to disappoint a pretty woman who had got herself up so artfully as that. In the end he gave in because, though he could be dogged enough when he chose, he also hated spoiling other people's fun when there was nothing special to be dogged about.

So he went into the tiny guest room which was always ready for him--it was really William's bit of a private workroom and had a couch-bed in it. He put on William's evening clothes, which did indeed fit him like the paper on the wall, for he was a good twenty pounds heavier than his slim cousin. William slaved in an office all day, whereas David lived in the country, a hundred miles out, took plenty of fresh air with his work, and only came into town every other week-end,

to see what had been happening besides what was in the great dailies. New York was New York, and he liked it--a certain amount of it--but he liked the old home up in Connecticut much better, as a steady diet.

He came out of William's room, sleek and fine. In William's dinner coat he looked much better than William ever did, because he had a more attractive face and figure. His shoulders were straighter, his manner more quietly assured. William was nervous; David wasn't. These points do make a difference in a man's appearance.

Lucille, smiling at him over the flattering white fur collar of her evening coat, patted William's head.

"It's a shame to leave you, Billy," she said, "but you know----"

"Oh, run along," urged her husband, burrowing deeper yet into his pillow, as into his only refuge. "I'll be glad to be quiet."

So they went. David hailed a taxi and put Lucille into it, wondering why the sort of thing he was expecting should bore him so horribly in mere anticipation when people like his cousin's wife could be so thrilled at doing what they had done hundreds of times before. There was nothing in these efforts at a good time. Just a getting together of a dozen people, none of whom were particularly remarkable or interesting to him--they couldn't be, or they wouldn't have belonged in William's and Lucille's set. He knew that set inside out and back again--he had met them all at William's apartment times enough to know what they were like. Good enough fellows, sleekly dressed, making money and wanting to talk about methods of making more. Their wives, young women who took excellent care of their faces and hair and hands, dressed to surpass their husbands in lateness of mode, and wore a constant air of eagerness to have the best possible time that could be had by the means at their disposal. An evening with these people meant cocktails, joking, laughter; more cocktails, increasing laughter rapidly becoming boisterous, bridge with higher and higher stakes, cooking something in a chafing dish sometime after midnight; or, more likely, everybody having the same glorious inspiration to go out somewhere and dance, and then to go somewhere else and have scrambled eggs at three or four o'clock in the morning.

But to-night, he had to stick it pretty well through instead of getting away when he wanted to, like a free bachelor; because he was taking Lucille, and Lucille's idea was not to be the first to go home from anywhere if she could help it. David knew she thought she could help it to-night, because she hadn't William with her to say worriedly that he'd got to be in the office at nine next morning. She understood well enough that on these occasional visits of his, David hadn't unavoidably to be anywhere next morning. Just the same, he intended, along about two o'clock at the latest, to lay a firm cousinly hand on her arm and say: "Come along now, Lu. You know you've had enough. We're going home." And because she liked him very, very much, she'd go--complaining bitterly, but she'd go, because he was David and had a certain way of deciding things which was difficult to resist.

So, practically led upon a leash, David went to this dinner, and there he met Ross Collins.

II

Ross, *with even greater reluctance than David, and with much more rebellion, presents herself at a dinner that is just a matter of duty to her--at first. She's had a hard day at her typewriter, and wanted to go to bed instead of making herself agreeable. Life often presents that complication.*

STRANGE HAPPENING AT GRANGE CORNERS

The roadster emerged with extreme caution from the side road into the main highway. Therefore it did not smash into the great touring car coming at a furious pace from the west, but missed it by several feet. Therefore there was no accident, nobody was rushed to the nearest hospital, and the headline above seems the only one justified. It would be well if there could be more of these mysterious failures to connect headlights at the bad double crossing at Grange Corners.

Ross Collins pulled the sheet off her typewriter, glanced frowningly over the item from Grange Corners, tore the sheet in two, and crumpling it viciously dropped it into the immense wastebasket--nearly as large as a clothes hamper--which stood at her elbow inviting contributions.

"Anything less amusing than that paragraph it's not conceivable that one could put forth," she said to herself with uncompromising severity. She glanced with some relief at the small clock on the corner of a crowded table which was mutely announcing that it was now half after six, and she might call it a day. What a day!

It was at this moment precisely, when she was sure to be lowest in her spirits if her work had gone wrong, that her sister appeared to her in the doorway. Such a sister!

Now Rosamond Collins herself--the Ross was her own contraction, for use in the newspaper and other columns which she frequented when things had gone better than they had to-day--was a slip of a thing in size. When she hung upon a subway strap in the rush hours kindly disposed people instinctively held themselves a little away, to give the child air. Young men, not so kindly disposed, catching a glimpse of the face under the close little black hat brim, were liable not to bother to give its possessor air. Therefore Ross had developed a trick of keeping her head down, and thus escaping notice by continuing to play the child rôle.

At her typewriter desk, however, as she looked up at her married elder sister--Mrs. Kendall Cheney--Ross appeared to be no child. Her bright red hair was the only bright thing about her just now. Her black-brown eyes had dark shadows of fatigue beneath them, masses of wildly curling locks drooped over them, her cheeks were pallid; she looked her age, which was all of--never mind what, just now. Her black taffeta working dress had its sleeves rolled up; the apartment furnaces were running full blast in a cold December, and something had happened to the radiator cut-off in Ross's small room--she had to keep the window halfway down to offset it, though snow-flakes now and then whirled through and melted on her hair quite as though it set fire to them.

"My word, Ethel! You look like a French mannequin. How in the name of time and money do you do it?"

"And you look like a little guttersnipe, my dear, with that hair of yours in a tousle. Do you *write* with your head, Ross, dear?"

"When it has any ideas in it. When it hasn't I write with my spine and all my nerves--and get nowhere, like to-day. Glory!--I'm glad I don't have to go to your party. I'm going to get me a snack somewhere, and so to bed."

"But you do have to! That's what I'm here for. Oh, I'm sorry--I know I promised. But the Lowells telephoned they couldn't come--baby sick, or something--it may be the dog. Anyhow, they were final about it. So I put it up to the Drummonds, as a favor. Billy Drummond got sick too, at the last minute, but his cousin happens to be in town--Lucille will bring him. Then the Higsbys called up five minutes ago and asked if they might bring some man that had just blown in, and I had to say Yes. But that upsets the table--makes thirteen. And besides," Ethel hurried on at the light sound of a scornful whistle from the lips of her sister, "it makes two strange men, both bachelors, and our crowd's all married. So I've simply got to have at least one girl, and it's too late----"

"Sorry, Ethel, but it's out of the question. I'm too dog-tired." Ross's tone was obstinate. She was cramming a mass of papers into a drawer, closing her typewriter. She could bear no more of this impotent day. "I should either go to sleep or snap somebody's head off."

"Darling, you can't refuse. You won't have to play bridge--there'll be three tables without you and whichever one of these men you prefer. I can fix that. And you can slip off early. But--you can whistle at thirteen at table----"

"Oh, *silly*!"

"It may be, but Paula Buell always counts--always--and besides it's horrid to have unexpected guests. Take a chance. One of them may be the find of your life."

"Sillier!"

"We're having the tenderest little birds you ever ate, and you look absolutely starved."

"I am, but not for squab--or men. Sleep--rest----"

"Oh, Ross, dear--*please*! I won't ask you again for ages, but to-night I simply must. And you've often admitted you never know when you're going to get something out of people."

"Not the people who go to your sort of parties. You know what I think of those special cronies of yours. Not an idea among 'em, or rather, exactly the *same* ideas, eternally.... Oh, well--I won't be too disagreeable, of course. Only remember you don't tie me up. I'm to slip out after the coffee is brought round. I'll stay for that, because I need it. But I won't be cornered with any strange man. You're to make them both play whether they want to or not, and leave out two of the others."

"All right. You're insulting, as usual--but you're a dear to give in. Now I'll rush down to see if the table looks right. I've had to do most of it myself.... Oh, Ross--haven't you *anything* but that old black lace?"

"Not a thing--that I care to wear. I'm really fond of that."

"*Why* don't you get yourself something new? You make money enough now. Well, anyhow, the lace is becoming, if you'll only wear a big flower with it. You have a white and silver one,

haven't you? And silver slippers?"

"You know I have."

"I *am* grateful to you, Ross. Now I *must* rush."

"Don't rush--glide! You might get a hair out of place!" Ross called after her sister with a slight revival of spirits. After all, she was frightfully hungry, and Ethel's dinners were marvels. How she achieved them--all in a tiny kitchenette! But Ross knew--it was by doing ever so much of them herself, and then hiring only what she must, including perfect service. The effect was always of great affluence, for Ethel's wedding china and silver and linen had been of the best, and were only four years old. The problem was, however, how Ethel herself could look, as she did to-night, after hours in a hot kitchen, like the French mannequin Ross had called her--than which there could hardly be higher praise, provided one cared for that exquisite sleekness, that perfection of detail, that manner which suggested to Ross not only poise but pose. And since Ethel and her husband, Kendall Cheney, seemed to be all for the sort of life they lived, Ross thought it not worth while to quarrel with them.

For this winter, because she liked their location, she had been glad to accept their offer of an unused room at the back of their apartment, in return for a handsome weekly sum. It helped, Ethel frankly confessed, to cover some of these details of the entertaining of which she was so fond; and with Ken away four days out of every week it was comforting to have her sister in the apartment, even though Ross's companionship was represented mostly by the furious click of her typewriter behind a closed door, and her goings and comings at all hours, as her assignments and commissions demanded.

Ross took time for a hot tub, though it might make her late. Several guests were heard arriving even as she turned on the water. She positively couldn't do without it, after such a day. It set her up a little, and she took pains with her hair. It needed taking pains with, for, tired of bobs, she was letting it grow; it had reached her shoulders and had to be turned under and pinned carefully close to her head if it were not to escape and show a loosened curl. A rascally thought came to her--why not let one curl hang below her left ear with an effect of quaintness? It was done at costume parties, and the black lace was very full of skirt.

She did it, and decided that the effect was jolly--and would probably annoy Ethel to distraction. What of that?--it would make the evening more amusing. Her head would look different from all the other women's heads. Theirs would be as though carved out of marble--or wood--and colored black or yellow or brown to give a look of life. She would enjoy their disapproving glances at her, for--there was no question of it--the curl was distinctly becoming and set her off amazingly, and she didn't care a straw that it didn't happen to be in fashion. Not that she didn't usually take pains to be properly dressed for any occasion. But she did dare, now and then, to be original, a little, just for fun.

She slipped out of her room, pausing a moment before starting down the narrow, candle-lit foyer which led to the long drawing room across the front of the apartment where the Cheneys gave their small dinners--for lack of a dining room. They were accustomed to have the table and its service discreetly whisked away at the close, turning the room back to its primary uses in the twinkling of an eye. The hum of voices was now loud--everybody must have come. Yes, there was Ethel's head. Her eyes were glancing down the foyer in search of her sister. In another moment Ken would be sent for her. Well, if they would make her come to their unwelcome party,

at the last minute ...

They were just ready to sit down. Ethel gave Ross a nod toward her place, her look conveying deep dissatisfaction coupled with resignation. After all, Ethel thought, all these people knew Ross for an erratic little professional person; it didn't much matter how she looked. It didn't occur to Ethel that Ross really did look as though she possessed individuality, which was more than could be said of the other women, who might all have been poured into the same mold of fashion; flawless, conscious, afraid to differ from the set forms at the moment approved.

III

DAVID *begins to wonder why he hated so to come to this dinner. It seems to have redeeming features. The success of dinners really always depends upon whom one sits next, doesn't it?*

David MacRoss had long been reading Ross Collins's pieces, here and there, because he couldn't seem to help it. They were little things--light as air, amusing with a humor which was different from other writers' humor. When he saw a column, or the weekly skit called *A Lady of Leisure*, or four lines of verse, or even a very short paragraph signed by Ross Collins, he knew he might as well read it, because he'd be missing something if he didn't. He'd often wondered about this Collins, because the fellow had an extraordinarily light touch, and never did a heavy-fisted thing. Not that he couldn't hit straight, too; but the hits were like wasps' stings--done delicately, by a featherweight. As a rule, however, Collins's stuff glinted and sparkled rather than stabbed. It was great stuff. Other young humorists tried to imitate it--David didn't think anybody could. Collins was Collins, indubitably young himself, and amazingly observant of life. High-priced, undoubtedly. He should be high-priced. If MacRoss himself had been a magazine editor instead of a writer, he'd have had Collins's stuff in at least every other issue, no matter what it cost. Coming upon a bit of it sandwiched between sterner lines was like coming upon the flash of a bright torch in dark caverns.

Of course he didn't recognize Collins at all, when he met him, because, though he was hurriedly presented to Mrs. Cheney's sister (and by her own name at that), and was placed next her at dinner, nobody told him, least of all Ross herself, who she was. He had always visualized Collins as one of these slender, dark youths, with a cutting eye, a tiny smudge on his upper lip, an insolent manner, and a way of getting copy out of you whether you would or no. A near genius, Collins, and decidedly masculine, in spite of the brittle quality of his satire. No sissy sort of chap could possibly do Collins's stuff.

So, placed beside this slightly quaint person with the little red curl over her left shoulder, hands like a child's, and a white cheek and whiter shoulder turned away from him at the start, he had no idea that at last he had met the author of the many lines which, smiling broadly or slapping his knee in appreciation, he had clipped and put away because he couldn't possibly bear not to be able to put his hand on them again. He had had the notion, when he had first looked down at this slip of a girl, that she was a very young sister of his hostess, brought in to fill in a gap for the evening, and would presently be sent away to bed. Like the young men in the subway, where she rode with her head down so that they shouldn't get a revealing look at her, he didn't see what was plainly to be seen after one thorough-going study of her black-brown eyes, that here was no child after all.

So he paid her no attention whatever for the first ten minutes, being engaged in attempting to respond to an extremely gay young woman on his other side, who liked his looks and found him a diversion from her other neighbor, whom she knew too well to care for. The time came at length, however, when the rules of the game demanded that dinner guests change partners, and since the gay young woman seemed to be his for life if he didn't get away, David made the motion. Ross made it too, for she had been exceedingly bored by the young man upon her right. It may be admitted that her observation had been characteristically quicker than David's--

she did not take him for a small boy who would soon be sent away to bed, but knew that he was probably, by the look of him, somebody worth pulling herself out of her weariness to bother with. And by now she was pretty well reinforced by the excellent food which she had just consumed. Ethel and Ken certainly did know how to furnish delicious food and drink. As for the latter, though Ross had been brought up on cocktails, she had discovered at a rather early age that it was best not to go very far with them if she expected to keep up her work and her nerve.

So now she turned her camellia-white cheek and whiter shoulder toward David MacRoss, and lifted her eyes to his. He immediately perceived that, after all, small as she was, she was not a child. The black-brown eyes were not big and round, they were partly closed between heavy dark lashes--an unusual combination with hair so red, yet not unknown. Some quite famous beauties have possessed it and have made the most of it. But the thing that struck David MacRoss, as he regarded this Miss Collins whom he had just discovered not to be a child, was that, though knowledge of life looked attractively out of those eyes, she was not attempting to use them upon him as a famous beauty might. She was merely looking at him to discover what he was like. As that was the way he was looking at her, the two pairs of eyes immediately arrived at a certain mutual comprehension.

It was Ross who first expressed this.

"Anyhow, it's a change, isn't it?" she breathed. "I'd really come to the end--at least for the present. You're all before me--an unknown quantity. Perhaps I can keep awake for another ten minutes, if you help."

"I'll do my best to help," he agreed. "It's hard to have to go to dinner parties when one wants to sleep, isn't it?"

"Did you want to do that, too?"

"Well," he confessed, "not on this particular night, because I came in from the country to see what I could see. But I know the feeling."

"You came in from the country? Really," said Ross Collins, considering him thoughtfully, "you know you don't look it."

"If I don't, it's because my cousin's clothes are supposed to fit me sufficiently well so that I can go out in his place. You see, in a crisis we seem to have only one outfit between us."

"I see. It's a pity I can't wear my sister's clothes that way. She's so big and beautiful, and I'm such a little pint-pot." Ross glanced toward Ethel, sparkling nervously, hostess-wise, at her end of the table, the French mannequin come to life. "She made me come to her dinner, to fill in, because you and another man were last-minute guests. I had nothing I wanted to wear except"--the white shoulder shrugged--"this, a thousand and one nights worn."

"It seems to do very well," he assured her, with a glance at the shoulder. It was such a tiny shoulder, yet well rounded with exquisite flesh. And the red curl happened to droop on the side of the neck toward him. The astonishing contrast between her little head, slightly ruffled because she could never make the crisp hair lie down, and the heads all about her, so perfectly groomed that they seemed not quite real, pleased him. He was conscious for a moment of an extraordinary wish to touch the red curl. It must take courage, he thought, to wear one's hair like that, engaging as the unusual effect it gave her undeniably was.

"Anything does very well," agreed Ross, "when one seldom bothers with dressing up."

"How do you account for the thousand and one nights, then?"

"Ah, but it wasn't I who took the frock out so often. It was Ethel, in the days when Ken couldn't give her so many frocks as he can now. It was one of her trousseau things--which means four years ago. So, you see, it's a hand-me-down--a dress old and wise in experience, cut neatly to fit me.... So, now that we know all about each other's evening wear, let's try another subject, shall we?"

He laughed. "All right, though I thought we were getting on rather well with that one. There was a certain intimacy about those confessions that encouraged me to think we were likely to come to basic facts gratifyingly soon."

"Are you out for basic facts?"

"Of course. I like to know why things happen, and how. Don't you?"

She picked up a fork and laid it on another, and a third on the second, fitting them together. They made quite a nest. He watched her slim white fingers touching the shining silver, and knew she wasn't thinking of what she was doing. She couldn't be. One didn't pile up one's forks like that at a dinner. Though he came from the country he knew that very well. Suddenly she flicked the silver back into place, and put her hands demurely in her lap.

"One of my terrible habits," she murmured. "It's a mercy Ethel didn't see me."

"I fear several people opposite you did," he assured her gravely, under his breath.

"Oh, well.... They couldn't think any more disparagingly of me than they do. When I was a child I had a silver napkin ring which precisely fitted a fat salt cellar. It was amazing how precisely it fitted. I couldn't keep from putting the two together, and feeling of the bottom of the combination to prove to myself that once again it was an exact fit. How can one outgrow a thing like that?"

"I should say you hadn't had much time to outgrow it."

"Do you say you come from the country?" She fixed upon him a skeptical look from between those strangely narrowed eyes of hers which gave her face so unusual a quality. "I was hoping that being from the country you wouldn't be saying that sort of thing quite as though you were used to doing it. Tell me about the country, won't you?... Though first--let me assure you that I'm twenty-seven years old, if you care to know, and you may venture to talk to me as intelligently as you ... can. I'd prefer it, really."

This delighted him. "'As intelligently as I ... can,'" he repeated. "The slight hiatus was well interpolated. Very well. We'll make a fresh start. We had to have some sort of a start, hadn't we? How could I know, till I'd sounded you out, whether you wanted me to attempt to talk intelligently, or just to say as flattering things as I could venture to express to you. I--well, I rather hesitate to mention the very charming person on my other side, but I did gather that in her case, as in that of most women, probably I was expected to do something of that sort. But I'm so unversed in these matters----"

"Oh, are you indeed! I begin to see that the country you come from lies quite close to Manhattan."

"But it doesn't. It lies a hundred and more miles away, on a crossroads a good mile from even the smallest town. And if you want to know something about it, let me tell you why I very nearly didn't come into town to-night. Do you happen to remember that we've had a good deal of snow, lately?--then some rain and a stiff freeze?"

"I only know----" she considered it, groping in her memory, while he looked at her profile and wondered why he didn't seem to mind that it was an odd little irregular outline, with a nose which very slightly suggested an upward tilt. An audacious profile, not an imposing one. Its owner would be into things--yes, very decidedly she would be into things. You couldn't keep her out. Like a small dog on the scent, she would be poking that little nose into your affairs. Keen--quick--flashing at you--seeing through you.

"I only know," she managed to recall, "that day before yesterday afternoon, being late to a play I wanted to see, and the streets being frightfully slushy, I afforded a taxi--and then we couldn't get near the curb because of the water flowing. So the Irish driver had to carry me. He complained that I was heavy, so, being Irish myself, for his impudence I gave him an extra tip. Yes, I remember about the weather.... I didn't suppose we'd get around to the weather," she added sadly. "You don't look like a weather man."

"Honestly, I promise you I'm not. Though I like to be scientific about such things, I'll skip the conditions which led to the result.... Just before I left the country this afternoon I saw that a crust was forming on the deep snow--you see the snow is still deep up in Connecticut. It came unusually early this year. We have no army of ploughs to rush it out of sight. It's a clear night--I saw it would be. And it's exactly at the full of the moon. Do you happen to know what a long stretch of snow with an icy crust on it, sloping down a hill through an orchard to an expanse of open field, looks like, with the full moon shining on it?"

Her eyes met his musingly. "I'm afraid I don't. I've never been in the country in winter--only a few times in the summer. What *does* it look like--with the moon shining on an icy crust?... Crust?... You mean the snow gets hard on top?"

"Exactly. So hard that you can walk on it--slide on it. It's that way up in Connecticut to-night. It doesn't happen many times in a winter. When it does happen it seems a pity to come away to town and miss it. You see, it's uncannily beautiful. Not like anything in the world that they have in New York. Not even like glittering make-believe of a winter night in the theater."

"Then why *did* you come away and leave it?" she asked gravely. "An extraordinary phenomenon like that."

"You don't really need to use the word 'extraordinary,' if you say 'phenomenon,' do you?" His eyes were laughing, though his tone was of mock severity. "A phenomenon *is* extraordinary. Besides, an icy crust is no phenomenon whatever; it's an entirely natural event."

She turned upon him suspiciously. "Oh--you're a writer! Or worse yet--a college instructor. I might have known it. But no, you come from the country."

"So I couldn't be either." He threw back his head and laughed softly. "You *are* an ignorant little person, after all. Yet you invite me to try to talk intelligently--you command me to."

"Yes, and see where we are. We've been talking ten minutes and----"

Her eyes had met Ethel's. Her sister was signaling imperatively that she should turn back to the

man on her other side, who was obviously trying to get back to her because the woman on his other side was absorbed in the man on hers. MacRoss saw the signal too, and also realized that talk of a different sort was eagerly awaiting him on his left.

"Good-bye," Ross murmured in his ear. "With luck, we may meet again--but you can't leave it *all* to luck."

"I won't," promised David MacRoss positively, and waited till she turned her white shoulder before he turned his black one, as even a man from the country may know should be done.

IV

DAVID *discovers how mistaken one can be. It just shows that one should always take a chance on going where one doesn't wish to go--especially a writer, with a notebook concealed somewhere about him.*

"Odd little thing, isn't she?" whispered the gay neighbor on David's left. She wore vivid green and gold, much lower cut than the black lace which had survived a thousand and one nights--though the lace was no high-necked gown.

"Odd? Who, please?" inquired David cautiously. Of course she couldn't be speaking like that of anyone so near by as his right-hand neighbor.

"Absolutely unique. R.C., I mean, of course." The whisper came closer and a bare shoulder, much more rich in abundance than that one on his right, touched his confidentially.

"R. C.?"

"Oh, hush--don't be stupid, David." David--and she had never seen him before to-night. Oh, well, he was from the country, where they went slower in these matters of acquaintance.

"Am I stupid? Sorry. You'll have to remember I'm a stranger."

"I mean," went on the whisper, slightly slurred, because the whisperer had by this time had too much to eat and more to drink, "your hostess's sister. Odd as they make 'em. Not one of *us*, at all, of course. I simply can't talk to her. Nothing to say. Suppose she's thinking up her funny little poems and things? They do say she always has a notebook fastened to her somewhere, takes down what people say. Liable to see any little gem of speech of your own in print to-morrow. Better look out what you give her."

The elbow nudged him a trifle. His companion's cheek was very roseate; she laughed into his face.

For a minute longer David was bewildered. *R. C. Takes things down you say--see 'em in print to-morrow.* Little White Shoulder was a writer then--some sort of writer. The familiar initials, R. C.--Ross Collins sometimes used them instead of a full signature, but they were usually recognized, just the same--these initials jumped at him. But Ross Collins was a man--he knew that. No, he didn't know it, he had just supposed it. It couldn't be--but of course it was, for his neighbor was going on, evidently much entertained by his denseness:

"I've always said people who write that sort of thing have to be odd. Don't even know how to have their hair done. Ever see anything so ridiculous as that curl? Ethel's terribly annoyed at it, but it was exactly like Ross to get herself up in some fantastic way, just to be different. I do think she's clever--fearfully clever--but that doesn't 'scuse eccentricity to the point of craziness. Personally, I----"

But David wasn't hearing much. So it *was* Ross Collins whose white shoulder was now turned away from him, and whom he must get back to as soon as he could possibly escape from his green-and-gold informant. It took a long time, and he had to be very nearly rude, in the end. But at last somebody spoke to her across the table, somebody else shouted with laughter in which she joined--and David slid a mile away from her as he turned toward the small figure on his

right. At the same moment a pair of black-brown eyes--mere slits of eyes between their lashes--flashed round at his, and with a smile which lighted the small white face into actual brilliancy, Ross Collins said to him relievedly, and very much under her breath:

"Hurray!"

"Three cheers!" he responded, with such a grin that he might have been a small boy receiving a Christmas present which exactly suited him.

And of course it was just exactly then that a maid-servant--imported from outside for the evening--came to Ethel Cheney's shoulder with a message. Ethel, frowning smilingly, looked down the table at her sister, and sent the maid to Ross. Ross laid down her napkin, rose, without even a word of excuse to David, and slipped out of the room. She did not return.

"These professional people!" said Green and Gold in David's ear. "Suppose it was an assignment--or whatever they call it when a newspaper sends a reporter off to write up a murder. She's delighted, of course. She'd rather go anywhere on earth than to a party. Now, David, you'll *have* to be nice to me--you haven't anybody on your other side."

He certainly hadn't--except a man he didn't like beyond the gap Ross's empty chair had left. And what a gap it was! At least as wide as a church door, although she was so small who had filled it.

V

DAVID *would like to take up the argument for the defense, but wisely refrains. When women are on the warpath men are safer in the deep woods.*

He saw her again exactly three hours later when, completely fed up with the evening, he had half persuaded, half bullied his cousin's wife, Lucille Drummond, to give up going on with the rest of the party, "somewhere to dance." He knew it would end with scrambled eggs--and he didn't want any scrambled eggs, anywhere.

"But Billy isn't *sick*!" argued Lucille.

"Isn't he, though? He had a hundred and two or three if he had anything, and his pulse was like a trip-hammer--a hundred and twenty at least. I'm going home to him, Lu--and so are you. You can't tell about these sudden attacks of influenza. They're as likely to end with a pneumonia as not."

So he had not only scared her into it but he had smiled her into it as well. One of David's smiles would make Lucille do nearly anything, and he had given her a particularly nice one with a hint of deep affection in it, which he considered highly justifiable. He really did feel a little worried about William, who didn't look as though he could stand an attack of pneumonia very successfully. These office-bred young men--they had no physical resistance; not from David's point of view.

It was as their elevator, crowded full with the first installment of the entire party, reached the ground floor that David caught sight of Ross, standing waiting for it to take her up. For an instant he didn't know her. She looked smaller than ever in a plain black tailored suit, black fox fur, and tiny black hat. The red curl was nowhere in sight, but the white face and the narrowed black-brown eyes couldn't be mistaken in that crowd of rouge and lipstick and hilarity. Besides, somebody said casually: "Hi, Ross--been out on a bat of your own? Hope it was a jolly one."

To which Ross replied, in a low voice, "Yes, thanks. And good-night."

Beside her stood a slim young man who had evidently brought her home. Dark and sallow, hollow-cheeked, somewhat cynical of expression as he regarded the group emerging from the car, he looked down at Ross and murmured something in her ear. She nodded. Apparently she didn't see David.

He made her see him. For a man from the country he was extraordinarily quick in his reactions. He said: "Wait for me, Lu." He gave one scrutinizing look at the young man who stood beside Ross. Was the fellow going up with her--at this hour? He came around by Ross's further side, and spoke in her ear.

"I've missed you."

Her face, as she looked up at him from under the tiny black hat, was very weary. It was more than weary. She looked as though she had been seeing something which had torn her to pieces. Well, things would tear that sort of girl to pieces, or how could she write what she did write? For Ross Collins's stuff wasn't always witty or waggish, though that was her chief line. Once in a while it was heartbreaking. He thought she must be about ready to do one of those heartbreaking things right now, though he hoped it was just plain fatigue of her diminutive

body, rather than devastation of her sensitive spirit.

"Have you? I was--unexpectedly--sorry to go."

"We were just beginning to get somewhere, weren't we?"

"It seemed so," she admitted.

"Mayn't we go on from there--to-morrow, somewhere? I'm only in town for to-morrow. Will you have lunch with me at----" he hurriedly considered a possible place.

She interrupted. "No--not possibly anywhere, thank you. But I'm going to the Fifth Avenue Hospital at three, to see a sick friend for ten minutes. We could walk down a few squares from there. I have to get a breath of air sometime during the day, or perish."

"I'll see you going in."

He looked back as he left her, to observe whether the man with her got into the car for the upward trip. To his intense dissatisfaction the man did. David wondered whether these New Yorkers felt it necessary to go up to the very door of an apartment to say good-night to a girl they had taken out, or whether, having gone up, they were likely to go on in.

It was half after one in the morning. The question bothered him. He was absent-minded in the taxi in which he was taking Lucille home.

"Davy, now you've made me go at this ridiculously early hour you might at least be entertaining on the way. Did you really find Ross Collins so amusing?"

He was instantly on guard. Lucille had watched him all the evening, he very well knew.

"She wasn't particularly amusing," he said.

"I don't suppose these people who scintillate so in print can keep it up out of hours. Queer little thing, isn't she? Not a bit like Ethel, who's really stunning, isn't she?"

"Very."

"Ethel was *so* provoked at Ross for coming down looking freakish like that. That curl!"

Good heavens, he said to himself, couldn't the other women let that curl alone? What of it? Must they stamp their entire sex with the same die of fashion? Evidently they must. But he wouldn't be so unwise as to defend any particular style of hair-dressing.

"The dinner was a mighty good one, wasn't it?" he suggested.

"Ethel's dinners always are. How she does it, in that box of a kitchenette! She really does it all herself, you know. Don't you like that crowd of ours? They're the jolliest things. You had Eve Forester on one side of you--that must have made up for Ross."

"It did. She was everything Miss Collins wasn't."

He considered that he was being rather deep in saying that, but Lucille suspected him. Somehow they always did suspect a man when another woman was concerned.

"You didn't dash at Eve, though, to say good-night when you left her, the way you did Ross."

"Didn't I? It was an oversight. I'll say good-night the next time I meet Miss Forester."

She really didn't get this, because she was concentrated on finding out what he thought of

Ross. She had noted every instant of the brief interchange at the lift door. David had looked to her as though he were saying something besides good-night to Ross. There was no reason why Lucille, being married to William Drummond, should care what his cousin David did or said to anybody, but somehow Lucille did care. She loved her Billy, but she also loved David--as a cousin. And she was sure David loved her--as a cousin. As a matter of fact, David did, in just that way. Lucille was a lovable young woman, even though she did have this feminine instinct of possessive curiosity. He supposed they all had it, and it must simply be dealt with as evasively as mere man could manage. Of course there was no reason in the world why he shouldn't have put an end to Lucille's curiosity by frankly telling her that he had an appointment to walk down Fifth Avenue for ten--or twenty--he hoped it would be thirty--blocks with Ross Collins to-morrow afternoon. *This* afternoon, it was, praise heaven! But he didn't want to tell Lucille. Only thirteen hours away, that appointment. What was the use of going to bed? Why not go now and sit on the steps of the Fifth Avenue Hospital, to be sure to be on time? He might somehow miss her, she was so small, if a number of people happened to be going in at the same time....

Lucille was going on. "I suppose, since you're both writers, you found something in common. But you don't write the same sort of thing--I should say not. Your deep articles wouldn't interest her--she's such a little featherweight. She has to be, to write her little absurd things."

"My deep articles," mused David, "don't even interest you and Bill."

"Oh, how silly, Davy! You know we buy every magazine you write for. I'm so proud--proud--of having you for a cousin!"

"Thank you, my dear." David patted the hand she laid on his arm. He knew she would be happier if he did. And anything to get her off the probe into his interest in Ross. He did get her off it. He began suddenly to talk about something he meant to do, and kept it up till they reached her apartment.

Then they went in and found William quietly asleep, his fever down, his pulse quieted.

"Just a cold," whispered Lucille as they tiptoed out. "And you made me come home for it! Oh, Davy! Now we know he's all right, let's dash off and meet the rest. I know where they were going. It isn't half a mile from here. They *do* have such gorgeous music there. Please! The best of the fun comes now. And there'll be scrambled eggs, later."

"That settles it." David laid his hand on the door of the small room where he was to sleep on the couch. "Scrambled eggs disagree with me--violently. Good-night, Lu. Sorry, but we can't go."

He had to kiss her good-night--not that he minded specially, for she had a very pretty mouth, and she hadn't made it redder to-night than it was conceivable a mouth should be. On his part, however, it was a cousinly kiss, distinctly--nobody could mistake it. Then he closed the door on the inside, pulled off William's too closely fitting coat and waistcoat, and sat on the edge of the couch.

"This afternoon, at three o'clock," he said to himself, "I shall visit a sick friend at the Fifth Avenue Hospital. I wonder if I should take flowers."

VI

VISITS *to hospitals may be depressing, but what matter, if one can keep up a patient's courage by going? Quite frequently one brings away from such visits more than one takes.*

Ross's friend at the Fifth Avenue Hospital was in a very bad way indeed. He had youth on his side, but it was his youth which had got him into these straits. Dodging through moving traffic in the rain, taking chances which no older man would, he had slipped on the wet pavement and gone down under a motor bus. He had been operated upon, but he was now having nip and tuck of it to pull through.

Ross's visit had to be short, but into it she put as much concentrated courage and will as she could muster--which was a good deal. She held Jimmy French's hand tight and told him she had an absolute conviction that he was going to come out as good as new, though it might take time. He looked into her intent face to see if she were speaking the truth and was obliged to believe her. It meant a good deal to him to have Ross Collins say that, for they had worked side by side in a magazine office, and had been of so much use to each other that a firm bond of friendship had been forged between them. He was much younger than she, but she knew he thought his eyes of her, and that if she could make him think he had a big chance for life it might really help to give him that chance. So she was planning to take time she couldn't spare to run up every day to see him, till he should be out of the woods--or have gone too deep into them to be rescued.

Those who know what it is to try to give of their own blood to keep another heart beating, if only in this intangible fashion, know that it is a spending of force which takes much out of themselves. So Ross came away from Jimmy French's ward feeling the need of air--air not soaked with the hospital odor, nor heavy with its infusion of dying flowers. She hated seeing the baskets and vases of them set outside the doors, waiting to be taken away. She wondered afresh why people send cut flowers to hospitals, instead of jolly-looking plants which suggest life rather than death. For herself, she meant to keep the gayest possible pots of growing plants with scarlet blossoms within sight of Jimmy's anxious eyes.

For the time being she had completely forgotten that David MacRoss was to be awaiting her outside. As she came out of the imposing entrance she was thinking of nothing in the world but Jimmy. David, walking up and down on the opposite side of the street, said to himself as he caught sight of her at last that that look of absorption was too real to be assumed. She must care a lot about this friend.

He crossed the street and appeared before her. "I take it the friend must be pretty sick," he said gently. His hat was in his hand, floating flakes of snow touched his brown hair.

Ross stood still, staring up at him. She really hadn't seen his full face enough on the evening before to be sure she recognized it now. It was only his voice which convinced her. He looked different to-day--taller, broader-shouldered, more virile. Billy's black dinner coat, fitting so closely, hadn't given him the same ruggedness of appearance as did the rough gray tweed topcoat he wore now. She could to-day much more easily believe that he came from the country, even though the tweed coat fitted him well, and the soft gray hat he was still holding was one

of those hats which look their quality. He had the outdoor look--ruddy brown color, clear gray eyes, a certain eager yet restrained expression not at all akin to the nervously alert aspect of the city-bred man.

"Do I really know you?" Ross asked, as she gave him her hand.

"Not a bit. But I hope you will. I shouldn't be sure I recognized you, either, except that I saw you in that little black hat last night. Otherwise, not seeing your hair--which would give anyone a clue----"

"Do cover up your own hair. It'll be soaking in a minute. Shall we walk along? People seem to be going round us here with some annoyance."

He put on his hat and they walked on together.

"About the friend. I hope she's coming on, even though you're still worried about her?" He did want to know it was a woman's straits which had brought that look into Ross's eyes. Queer, that he should care--as it was queer that he should have minded last night about the man who had brought her home. He wasn't accustomed to jumping with such concern into the affairs of an acquaintance so new as this one.

"He's got to come on, poor boy. He was terribly hurt last evening--while I was at that awful dinner. But I can't talk about him. Thank you for being interested, though."

"I am--and sorry, too. All right, we've lots of things to talk of. First--how far down are you going to let me walk with you?"

"As far down as--well, I shall know when we reach the place. Sha'n't you? Besides, I haven't so long to spare."

"This is"--he glanced at the sign--"One Hundred and First Street." To himself he said that he'd like to mark the spot where they started on this walk. He added, aloud: "There's nothing like knowing afterward where history began."

"It began last night, didn't it?" she observed.

"Only the prelude, according to your own words. Just before you were called out you said, 'We've been talking ten minutes and----' I think you were going to add, 'and have barely made a beginning.' Wasn't that it?"

"I don't remember what I was going to say. But I should imagine it was probably that we had got nowhere."

"Do you really think we had got nowhere?"

"Well, Mr. Mac----Oh, I'm sorry, I *have* forgotten your name."

He smiled. "Remember it by your own. Mac--Ross."

"Really? Of course, I can't forget it now."

"I believe you can't. I'm going to repeat that question. Do you really think we had got nowhere? If we hadn't got anywhere at all would you be letting me meet you this very next afternoon for a walk down upper Fifth Avenue?"

She considered it before she answered. He looked down at her interesting profile, as he had the evening before, while she was considering. The smallest hint of a red curl had worked out over

her ear and showed at the edge of her hat brim. It was not a daring curl like the one of last evening, which had nearly touched her shoulder, but enough of one to remind him of it, and show its fascinating color. He recalled that in his schooldays the only girl he had really liked much had had hair of exactly that shade. And a peppery temper to go with it--which was why he had liked her, he supposed. He had no doubt that Ross Collins had a peppery temper too. It showed plainly in some of her biting little paragraphs.

"I suppose I shouldn't have been letting you meet me, this very next day," she now answered with frankness, "if I hadn't seen something in you. Would you mind very much if I called it possible 'copy'? Because I warn you I'm quite ruthless. Anything interesting or stimulating you say will very likely be used against you."

"Notebook and pencil along, eh?"

"I've a remarkably good memory. And I don't deny the notebook."

He put his hand inside his inner breast pocket. He produced a much-worn small leather book, and flipped its pages to show closely written lines packing it.

"Here too," he confessed.

Her glance came up at him, sharply surprised. "Do you mean that--oh, yes, I do remember! '*Extraordinary phenomenon*.' You caught me up on that last night. I charged you with being a writer--or a teacher--but what happened? It never came out which you were. I suppose my own egoism bore me past the finding-out point."

"Not at all. It was just then that you were taken away from me--and brought back by another man."

He hoped she would explain that, but she didn't. Instead she asked him if he were a writer. He admitted it.

"But not the sort of thing you would be interested in," he explained. "Stuff dull as ditchwater, to a person of dreams, like you."

"Dreams!" she repeated, in a tone he didn't quite understand. The corners of her lips curled slightly. "Tell me what name you write under."

"I write under two names. One, my own--David MacRoss. The other--I think I won't tell you, just yet."

This brought a smile to her face--the first real smile he had seen since he caught sight of her, looking so unhappy as she came out of the hospital. "Then we're even," she said. "I do that too. Which is the real you? Or don't you tell that, either?"

"You know," said David MacRoss thoughtfully, "it occurs to me it might be interesting if we left it to time for each of us to discover the other's real self."

"Oh! But I thought you lived up in the country, a hundred or so miles away, and were going back to-night, or to-morrow."

"I do--and am. But what's a hundred or so miles between friends? We are friends, aren't we?"

"We're not friends," said Ross Collins, very positively. "Not in the least friends. I don't make friends like that, all in ten minutes. Do you?"

"Well, I admit I don't, as a rule."

"It's a rule to which there should be no exceptions. You seem to be a little bit interested in me. I don't mind saying I'm a little bit interested in you. But--friends!" She made a gesture with her little gray-gloved hands. "Why--it's a *friend* I'm leaving, back up there in the hospital. Tied to me by ropes of steel. I didn't make him that in an hour, in a day, in a year. We grew--and *grew*--to be friends. If he dies I----" There was a long pause. "The world will be darker for me." And though her voice was perfectly steady as she said it, he could see that she had had to steady that voice with an iron will.

He gave this avowal the respect of silence for the space of several rods. Meanwhile he discovered that it had deeply depressed him. Plainly he was not getting on very fast, after all. Did she mean him to understand--what *did* she mean him to understand? That the man she cared for beyond others was lying up there in the hospital, while she had agreed to meet himself merely because, as she had plainly said, there was a chance of her getting the always-necessary-to-be-hunted-down "copy" out of him?

Well, even so, he couldn't stop wanting to know her. Even if he could come to know only the outside edges of her, that would be worth the time and trouble it might take. Something about her personality was proving infinitely attractive to him. It wasn't only that she was unusual in looks, in voice, in manner; it wasn't only that in her severe little black suit and hat and furs, with her perfectly gloved hands, her beautifully shod feet, she gave the lie to his ideas about the average woman writer's carelessness of attire; it wasn't only that he liked the clear whiteness of her cheek set off by that hint of a red curl. It was, he told himself, that he knew, by the things of hers he had read, that beyond this gratifying exterior was to be found a spirit not of the ordinary. *Come and find me*, it seemed to challenge him, even while it put him off. Why, tucked away in that notebook of his at this very moment lay a clipping he had placed there months ago. If he should show her that, she would understand why he wanted so to know her. Or--would she? Did she possibly not realize how much she had revealed of herself in those fourteen lines?

VII

It's a long walk to take under an umbrella, but how else can one attain a semblance of seclusion in the very center of the pedestrian traffic? Of course there are taxicabs, but if one wishes real excitement, umbrellas offer better chances.

It was Ross who broke the silence, in a low, toneless voice which didn't mislead him at all. He saw that, though he had for a fortunate minute or two made her forget, she was now back at the hospital.

"I think I'd better cross over to Lexington and take the sub down," she said. "I'm really not a bit good company, and I oughtn't to take more time for walking."

"Oh, please!" cried David. "Please don't. Try me a few blocks farther. I know you're absorbed in your anxiety--I do hope to God you'll keep your friend, if you want him so much. But the fresh air is what you need. We won't even talk, if you don't want to--or until you want to."

His hand gently guided her past Ninety-first Street, and she accepted his will. He breathed more freely. Before they should reach Eighty-third he must somehow get her to stop noticing where they were in relation to the detestable subway stations.

As they walked on they couldn't keep pace, he couldn't possibly bring his long stride down to her short one without looking absurd. This was unfortunate because it's much more comradely to be swinging along at the same gait.

"I wonder," he suggested presently, "if we couldn't get into step, somehow. Could you lengthen just a bit, while I shorten? Or can't it be done?"

Trying to do it took up a full block, but they finally arrived at a possible medium in which neither was doing a too-exaggerated gait. The effort had made her smile a little.

"This snow," said David suddenly, "is turning into a rain. We must have an umbrella. Wait a minute."

Now of course there are no shops on Fifth Avenue above Fifty-ninth Street, and the two pedestrians were still in the Seventies. To procure an umbrella at that particular point one must be a person of resource.

He hailed a taxi. "If you don't mind?" he urged. "I want to buy an umbrella, and then we'll get out and walk again. You know this fresh air is doing you good."

"How eccentric you are," murmured Ross Collins. But she submitted. She might as well let this extraordinary young man have his way; he might give her an idea. And the chilly air was doing her good. She felt as though Jimmy might have a fighting chance--she was surer of it than when she left the hospital. And she wasn't as tired.

The taxi took them down to the first shop where David might buy his umbrella. He came out with it, inwardly exulting, and dismissed the taxi. Just to get her under an umbrella with him would help a good deal. The rain was not yet heavy, but the skies were growing darker; almost a twilight was to be had under the umbrella. The crowds were becoming thicker on the sidewalks, too. That proved to be a great help, for after they had been nearly separated two or three times by scurrying people who had no umbrellas, David said casually:

"Would you mind taking my arm? We could walk so much better, and now and then it's rather difficult keeping this over your head."

She took his arm. Truth told, she had been wishing she could do that. A comfortable arm to reach up and cling to on such a walk in the rain isn't at all a bad thing.

"Of course," she said suddenly, as they now swung along all by themselves, as far as the other people on the street were concerned, "it's perfectly ridiculous not to take a bus or the sub or even a Madison Avenue surface car, if we must stay together. Nobody but a man from the country would insist on walking in the rain. I'm getting my ankles quite wet."

He looked down at the ankles in sudden anxiety. "If you put it that way," he gave in, "we'll have another taxi in two seconds. I didn't think it was raining hard enough yet to wet ankles. Mine feel dry. But if you say the word----"

"I don't. I like walking in the rain, and I can dry my ankles when I get home. I was just pointing out that we *were* ridiculous to be doing this. But never mind, since you've bought the umbrella. Why don't we cross over to Park Avenue? There'll be fewer people."

"I doubt it. But we'll cross." This was at Fifty-second Street.

It was at Fiftieth Street that they really began to talk. By great luck he brought up a subject which interested her--as it had long interested him. It was a matter of mob psychology, and he had just had a queer experience which illustrated a certain phase of the subject. He took as long as possible to tell it, and made the telling as graphic as he could--and he was no untrained expressionist. When he had finished they began to discuss it. Right through the frightful traffic around the Terminal and across Forty-second Street they kept it up. As they marched down Fourth Avenue Ross's face was showing a hint of color, her eyes glanced up at him every so often, as his looked down, and the glitter of the now early lighted streets in the gloom showed him just what was happening to her. She was forgetting everything except the interest of the meeting of two keen minds. He had done it!

But he had still another idea in the back of his head. It might or might not be a good one, but it seemed to him worth trying. He wanted to get as far as he possibly could into her consciousness, so that she wouldn't forget him the moment he was out of sight.

At Twenty-ninth Street he said suddenly: "We're so far along down toward Twentieth, would you take the time to come a little out of your way? I'd like to take you somewhere, a place I very much like to go. Maybe you know it much better than I do, but if you don't----"

She looked up at the street number. Then she stood still under the umbrella. "If anybody had told me I'd walked almost four miles in the rain this afternoon with an entire stranger----"

"Entire? *Now?* Not quite that, am I?"

"No, not quite that--now," she admitted. "Well, where is it you want to go?"

He took her two blocks to the Little Church Around the Corner. Thousands of New Yorkers probably knew it better than Ross Collins. It was faintly lighted; a few people, as always, were wandering about it or sitting silently in the pews, here and there. At the doorway of the most picturesque and dramatic small church in the great city she paused.

"Yes, I've been here for the funerals of actors," she whispered. "To get the eternal copy. Why did you want to come?"

He led her down a side aisle to a corner in the transept where they were out of sight of everybody. "Let's sit here, just a few minutes," he said quietly.

So they sat still and silent, for the few minutes. Ross at first was wondering. Was he "religious," then? She wasn't. He hadn't been talking like a preacher; he had been quite as modern and straightforward as she in their discussion. He had grown to seem to her sturdier and sturdier, until now, as he sat beside her in the dim light, she had the sudden feeling come upon her of being in the care of a person who was immeasurably stronger than she in just about every way. But why should he want to come and sit in this dim church with her?

Her thoughts leaped back to Jimmy French. Poor Jimmy! What was going to save him? If she believed in a God who cared anything about human beings and their suffering she'd say a prayer for Jimmy, right now, in this church. But of course she didn't believe He--if He existed--did care a straw whether Jimmy or anybody else lived or died. These other people, kneeling, probably did believe in Him; they were saying prayers to Him at this minute, asking Him to spare them this or that beloved friend, or to get them out of trouble. What was the use in her saying such a prayer? She wouldn't. Jimmy would live--or more probably he would die. Nothing could be done about it.

She turned to David. "Shall we go?"

He assented. They went out, treading noiselessly, not to disturb the others.

When they were well away, and almost down to the park where the Cheneys lived, and her room and her typewriter and all the rush and weariness of her work were waiting for her, she said--it was the first word spoken since they had left the church:

"Please tell me why you wanted to go in there?"

He smiled down at her. "I don't suppose I could tell you. Perhaps sometime I can. It's a peaceful place, though, isn't it?"

"Why should you care for peaceful places, if that is one. You look as if you could never be tired in the world, you have so much vitality. But even if you were tired--or unhappy--quiet and dimness don't always make peaceful places. I thought of all sorts of disturbing things while we sat there."

"So did I."

"Then why----"

"Please let that wait. You've had a long walk, and the little rest before we finish won't have hurt you. For the rest of the way I want to plan how and when I may see you again--provided you are willing to see me."

"Wouldn't it," suggested Ross, "be quite perfect if we didn't see each other again?" And at the look he gave her, as though she had struck him a blow, she added quickly: "I mean--a thing like this ought to stand by itself. It's a unique experience. If we met again it might be spoiled. We might quarrel--might detest each other."

"That," offered David sternly, when he could adjust himself to so erratic a point of view, "is sheer bluff on your part. You don't mean it. You may think you enjoy fancying it--stinging me with it--but good lord, Ross Collins, do you know that our minds have fitted together as though they were dovetailed, ever since we left Fiftieth Street? See here: do you in the least remember

crashing through the traffic at Forty-second, in front of the Terminal?"

"No. Did we come that way?"

"Don't ask me. We were on Park--we were then, sometime after, on Fourth. Unless we went around Robin Hood's Barn--which isn't done in New York--we got there by coming through the worst congestion in the city. I have no recollection of it. Neither have you. Well, then, do you think such utter absorption in each other's thoughts means nothing--*nothing*--in a world of misfits? And would you throw that away by agreeing not to see each other again?"

This passionate inquiry went where he meant it to--into her full recognition of what might be worth holding onto.

"All right," she said, with a strange little sparkle between those narrow lids. "If you want to take the risk, the next time you come to town----"

"I'll write you about that," said David, "in the first mail after I can make my plans."

As she went up in the lift she discovered that her ankles were indeed very wet. For the last few squares it must have been pouring--a chill, New York, December rain, than which there can be nothing wetter. It certainly *was* odd that she hadn't noticed it.

VIII

One of the tricks by which the Big Tricks are turned. It requires a flying pencil and a notebook as receptive as a human being. Not all notebooks are like that.

"Yes, Miss Collins, Miss Winthrop is expecting you. Will you please come up?"

Ross went up in the Winthrops' private lift to their twelfth-floor apartment, and was shown to her friend Madge's bedroom. It was a room all amber and green with touches of gold, luxurious yet restrained in effect, after the best manner of to-day's decorating and furnishing.

Madge, having breakfast, sitting up in bed in the midst of silk, chiffon, and lace, all in faint rose tones which became her own delicate coloring, was looking as much like a jewel in a rich setting as usual. She was, however, noticeably heavy-eyed. It was easy for Ross to guess the reason.

"Out most of the night, Fair One? The Atkinson dance--plus?"

"Just that--plus, as you say. Sit down, dear. Won't you have some fruit and coffee--or more?"

"No, thank you. It's my lunch hour, you know. I've just had a whopping bowlful of hot stew at the Oyster Bar. I don't suppose you know that nothing is needed after that."

"Indeed I do. I've been there. It's getting to be quite the thing to do. That's a deliciously filling way of cooking oysters, isn't it?"

"It is. How was the party?"

"We weren't in till four, after *such* a night! Ross, if it hadn't been for Nicky Gilbert I really don't think I could have come through alive. In his quiet way he somehow manages to look after me, no matter how irresponsible the other men get--and he doesn't do it obtrusively, either. It--endears him to me, in spite of myself."

"I suspect it does. But I'd advise you to hang onto your well-worked-out views regarding your future contentment, not to mention ambition, my Madge. Nice Nick would smother you in the end, you know. And I sometimes fear you're slipping a bit, without knowing it."

"I don't intend to. I couldn't marry Nick--my family would never forgive me.... I mustn't talk about it now, though. I can tell by your bolt-upright position on the edge of that chair that you're on your way to something important."

"I am--or I hope it may turn out that, though I don't need to sit on the edge of my chair quite so long beforehand. I've an appointment in exactly forty-five minutes, and it takes twenty to get there. I'm sorry. I'd love to hear the sort of thing that doesn't make copy for me, but interests me all the more for that, because it concerns you."

"I know, but you want the notes now, and you shall have them. I think they're particularly hilarious ones."

"Splendid! I need them badly."

Madge rang, had the tray removed, and settled back among her pillows. Ross was ready with notebook and pencil.

Once a week when the Winthrops were in town Ross came to see this young woman, the

daughter of people of wealth and social prominence, who had been a former classmate at school. The friendship there made had continued, cherished by both because of a strong congeniality of spirit, in spite of the wide gap between their modes of life.

Madge was deeply interested in Ross's weekly magazine column called *A Lady of Leisure*. It had been begun two years before, inspired by certain contacts Ross had been making with unusual women who interested her. One of them, a visitor from England, had had a dryly original way of commenting upon people and events, which struck Ross as more freshly diverting than any way of putting things she had ever heard. Being herself apt at mimicry she had found herself able to reproduce this woman's style, and to fit it to the uses of her own trade. Long after the Englishwoman had gone back across the water she was unknowingly inspiring Ross to carry on her enlivening methods. Speaking with her laughing lips, using her high-bred yet original and unhackneyed means of expression, *A Lady of Leisure* had become a well-known and much relished character in the column of a magazine devoted mostly to sophisticated waggery.

But it was Madge Winthrop who had been from the first of invaluable help to Ross. She too had been captivated by the Englishwoman, and had seen the possibilities for her friend in using Mrs. Barnstable as the prototype of a character from whose lips might issue all sorts of merry recountings and descriptions, following the events, the fashions and follies, the lighter issues of the day. But Ross lived in another world than that of the famous Englishwoman, and almost equally far from that of Madge herself--the type of person whom this gay chronicler must be supposed to represent.

Ross had been born the daughter of an unsuccessful merchant who had died--she had long believed--of his failure to provide competently for his wife, Ross's mother, who had come from a family much more intellectual than his, and who had been far more gently bred. The two should never have been mated, perhaps, though there lingered undoubted evidence that Mary Collins had loved her unimportant husband to the end of his undistinguished days. She had shortly followed him, and Ross had been left with quick wits, an instinct for beauty in all forms, and a sturdy independence which came from somewhere far back on her mother's side, as her chief inheritance.

But Henry Collins had somehow seen to it before he left her that this daughter was sent to the best schools, for the sake of her mother, who had been graduated from them years before. Their elder daughter, Ethel, had married early; she had had no taste for the higher education. It was at these schools that Ross had met Madge Winthrop and afterward, through Madge, her social group. Ross was often included by them--and increasingly so as she became known upon the printed page--in their less elaborate plans for amusement and for club work. They considered her extraordinarily endowed with cleverness, audacity, and charm, and liked to have her among them. From their talk she garnered much extremely modern, vivacious material for her *Lady*. But Madge could give her still more because she deliberately saved up all she heard and saw that could be of use to her friend, and on these weekly visits spread it graphically before her.

"Last night," she would begin, "the rarest thing happened. You know Dicky Derling--his way of making absurd speeches at the most inopportune moments. Well, Adelaide Sydenham had just come in ..." And she would tell the tale, while Ross's flying pencil secured it. In the *Lady's* next column the story about Adelaide and Dick would appear, transmuted out of all recognition, crammed into one delicious paragraph, making readers look up from reading it to exclaim amidst

strangled laughter: "Oh, hear *this*! Did anyone ever have such a way of turning a quip as Ross Collins? It isn't anything she says, really, it's the way she *says* it!" Which obviously explains most successful attempts at humor, and its more subtle sister, wit.

So Ross held her sessions with Madge, and considered herself lucky to get them. In return she gave her friend many glimpses into a world of which Madge knew nothing, except through the printed page. In these recitals of Ross's experiences all sorts of people figured. No question that this little person, under the tutelage of one and another of the men and women with whom she had worked at various periods, had come to know intimately not only the highways but the byways of the great city in which she had been born. Under another name than that of Ross Collins she daily wrote of both highways and byways, but with this name she had made no noteworthy reputation outside of a certain newspaper office, nor did she care to make it. Only a few knew her by the fictitious name.

One day she had told Madge, had shown her a column or two signed by the pen name, and Madge had looked at her in amazement.

"Ross! But that's not you at all!"

"How do you know it isn't? That may be the real Me. The *Lady of Leisure* certainly isn't. If you knew how often I grin at myself as I sit doing the *Lady* in my grubby room, you'd know I don't even get inside her skin. She's really *you*, of course."

"Ross! What nonsense! She's Mrs. Barnstable--you know she is. From the very beginning it was Mrs. Barnstable you were visualizing when you did the *Lady*."

"The cat's out," Ross confessed. "Of course it was Mrs. Barnstable who started off the whole thing. But, fascinating as she is, she's a middle-aged woman, and she dresses a bit too mannishly to be compelling to the male eye. Whereas my *Lady*, if she's anything, must catch all eyes. I flatter myself I've made her do that. How could I help it, with you for a model? So between you and Mrs. Barnstable, we've made a sort of hit, eh? And don't you think I'm just about equally grateful to you both?"

"You imp, I'm not sure *I'm* wholly flattered," Madge objected. "As you put it, the Englishwoman furnishes the brains for this composite, while the American supplies the rouge and lipstick and evening clothes!"

"As I begin to write in the composite's person," said Ross, endeavoring with a glint in her eyes to explain, "I see *you*. Always I see you. Sitting up in bed as you are now, looking exquisitely frivolous in your fripperies.... I adore that shade.... Lunching with some other perfectly turned-out friend--Audrey Cortland, Katherine Colt, Anne Lloyd, your sister Virginia. Dancing with Lynn Fairbairn, or Nick Gilbert, or Ronny Van Dyke. Standing to be fitted by Madame Coline and her assistants. Coming out from a play to stand waiting for your motor, wearing one of those gorgeous evening wraps of yours, all ermine collar rolling up about your beautiful shoulders. Always I see *you*, my dear. If I didn't I couldn't do my stuff. I--" she smiled--"now you *will* see that I mean what I say. When I begin to do the *Lady* I always set that marvellous photograph of you done by Selma Colfax on my desk and keep you there. Why, I doubt if I could do a single one of my columns without it!"

"I should think," mused Madge, "looking at that picture would make you dumb. Why, it's no more like your scintillating *Lady* than a pigeon is like a--a pheasant."

Ross laughed. "You don't know yourself, do you, my dear? And I'm offering you incontrovertible evidence. I couldn't put a pigeon before me and think a pheasant, could I? Very well. The fact remains. And another thing I want to tell you. With my training in the other school--the sordid school--the one I undeniably do represent in that column I showed you--it would have been easy to make the *Lady* under all her smoothness a gossiper--a tattler--an insinuator. She might have gone better than she has if I had--with some readers, certainly. But with you for her model, and the remembrance of Mrs. Barnstable's beautiful breeding, I simply couldn't do that, Madge. I had to keep to sheer amusing nonsense, ruling out the viciousness. It's made it a harder job--oh, I promise you it has. Innumerable times I've had to hold my hand, being by nature loving of a sharp stab where a gay flick would do as well. Often it's seemed like trying to get an effect in pastel tints when I wanted to splash on the brilliant oils. But, after all----"

"After all," declared Madge, "you've done the subtler thing. People are enchanted with the *Lady*--all sorts of people. She's an unusual figure as you present her; there aren't any snarls or jabs in her speeches, yet she's never dull."

"Snarls and jabs do make entertaining reading, though. I'll admit I enjoy 'em myself. Hard hitting fascinates me. I like seeing adversaries stand up to each other in print, and feint and parry and get in a deadly thrust now and then. That's all right, too, if the fight's a fair one. Things can't be smoothed over much in this world--what's *there* is bound to show. But you, Madge, when you speak in the person of my *Lady* you have to be the lady you are, and that Mrs. Barnstable is. I make you as sparkling as I know how--as witty, as quick and keen, a perfectly darling rascal in your way--but I won't make you what you couldn't be--underhanded, spiteful, vicious, catty, to be feared. And you know, my dear, having to do you that way is most awfully good for me, for I'd be a natural cynic as regards those born to the purple like you, if you hadn't taught me the contrary."

In this way Ross seemed to herself to live in two worlds. One, vicariously, was that of Madge Winthrop--a sort of super-world, where luxury and pleasure were the chief ends, with an admixture of charitable deeds to even things up--or at least to give the doers comfortable consciences. The other world was that of her work of every day, on a lower level--on many lower levels. To go from a police court where she had watched the lowest types of ragged and ill-smelling human beings crouching and cringing under the hands of the law, to a luncheon with Madge Winthrop among the most fastidious of the so-called upper classes, often made Ross wonder what actually could be defined by the name of "life," and which it really was. Madge was living her life, Ross was living her life, Mary Reilly, haled into court for thieving and child beating, was living hers.... And David MacRoss, whom, amidst all the hurry and scurry of her days, and with all her worry over Jimmy French and his chances for recovery, she had thus far been unable to forget, was living *his*. Which of them all was most real? She didn't know.

IX

A guest coming to the country falls almost instantly asleep. She had always known that there was nothing in the country to keep one awake.

Dear Ross Collins:

I have an idea that your eyes have seen city life very thoroughly and country life not at all. Up here in Connecticut in December it's really pretty nice. I think you're tired. When you can leave the friend in the hospital will you let my sister invite you up here for a week-end? She and I keep house together, and she's the sort of sister who knows a good deal more than you might imagine about life and its problems.

My first plan was to ask you to let me see you every so often in New York, since my work takes me there for a day or two regularly every two or three weeks. I still want to do that, but it occurs to me that just now you might find a little visit up here rather refreshing, and that you may need being refreshed more than you recognize. You've been living under strain for a good while, haven't you? Well, there's no strain in the life up here. And I have such a lot of things to show you. Won't you come, please, whenever Hester asks you? She's ready, whenever you tell me you can get away.

To my mind the country, even in winter, has it all over a walk from the Fifth Avenue Hospital down to Twentieth Street as a place in which to get acquainted. Don't you want to try it? It's only three hours by train from the Grand Central. I'll meet you at the Lennington Station, a few miles from home.

Hopefully yours,

David MacRoss.

To this, after a week of waiting, he received an answer.

I hope you will forgive me for not writing earlier. I've been in such suspense over my friend Jimmy French, in the hospital. Now it seems to be certain that he's going to live, but the chances of his ever walking again are very slim. It's all used me up, rather, I'm so fearfully unhappy over it. I don't think I could bear to leave him just now, even for a week-end, he counts so on my visits. But perhaps when his life is surely safe, and he's going along on the road he's got to take from now on, I may be glad to accept that quite wonderful suggestion of an invitation. Perhaps when I come back I can work again--I can't now. I seem to hate the city, all at once, for doing what it's done to Jimmy.

He sent her a line of sympathy, along with a box of flowers and a book labeled:

If your friend can be read aloud to, perhaps he'd like this--just out. Unless he's a reviewer and had an advance copy, he may not have seen it.

After another week he wrote again, urging the visit. The correspondence, supplemented by

some telegraphing, ended by Ross's taking the train on a January afternoon, nearly three weeks from the night of Jimmy French's accident. She had had time to recover a little from the first shock of the unnerving experience, but she had been capable of no real work. She had dropped off a pound or two of flesh, and she carried about with her a never-ceasing sense of exhaustion such as hitherto she had felt only when she had been heavily overworking.

Jimmy had been--and still was--such a dear boy! She hadn't known how much he meant to her until he had been hurt. She had taken him and his worship of her for granted, more or less; his thousand and one ways of being of use to her as something which had come to belong to her. He had had a flashing sense of humor, and an idea that you could get anything in the world you wanted if you worked hard enough. He had worked--how he had worked. Constantly she could see his snub-nosed face, with the twinkling blue eyes, and the smile which won everybody to his side--herself among them. Just a boy still--twenty-two--yet he had lived a lifetime of experience in hard knocks. And now--all over--an invalid's wheel chair his only prospect. She couldn't get over the pitifulness of it, nor the vision of the great truck which had crushed him. A second earlier--a second later--and Jimmy would have been well and smiling now.... Smiling? He *was* smiling! Which made it even harder to understand why it had had to be.

The train took her away from it for a little--there was that to be said for going up into Connecticut. Past snow-covered fields on which the winter sun was shining, on and on, through small towns, till at length the snow grew deeper, less disturbed, and in the late afternoon the train set her down at the station to which she had been told to buy her ticket. She had never heard of it until David had mentioned it. A little hide-bound New Yorker, that was what Ross supposed she was, knowing nothing outside of a few square miles. Certainly nothing of rural New England beyond its position on the map.

David was waiting on the platform--had been waiting long before the train whistled far down the valley. He received her and her mite of a black bag, scanning her closely as she came down the steps, and smiling down at her as she stood beside him on the platform.

"You poor little bit of humanity! You *are* worn out. I'm glad I've got you."

She pulled the small black hat still lower over her eyes. "Do I look as haggard as all that?"

"'Haggard' isn't exactly the word. You look as though a good stout Connecticut wind would blow you away. Come along and get inside the car. Do you consider yourself dressed for a seven-mile drive?"

"In as jolly a closed car as that, yes."

"Even so, Hester sent down an extra coat for you. You'll be lost in it, but it'll keep you warm."

She snuggled inside the coat. The wind *was* cold, and the tailored black suit wasn't exactly winter clothing. The coat was a dark mink, warm, luxurious, and costly, if she knew anything about furs. Heavens, was she going to one of those great country places of the rich? Was David a prosperous fraud, with his talk of work? Was Hester a real person, or was this young man playing a trick on her? Hester's letter had been very nice, but she supposed David could have written it. Well, anyhow, it was wonderful to be flying off over the snowy road, in a motor which made nothing of ruts or drifted places. She didn't much care what happened next, if she could be for a little far away from poor Jimmy, so that she might bring back to him fresh comfort with her own renewed vigor.

Her second glance at David's profile, as he sat beside her, told her, as before when she had been with him, that he was no fraud of any sort. She said to herself that she must have a tabloid mind, to be capable of having such a thought occur to her. He was talking away, pointing out landmarks to her, making himself friendly and genial, the capable host. And before she knew that seven miles had been covered he was turning in at a low stone gateway set between thick snow-covered hedges, and the car was drawing up at one of those big, square New England houses which may look as hospitable as they can look austere. This house was all hospitality to-night. Dusk was coming on, and there was hardly a window which did not glow with a mellow light.

"Home!" said David, in a tone of strong satisfaction. "My home. And you're going to spend two whole days in it--and outside it."

"And I've seen you just twice before," wondered Ross, upon the doorstep. "What a queer thing that I should be paying you a visit!"

"Not queer at all. Some people don't have to spend a lifetime finding out that other people belong where they themselves do."

He threw open the door. "Hester!" he called, and with a hand upon Ross's arm, and her bag in his other hand, gently propelled her in. A big dog came dashing out at them. "Down, Marco--down, sir! This lady's a friend, old man--don't knock her over!"

A figure came out of an inner door, a pleasant figure to see. David's sister Hester was what Ross might have expected, if she hadn't acquired an idea, whether from fiction or the stage, that all New England spinsters are tall, angular, sharp-eyed, and thin-lipped. Miss Hester MacRoss looked as though no Connecticut wind could blow her away because she was too used to tramping sturdily against them. She had a strong and pleasant face, looked about forty years old, and unquestionably had not spent all her days in the spot where she was standing.

"Welcome, my dear Miss Collins," she said, in a warmly cordial voice, "first as David's friend and then as, I hope, mine. Will you come in here and have something hot to drink, or would you like to go to your room first?"

"I'll answer," said David. "Something hot first, and then quite immediately her room. Eh, Ross?"

"Both, yes, please," said Ross. She was already glad beyond words that she had come.

So she had tea in front of a great New England fireplace, full of flaming logs. Miss Hester's maid brought in the tray, but Miss Hester served Ross herself, while David looked on, thinking that if he had brought a child from an orphan asylum she couldn't have looked any smaller and whiter than Ross, in the big chair he had pulled up for her. She was keeping on her hat, and he was wishing to pull it off and show his sister the beautiful curling red hair which was Ross's great hostage to beauty--after her strange eyes, which could hardly be seen now, under the hat brim.

Of course, to a young person of Ross's discernment, it was perfectly evident the moment she had come inside the house that a goodly amount of worldly prosperity backed it. It was far from being one of the great show houses of the rich, but it was full of comfort and charm. Books were everywhere, fine old pieces of furniture, gleams of copper and brass. The lighting was all by means of oil lamps, but such oil lamps as she had never seen, with colorful shades which delighted her color-loving eyes.

"Now," said Miss Hester, rising, "I'm going to take you to your room. I'm sure an hour's rest before dinner would be the best possible thing for you."

So she led her guest up to her room, and as Ross looked about it it seemed the most lovely and peaceful room in the world. When, after a little, she was left alone, she was thinking that David's sister was to her an absolutely new type. She hadn't known that women who lived in the country in winter instead of in a city apartment could possibly look as though they knew Fifth Avenue quite as well as she herself did. Such ignorance was colossal, Ross supposed, but how could you help it when your world from childhood had been bounded by the Battery on the south and the Bronx on the north, the Hudson River on the west and the East River on the east? Why, she could readily imagine Miss MacRoss presiding over some great gathering of club women and doing it with more real dignity, more than the average level-headedness, and decidedly more sense of humor than she had ever seen it done; and she had been present, as a special writer, at a good many such convocations. And she could equally well imagine her, as David had described her downstairs, taking the keenest interest in the transplanting of shrubs, the growing of strawberries, the acquiring of the purest bred Jersey cows for the great barn far back on the place; going about in a short skirt and leather jacket, not only ordering but actually doing parts of the work herself. Just to know Miss Hester MacRoss, it occurred to Ross Collins, was worth coming to the country.

Then she slipped out of her dress and into a little négligé, and carefully removing the cover from the big four-poster bed, dropped down upon it. Almost instantly she fell into an exhausted sleep.

Miss Hester, coming in softly at seven o'clock, after a light unanswered knock, found her guest still asleep. Whether to waken her? David had warned her that Ross was both tired and unhappy; she had seen that for herself as they sat downstairs by the fire. Neither of them knew, though it was easy to guess, how many nearly sleepless nights Ross had spent since Jimmy had virtually gone out of her busy, work-a-day world. It had meant not only a consuming heartache for Jimmy himself, not to mention the strain of the daily hospital visits, but it had meant also the loss of that for which he had stood--young and comprehending sympathy with her ambitions, readiness for adventure, a contagious hopefulness through thick and thin. She felt weak without him, though she had other and more powerful friends, both men and women, in the ranks of the magazine forces, than Jimmy French could ever have been. The experience had taken heavy toll of her none-too-great physical strength, as it had taken even heavier toll of her power of creation, for the present, at least.

So on Miss Hester's comfortable bed she had dropped off into the sleep of forgetfulness. She had come to a place where all the old life seemed temporarily left behind, and she could relax--let go--as she so much needed to do.

Miss Hester, looking down at her in the mellow light of the lamp, was reminded of a little red-haired dog with a broken leg David had once brought home and insisted on keeping and nursing back to health. Ross's curly red hair was a mop upon the pillow, her thin, white little face was like that of a child, for the knowing black-brown eyes were hidden, and only the dark line of the heavy lashes was left, a line curving above deep shadows of fatigue.

"Davy," said Miss Hester to herself, as she looked, "it's a case of vicarious paternity on your part. You can't see a child suffer. If this isn't a child, but really a woman, as you think, that

makes you even more vulnerable.... Well, it seems a pity to wake her. Shall I let her sleep?... Yet she needs food almost as much as she does sleep. Another hour, perhaps."

She drew up a light silk quilt over the small unconscious form--Ross's attitude showed just how she had flung herself down upon the bed, stretching out her arms as one does who wants above everything else to be rid of tension. Then Miss Hester went quietly downstairs. David stood upon the hearth rug, waiting for her with an odd look of expectation in his eyes.

"Coming down?"

"I hated to disturb her. She's as sound asleep as a kitten under the stove. How about letting her lie an hour longer?"

"A good idea, but disappointing. You're the best judge, I suppose. Out of two evenings... And won't she sleep better later if she's wakened pretty soon?"

"Very likely," agreed his sister, with a discerning glance at him. "Though she looks to me as if a week's sleep wouldn't hurt her."

"We'll keep her a week, eh?" urged David. "When you see her awake and rested you'll see what interests me."

"I have a glimmering of that," admitted Miss Hester. "By the way, there's one of her unique scintillations in this magazine; I was reading it just before you came. It's unusually brilliant. One wouldn't say the writer of it could ever tire."

David took the magazine from her hand, read the lines; but though they were indubitably witty he didn't smile.

"Hess," he mused, "is there always a wound behind that sort of thing--if you happen to know about it?"

"Of course that was written long before this friend whom she's grieving over was hurt," she reminded him.

"Yes, but she has a face that shows she's acutely conscious of every touch of tragedy in life, even while she writes comedy for a living. Yet she actually thinks she's hard-boiled. Thinks she's a scoffer--thinks she's completely disillusioned. It's one of the greatest self-misconceptions I ever knew."

"Not an uncommon one, however, at her age."

"She told me frankly she was twenty-seven."

"Not possible, I should think."

"You haven't seen her yet. She's been knocking about New York for years, living alone a good deal of the time."

They talked in low voices. The last thing David said before Hester went up again to Ross's room was: "Sis, you're a brick of bricks to let me bring her here, like this, and take her into your own interest. I'll wager there isn't another sister in New England, of your age or any other, who would have done it for an eccentric younger brother, knowing how short the acquaintance has been."

"I'm eccentric myself," she admitted, "as you well know. Besides, Ross Collins is hardly a new

acquaintance. Haven't we both been enjoying her ever since we first began to notice her?"

She went upstairs again. David waited rather anxiously for her return. She might easily decide to let her weary young guest sleep on till morning. For himself, he wanted to feed Ross, substantial, delicious food. Then presently he heard sounds of voices in the room above, and knew that his new friend was awake.

"Down in a few minutes," announced Hester, passing the door on her way to the dining room to give an order. Reassured, he continued to wait, more impatiently than ever, listening to the light footsteps overhead. How would she look when she appeared? Rested, he hoped. He wanted to give her one of those evenings by the fire which had to him, in the deep country in winter, a quality of which she knew nothing. What were evenings by the fire to a city dweller in an apartment like that of Ross's sister--if they had a fire? He didn't recall that that apartment did have any fire--or if there was a fireplace of the pint-pot city type, it wasn't used. Why should it be, with stifling heat filling the radiators? And what sort of talk went on before it, if it was used? He thought he knew, by the sort of talk which had prevailed at the table on the evening he had dined there. Lively, knowing in its way, yet commonplace mostly, and to him infinitely boring. He granted, willingly enough, that there were plenty of firesides in New York--or the substitutes for firesides--before which desirable and highly stimulating talk did go on. But he doubted whether Ross's home environment had ever been of that type. By her own light she had made her way thus far through life; he was sure she hadn't had any real home of the kind he knew so well. That was what he particularly wanted to show her.

X

MORE *sleep. Merciful heavens!--is that what she came for? Precisely, though she didn't know it.*

He didn't hear her come down the softly carpeted stairs; she was in the room before he knew it. He sprang to meet her. She had brought only one extra frock with her; a very simple dress of rough white silk, as suitable as anything she had, she had thought, for the country. It was exceedingly becoming, and it was a relief to David to see her in something besides her austerely tailored black. Her eyes were still heavy, but her smile was less forced than it had been two hours ago.

"It's good to see you looking a bit rested," David greeted her.

"I never knew," said Ross, spreading out both arms and moving them gently up and down, "such a bed. I sank upon it, meaning not to stay ten minutes. It received me--it was like lying upon a cloud with no bottom. Before I knew it I was gone. Even coming downstairs to you and your wonderfully kind sister, I was thinking that by and by I should be back on the incredibly luxurious cloud, and could stay till morning."

"We shouldn't have wakened you, except that we thought you needed food even more than sleep. Would you mind telling me what you had for lunch, before you took the train?"

She looked puzzled. "Did I have lunch?"

"If you can't remember it, probably not."

"But I can. I went to the counter in the station and had--yes, a cup of very strong coffee. I didn't seem to want anything else."

"I thought not. But you're going to want Hester's food to-night, and I hope you'll eat a good stiff dinner, one fit for a brakeman."

"Don't be disappointed if I can't. I--I'm really not hungry."

She didn't eat a meal fit for a brakeman, but she did as much justice to the well-chosen, perfectly served little dinner as her hosts could expect. One could hardly help it, at that table. It put life back into her, in spite of herself. She had been choking down her food ever since Jimmy had been hurt, keeping going on strong tea and coffee--poor props enough for steady support. Another great fire was burning in the dining room; she couldn't keep her eyes off it. It fascinated her so that it helped to keep her putting bits of food into her mouth.

"I believe I've never really seen a fire before," she confessed. "Certainly not one that was so recklessly gorgeous as that."

"We'll have one even more gorgeous when we go back to the other room," promised David. "And we'll sit in front of it, while Hester goes off to a session in her little Community House. She's absorbed in plans for opening it. We'll show it to you to-morrow night."

"I'm late for it this minute," observed Miss Hester, glancing at her wrist watch, "If you two will excuse me----"

"We'll excuse you"--David saw her to the door--"but we want you back."

She nodded. With a little electric lantern in her hand she smiled back at Ross, her pleasant face glowing ruddily under her hat brim. "Don't keep her up too late," she admonished David, and went out into the night. Ross, going to a window, watched the vigorous stride of the erect figure, clearly visible against the snow.

"How all alive she is," she said.

"From the top of her competent head to the tips of her energetic toes," he agreed. "Come--let's establish ourselves on this couch in front of the fire. I'm not going to ply you with photographs of the place in summer, or read poems or magazine articles to you. Not going to try to entertain you in any way. Little worn-out beggar that you are, you've been warmed and fed, and now you're going to curl up like a kitten, and even go to sleep again in your corner of the couch, if you'll just let me keep watch beside you."

"Sounds wonderful." She dropped into the indicated corner. The couch was like the bed upstairs--deep and soft and many-pillowed. "Oh, what absolute comfort! I didn't suppose I could be quite so ready or have such a chance to let everything go and just rest. I mean--I thought you'd expect me to try to be gay--witty--play up: the appreciative and amusing guest. May I really just sit here and look at the fire, and not talk--or even be talked to? It seems such an ungrateful way to spend an evening, especially when I'm such a stranger."

"I don't know any way of spending it," he assured her, "that could give me deeper satisfaction. There are times to be gay and witty--if one can, like you--and there are other times when being like that just doesn't fit the occasion. If you should try it to-night I should feel as though you were wasting yourself. And as to your being a stranger--you know you are not that. Sometime I'll prove it to you.... Now put your head back. See that little blue flame in the corner? Watch it--and so will I."

Obediently she laid her head against the soft couch back, sliding down a little on the seat and stretching her small feet forward, crossing them on the hearth rug. They were finely shod feet, and David's eyes rested on them with high approval. Ross's whole attitude was that of one who is completely at home and relaxed and comfortable. It was precisely what he wanted.

He produced a pipe. "Mind?" he inquired.

She shook her head. "Love to have you."

He filled and lighted it, and went around and turned out all the lamps except a small one in a corner. Then he sat down beside her, leaving a little space between them. He puffed away in silence for a few minutes, his head also tipped back, his long legs extended. Then he reached out one hand across the space and took hers into it.

"Mind?" he asked again.

She turned her head slowly toward him and smiled, and the firelight was reflected from the half-shut eyes between the falling lashes. Then she turned her head back again.

"It was the one thing lacking, only I didn't know it."

He clasped the hand tight for a minute, then let it lie in a quiet, though close, hold. It was such a little hand, so seemingly powerless in his. He knew those fingers could hit typewriter keys, hours on end; but to-night he thought it was a hand which needed to be held in just such a firm grasp as he was giving it, conveying, as he meant it to, the sense that here was a good friend,

who wanted nothing of a weary woman except to try to let his quiet strength flow into her, if such contiguity could make it seem to do so.

So Ross lay back, looking into the fire, and let her hand rest, as she might if she had been a tired child and her father had been holding it. Presently she closed her eyes, and David could feel that all tension had gone out of her. He looked around at her cautiously and said to himself that in another ten minutes she would be asleep again, precisely as he had suggested. She must be even more worn out than he had realized, to take him and his handclasp so naïvely as that. He smiled to himself. He couldn't be very exciting, if she really could forget his presence. He sincerely didn't want to be exciting--not to-night.... Yet after all, he didn't quite like to think he wasn't--in the least.

For himself, even to touch her in this brotherly sort of way *was* exciting. It brought up all sorts of possibilities. He wasn't a holder of women's hands--or only in emergencies. He had discovered a very long time ago that all trouble for a bachelor begins that way, and up to now he had wanted to continue to be a bachelor. He knew perfectly that to hold any woman's hand meant that the next thing she would expect was a kiss. He knew also that it was equally true that holding a woman's hand, if she were really attractive, was likely to make him want to kiss her. And then the thing certainly was set going, with small chance for escape. So he had been wary--except for a few instances when he afterward had wished he had been so, and had extricated himself with difficulty from the consequence of not having held to his resolutions. On the whole, however, David MacRoss had been quite as discreet as his Scottish ancestry plus his New England bringing up could be expected to make him. It was no philanderer who sat there holding a tired girl's hand. It was a hard-headed, if now and then soft-hearted, young man of enough experience to know precisely what he was doing to himself, if not to Ross, by the process known in the electrical world as making contact. It was fairly sure, in this case, to cause sparks to fly, and to set something afire, if only his own heart. But evidently it was not going to set Ross's afire--not to-night--for she was, very soon, quite frankly asleep.

It was Miss Hester's return which roused her. She had not been heavily asleep, nor for more than a few minutes, and as the door opened David gently withdrew his hand. Ross sat up. The warmth had tinged her ivory white skin with a hint of color; the relaxation had done much to renew her. As her hostess, her own face aglow with the nipping of the January wind, came around to view her Ross got quickly to her feet. She and David stood together on the hearth rug.

"I am," said Ross, meeting Miss Hester's smile with a most disarming one of her own, "probably the rudest guest who ever sat before a fire and went to sleep. This is the second time I've been unconscious since five o'clock, when I arrived. I should be dubbed the Dormouse and given a dash of water in the face."

"If you really were asleep," replied Miss Hester, "I should call it a remarkable tribute to David's powers of persuasion. He wished nothing so much as that you should be refreshed by this visit."

"I did all but sing 'Rock-a-by, Baby' to accomplish that end," avowed David. "And I'm hoping a whole night of real rest will put Ross where she wants to stay awake. Anyhow, I'm going to take her outdoors to-morrow and see what fresh air will do."

"Why not to-night? I'd love a walk, right now. It seems to be only ten o'clock."

His face lighted. "Really?"

"Really--if you'd like it too."

"I'd like nothing better. But"--he looked down at her sheer stockings and slippers--"you couldn't walk in the snow in those shoes."

"Why not? I----"

"Nonsense. Such footwear may go on Fifth Avenue, but not in the country. I'll bundle you into the car instead, and we'll take a little run, just to show you what the moonlight is like on snow that hasn't been trampled on by thousands of feet. Come on."

But Ross delayed him for ten minutes, talking with Miss Hester. She was suddenly quite wide awake and realizing her duty to her hostess. It was a pleasant talk, and while it lasted each woman gained considerable insight into what the other might be capable of in the matter of congeniality. Then David came with his sister's fur coat, wrapped Ross in it, and took her off.

XI

A TOWN-BRED *writer views a country-bred writer's attic workshop. She is unable to understand how chips can fly in such a spot. Too many views from the windows. She knows that real work can only be accomplished in small dark rooms, with artificial lights.*

Everybody knows that healthy youth recuperates rapidly, even from hard blows. At twenty-seven Ross Collins, given the right conditions, was as youthful in looks and in certain reactions as she had been at twenty. Waking in the MacRoss's charming big square east-by-south bedroom, with a dazzling January sunlight flooding straight across her bed, she lay for a minute marveling at the surprise of it. She was not used to having the sunlight touch her until she got out into it. Then she pushed back the covers, ran over to close her windows, dived back into bed until the warmth she felt pouring up the hot-air register by her bedside could take effect, and then plunged into the bath which adjoined her room, and where a turn of the faucets brought her boiling hot water and spring-clear cold. Ten minutes later she ran down the staircase, fearful lest the household were at breakfast and she might miss having it with them.

"Who comes here?" David met her at the dining-room door. "I wanted to go up and pound on your door. Hester was planning to send up a maid shortly, followed by a tray. This is better. Feeling more like it? You look it, praise the Lord!"

She did look it. Her red hair positively ate up the sunshine as she came into it, where it streamed through the windows at the end of the big room where the breakfast table was set. Her little black wool frock couldn't make her look in mourning this day, for her face was eager, and her smile----Well, David hadn't yet seen her smile quite like that, and it took him off his feet.

"Such a sleep! Such sunshine to wake to! I feel as though I'd been born all over again, up here. I'm going to forget all day that I've got to go back to-morrow night."

"But you haven't."

"Of course I have. I'm due in several places on Monday, and in my own room the overdue work is piled----"

"Just forget it--absolutely. Let's live to-day for to-day. I've planned it all, and you can do as much or as little of it as you like. Now come and have breakfast. Everything's smoking hot."

Breakfast was a feast. Ross thought she had never tasted anything like it. The talk was full of interest; Miss Hester had a merry tongue this morning, and kept her brother and their guest laughing with recitals of what had happened at the community meeting the evening before. David too was in high spirits; his laugh was infectious, and Ross found herself joining him irresistibly.

After breakfast: "Look what's here," boasted David. He produced a pair of black riding boots, even so small as Ross's needs called for.

"Susan leaves them here, to use summers," he explained. "They may be a trifle big, but not much. Sue's a little heavier than you, but her ankles are slim. Try 'em. I want you to walk all over the place, and you can't do it in the very pretty but totally unfit shoes you have on."

Ross slipped off the shoes in question, and David, kneeling, pulled on a smart black boot, a little worn where the spurs had gripped.

"Just right. Who's Susan?"

"Young niece of my sister's. Mighty nice youngster."

"Not a niece of yours?"

He laughed, putting on the other boot. "Well, she calls Hester 'Aunt Hester,' though she's not a 'blood relation,' as the country people say. But she doesn't 'Uncle David' me. I assist her in cutting up too many capers. Her picture's in the living room. Notice it?"

He showed it to her. Susan looked not only mighty nice but mighty pretty as well. She might be, by her artfully taken photograph, sixteen or twenty-two--one couldn't tell. Ross suddenly envied Susan, coming up here for the summers and leaving riding boots behind so that she could cut up capers with an uncle only a few years older.

"She's lovely."

"Susan's abroad this year, with her mother. But wherever she is she usually leaves a lot of things around here, sweaters and such stuff. Wait till I look in the coat closet.... Here you are. By George, this is just the thing!" He pulled out a bright green leather jacket. "I used to like to see that on Sue better than anything she wore last year. It'll just suit you. It's warm, too. Lined with wool."

For some unexplainable reason Ross hated putting on the attractive Susan's things, but that was absurd, with David eagerly holding the coat. So she slipped into it, ran upstairs for her hat, and was ready for adventure.

She got it. It was a full morning, for David took her to all sorts of places, sometimes in the car, sometimes on foot. She had had no idea there could be so much to do in the country in winter. She ate a hearty lunch because she was very hungry, after tramping about in the bracing air. The cold had moderated, the wind had gone down, the sun shone brightly; it was an ideal day in which to explore the unknown.

In the afternoon, when Ross had had an hour stretched out on her bed, just deliciously tired enough in her unaccustomed muscles to welcome a rest, David took her up into what he called his workshop. He had saved this till he felt she was ready for it. He wanted above everything else to have another talk with her, such as had made memorable the latter half of the walk down from the hospital in the rain. He hadn't tried for the talk during the peripatetic morning.

"Third story, up under the eaves. Place where I can be all by myself with not even Hess coming up--unless I ask her. It's probably the place in the world that I'm most attached to. The stairs are rather steep, aren't they? All the better, from my point of view."

"Of course I can't imagine," said Ross, climbing the stairs, which were really ladder-like in their ascent, "how you can want to get any farther away from the world than you are already, downstairs anywhere. If you were used to working, as I am, with seventeen different varieties of noises in your ears, including the steel riveting which never ceases in New York, you wouldn't think you had to climb a steeple to insure quiet."

"I *have* been used to working in just that way. Thought at first I must, to be a writer. Maybe you don't think I know what twenty typewriters all clacking together sound like. After two

years of it I wasn't used to 'em--never should be, with my country bringing up. Here we are. Do you say it's worth it?"

Ross stood in the doorway of the attic room, gazed about her for two silent minutes, then admitted that it was worth it.

Books, books, books--that was what struck her first. He must be in the habit of buying everything he wanted, for the shelves stretched to the low ceiling on all sides everywhere except in the places where the dormer windows interfered. A big desk near a window, with a typewriter upon it, showed where he worked. A great table covered with magazines and reviews, a pair of deep leather easy chairs, one on either side of a fireplace where logs were blazing, some interesting old maps and gay hunting prints, two or three framed photographs--the room had the look of being, as it was, the haunt of a bachelor, and a bachelor only. There were no flowered chintzes at the windows here; the sun was free to send his rays into the room unhindered by draperies. Two or three plain rugs softened the austerity of the floor. Altogether, the phrase "man's workshop" fitted the place, although there was just one touch which suggested that women had been not altogether excluded from it. On the desk stood another large framed photograph of the girl whose green leather jacket Ross had been wearing.

It was Susan on horseback, an even prettier and more alluring Susan than the one in the picture downstairs. Evidently Susan was allowed in this room when she was spending her summers here, or she wouldn't be represented in her absence by so distracting a likeness of herself. And in the very spot where David was bound to meet her eyes and her challenging smile every time he looked up.

But Ross, after one glance, paid the photograph no attention. She looked out of all the windows, admired the far-reaching view in two directions and the vista into the snow-covered hills near by at the third. She studied the rows of books, taking down one here and there; she surveyed the magazines. David watched her, his attention absorbed. This was Ross Collins, who had made a reputation for herself, appraising the tools in his workshop, looking about for the chips from his bench. He was now aware, more than he had been before, that he and she, as far as their daily environment and contacts were concerned, belonged at opposite poles. Clearly, this sort of working place was one to which she was utterly unused.

They sat down, presently, in the two big leather chairs, opposite each other.

"Well?" queried David.

"Want the truth?"

"Nothing but the truth."

"I feel," considered Ross, "as though I were out of the world, in some sort of place halfway between heaven and hell, where nothing could possibly happen."

"Whew-w!" whistled David.

"And yet," she finished, "where it's perfectly heavenly to be--for a time, anyhow."

"That last doesn't help it much. In other words, you're no recluse. Probably you're homesick this minute for Times Square."

"Oh, no, I'm not. I'm enormously interested in seeing how another worker works. For I do know that you *are* a worker, and I know that other men have written from a cell."

"*A cell!* Are we as far apart as that in viewing my cherished attic room?"

"Your attic room"--she looked about it--"is one of the most delightful spots I've ever seen. But as a place where ideas come flocking in--I should think they'd all leave you here and you'd just idle away your hours lounging in front of the fire, with a book in your hand."

"Well, I managed to pound out seventy thousand words here, in the last six months. Of course there mightn't have been an idea among them."

"I'm a fearfully rude guest," admitted Ross, "but I don't go so far as that. There must have been any number of ideas. I'm not skeptical as to the results you get here; I'm just stumped as to how you do it. I'm sure I couldn't. Why, when I can't work--find myself up against a snag--I put on my hat and dash out. If I don't meet somebody or something within ten squares that gives me a spark I dash back again--and find it waiting for me, more than likely, in my dingy though comfortable room at the back of my sister's apartment. If I just went out for a tramp in the snow, as you do, and then came back to a room like this, I'd--slump into one of these chairs, and not care in the very least whether I produced another line or not. You see, David, I work for my living."

"I see. And I work for mine."

Her skeptical glance questioned this.

"I work for my living in the sense that I couldn't live contentedly--or live at all, perhaps--without work. Neither Hester nor I could idle around up here in the country if we didn't have any number of vital interests. She--well, Hester has a rather good job in the city, which takes her in often. She's quite an executive. A number of people receive orders from her. Up here she has a little office of her own, that you haven't seen, off the dining room, where she keeps the wires fairly busy between here and New York. As for me----"

He paused, lighting his pipe, while Ross watched in silence. She had made a snap judgment, probably. She admitted to herself that it was like her to leap to conclusions.

"As for me, I go in every so often, and haunt the places where things happen. I bring away enough stimulus to last for quite a while. But let me tell you this, my dear young metropolitan. *All* the mental stimulus is not to be found on the Island of Manhattan. There's a very respectable lot of it between this house and the station where I met you. Maybe you'll get a little of that this very evening. Anyhow----"

He broke off, laughing. "Let's take it for granted that we came from opposite poles. The thing that matters is that we meet here, in this room, before this fire. Coming down Fifth Avenue, three weeks ago, we found any number of things we looked at and thought of from the same angle. Let's find some now."

Ross glanced at him. A sparkle of fire was in her eyes. "I love to quarrel," she said rebelliously. "It's stupid to agree about everything. A good brisk discussion is heaps more fun. Come on--let's fight!"

"Right you are. The suggestion is excellent. What shall we fight about first?" responded David amicably.

So, since she would have it so, they fought. They had a great time of it. David was a fighter, after all, she discovered, if there was something to fight about. Ross found half a dozen

subjects on which she could violently disagree with him, and so deliberately tackled him. Sometimes she won, sometimes she was thrown. And then, quite suddenly, after all this battle of words, which Ross enjoyed thoroughly, and during which David found his blood coursing rapidly, they sheathed their swords and shook hands again, over a matter on which they found themselves passionately agreeing. And this agreement wiped out the memory of the disagreement as though it never had been. Their minds had flowed together again; for the moment they were one. The joy of it was felt by them both.

David looked at his clock, a grandfather clock in a corner which had solemnly ticked away three full hours.

"Shall we go down and have some music?" he suggested. "And then it will be dinner time, and then we'll go to Hester's party."

"Music?" Ross's tone was eager. "What sort? Radio?"

"There is radio, but that's not what I'm suggesting. It's the hour when my many-sided sister loves a little music all our own; she'll be expecting it. Come and see."

A room downstairs across the hall from the living room had not been shown Ross. It was big and nearly empty, except for a few comfortable chairs, a small grand piano, and above it a big dim painting of four old musicians playing together in the dark corner of an attic room, the candles assembled to give them light throwing weird reflections on the ruddy, absorbed faces. At sight of this Ross gave a little cry, and went to stand beneath it, then away from it.

"Oh, how very, very haunting!" she cried. "I like that immensely. So do you and Miss Hester, I expect. And what a lovely, unencumbered room to make music in!"

"We like it," agreed David simply. "Coming, Hess?" he called across the hall.

Miss Hester came in, went to the piano, sat down before it. David took a 'cello from its flannel case and tuned it. Ross, in one of the deep chairs, sat and looked at them and listened, and carried the memory away with her. If the four painted musicians above the piano made an interesting study, the two live ones constituted one still more fascinating. Miss Hester was an accomplished pianist. Her fine head was thrown back, her straight, strong shoulders and well-molded arms and hands made her seem a wielder of musicianly power like that of a man's. David, his head bent over the 'cello as he sat with it between his knees, gave Ross a new impression entirely. Music such as these two were playing was a resource indeed for the country on a winter day. Ross, who was accustomed to hear all the great music she could afford to pay for, gave this pair her trained and appreciative attention.

David, glancing at her now and then, recognized her enjoyment. Another point of contact, and a significant one, he exulted. He hadn't known whether she cared a copper cent for Brahms or Beethoven, Debussy or Tschaikovsky or any of those schools. Now he knew. He insisted on trying her with various sorts, not excluding two or three very modern pieces, and when finally the little recital came to a finish with a simple but effective setting of an old English song, he waved his bow with a flourish.

"She likes what we do, Hess," he exulted. "She belongs. Old classics don't have to be jazzed for her, yet she appreciates the best of all schools. She may write like a modern of moderns and a little satirist at that. But when it comes to the real thing she knows what's what and who's who."

"Don't be snobbish about your taste in music, Davy," enjoined Miss Hester. "I heard some magnificent jazz the other night, His Majesty our most beloved conductor on the stand."

"Oh, jazz!" retorted David, putting down his 'cello carefully and sweeping his sister off the piano bench as though she were a feather instead of the substantial person she was. He took her place, and from under his fingers now flowed the gayest syncopations, the most fascinating beats, the merriest enticements imaginable. Ross, who had long ago abandoned her easy chair to stand leaning against the piano, began irresistibly to feel the urge of dancing feet.

"Let 'em go. Dance!" commanded David, sensing the light tap of toe and heel.

Ross shook her head. "Can't dance without a partner."

"Hess!" His voice roared after his sister, who had disappeared with her dismissal from the piano bench. "Come and play for us."

But Miss Hester's office door had closed upon her.

"Never mind, we're going to such a dancing party to-night as never was. We'll step out then," promised David.

"I'd rather just look on." Suddenly Ross left the piano and went over to the window, turning her back upon him. He sat watching her for a moment, while his fingers dropped from the keys. Then he followed her and stood just behind her shoulder. A silence fell.

"Yes, I know," David spoke very gently. "You've been made to forget him, just a little bit, then you remember again--the wave sweeps over you--and you feel guilty. You needn't. If he's the sort of friend I have an idea he is, for you to take his troubles so hard, the last thing in the world he'd want would be for you to be grieving over him."

"That's quite true." Ross's voice was a mere murmur. "But--you don't know how many times Jimmy and I have sat in the topmost rows to hear--oh, all the music there is to hear that's supreme. And then a musical revue, for just a change, and because we couldn't bear having our hearts torn any more for a while. Jimmy could dance himself--he could have earned a fortune on the stage. He was a little snub-nosed reporter and hack writer--that's all he was, or maybe ever would be, though he was a corking good one. But he has the bluest eyes--the nicest smile--the dearest ways. He--I just can't have it--as it is."

"I know," he said. "Neither can I, for your sake."

Suddenly he wanted to enclose her in his arms, bend her head back against his breast, and bury his cheek in her ruddy hair, which looked as soft as silk. But he didn't, because it wasn't yet time. One may console but not make love to a woman when she's trying to keep a grip upon herself, for love--if only friendly love--of another man.

So presently he led her out to the foot of the stairs, having said or done nothing except to make her feel that he was sorry--which was quite enough and not too much.

"Please go up and put on that white frock," he said, "and be ready for dinner and the evening. Dances begin up here soon after the chickens go to roost. We don't wait around till after midnight before we saunter in; we burst upon the frolicsome scene while the night is young--very young."

"I wish I'd brought a more party-fied dress to wear. I didn't dream of needing one."

"You don't. I like the white frock immensely--it becomes you. Some of us go in rags, and some in tags, and some in velvet gowns, so to speak. In fact, anything goes in the matter of dress. Probably Hess will wear a certain dark blue thing of hers I like, with what she calls 'touches' of scarlet and green embroidery about the sleeves--no dress-up affair at all. Wait till you see our humble gathering before you do any regretting. And if you yourself want a 'touch' of color I'll engage to furnish it."

He let go her hand as she began to ascend the stairs, though not until the third stair, when she gently pulled her little fingers away from him. Then he made her a very low bow, bending from the hips, his heels together.

"To our next meeting," he called after her, "and mind you don't let too much time elapse."

XII

ASTONISHING, *how much fun may be had in the country, and at a dance with people who mostly never have seen the Big Town. Who ever supposed country people could dance so that one would care to join them?*

The "touch of color" proved to be an artfully gay little bunch of French flowers, in coral, orange, and green shades.

"May I pin it on?--if you like it?" David asked as he met Ross, where he had left her, at the foot of the stairs.

She eyed the pretty decoration distrustfully. She had vowed to herself that she would wear nothing more that had been left behind by the favorite of the house, Susan--whatever her family name might be.

"Does it belong to your sister's niece?" she inquired. "Because I do object to being decked out in too many of another girl's things. She mightn't like it herself."

"Hester confided to me, when I noted this object on her dressing table the other day, that she had picked it up in town, and didn't I think it was jolly? I thought it was, and remembered it just now. She hasn't worn it yet, and said she'd be delighted to present it to you, since she bought two or three of them for herself and friends."

She let him fasten it in the place below her left shoulder, where he thought it ought to go, and knew by his satisfied expression that it undoubtedly was becoming.

"Now if I just had a posy to match on my coat ..."

"How will a sprig of holly do?"

Ross plucked a bright bit from a great bunch of it on the chimney piece and affixed it to his lapel.

"Splendid! Now we're both decked for the party, and who wants black coats and décolletés, when we can be so comfortable without 'em?"

He was in a gay mood, and he carried her along with him. Dinner was a pleasant affair, and in less than an hour after dinner they all went to Miss Hester's party.

"It really is her party, you know," David explained, as they went down the road a few rods and stopped before a small, brightly lighted building. "She always wanted to do something to this little old unused schoolhouse, because it was such a classic affair from the architectural point of view. So one day she bought it for a couple of songs, and the land around it opposite us, which came a trifle higher, and restored the building for a sort of community house. She had a lot of fun with it, getting it ready, and to-night she's opening it. There'll be no summer people swanking about. They will be mostly the pure country type, as we see them in winter. She's having a regular old country fiddler for some of the old-time dances they're going to do, and a nice little orchestra to play for the more modern steps. Here we go. I hope you have your notebook with you--the one they say you always carry."

"Who says I always carry one?"

"A young woman in green and gold confided it to me, as I sat next her at your sister's dinner."

"Oh--Eve Forester. She *would* confide anything she knew--or didn't know--to anybody at any time! And I didn't happen to bring a notebook up here at all."

"Didn't think you'd get a single idea, off in the country, eh?" challenged David. "If you don't wish for pen and paper before the evening's over ... But I'll lend you mine, if you do."

They went in with others of the guests who had been coming along the road with them, some on foot, most in small cars. Ross looked about her with interested, amused eyes. It was a motley crowd, certainly, assembled in the flag-and-holly decorated room, lighted by rows of Chinese lanterns. They mostly looked like intelligent and prosperous country people, and here and there among them Ross noted really fine faces. Plenty of pretty girls in gay and well-conceived frocks; numbers of bright-looking young men, only slightly stiff in manner now at the beginning of the evening; they would relax from that when the dancing began.

Miss Hester's idea of opening a country community house was not based upon ordinary notions of the supposedly fitting thing at such an affair. She had prepared no "program" of speakers; she knew far too well how tediously tantalizing it is to young people to be put through long preliminaries taken part in by a number of dull elders before their own impatient feet can be permitted to try the qualities of a dancing floor. Wise in her generation, and in theirs, she merely shook hands with everybody as they came in, playing hostess, with her small group of special friends, in an engagingly informal fashion. Then, unexpectedly, a tall man, a congressman from this rural district, rapped for silence and began sonorously:

"Miss MacRoss, we feel that before everything else we ought to have a speech from you, who have so generously and high-mindedly invited us here to-night, opening to us this new resource, which we hope to enjoy with you"--and was going on to make a presumably long speech of his own. Miss Hester caught him up at this precise point, with his mouth open and his shoulders stiffening as he drew breath to continue.

"That's very nice of you, and I appreciate it thoroughly, Mr. Chapin," she said, in the hush which had fallen--and she caught a glimpse at the moment of a boy and girl casting resigned glances at each other--"but somehow I don't think it's necessary to use up a bit of time in speechmaking by me about this little house or its new purposes. Do you--really? It's served its day as a schoolhouse, and if Presidents of these United States might have gone from it, but didn't, at least many such public men as yourself did get their early and efficient training here. Now it's yours--all of yours"--her bright-eyed glance swept the full ranks--"as well as mine, and I hope we're going to have many a jolly time in it. Don't you think the best way to set things going is to form for a perhaps rather crowded grand march--but who minds?--and then be off for the fun of the evening? I think everybody's here--everybody who can get in at all. If you'll do me the honor of helping me lead, Mr. Chapin ..."

She gave a signal to the little orchestra, made a step toward the tall, thwarted, but flattered congressman, placed her arm in his as he bowingly offered it in his best manner, moved off with him, smiling up at him--and the "fun," as she had called it, had begun.

"Gee!" breathed the boy in the girl's ear, "it takes Miss MacRoss to start things. Looks like we weren't going to have any speeches, after all. Look out--you'll get your toes stepped on. I'll bet this place never held so many people before."

"Do you really think we're going to dance, *right* after this?" whispered back the girl.

"Do they have speeches *after* the grand march?" her companion exulted. "You bet they don't. We're off. And don't forget you're giving me every other dance, let come who may."

Her look at him gave the promise, even though it pretended to be an amazed look at such presumption.

As David and Ross shuffled along with the others--it couldn't be much more than a shuffle, with everybody taking part and filling the sides of the room to repletion--David also was saying things in his partner's ear. He too was exulting, though for a different reason than that of young John Rayburn, with whom he had lately exchanged grins.

"It certainly takes Hessie to cut the red tape! It isn't the first time I've seen her plug the mouth of the long-winded, or smile her way through a difficult situation. If that chap had got a good start ... But would she let him? She wouldn't. You can't get ahead of Hess--or get mad at her. Look at her now. Hasn't she got him tamed? He thinks *he* proposed the grand march, by now! No wonder she's an executive of parts."

"I can see that. And isn't she charming as she moves along there? I didn't know she was so beautiful!"

"She isn't beautiful. Even an admiring brother couldn't claim that for her. But to my thinking Hester does have a certain distinguished look which at her age serves her better than mere beauty. Put her anywhere, in a strange place, and people want to know who she is. Bragging of my sister, am I? Well, I've plenty of reason, though I can't give you the whole story of her just now. I say, the little orchestra's doing rather well, eh? Not an instrument off the key!"

"It's good music--I'm enjoying it. And enjoying looking at all these new faces. Aren't the girls pretty! I didn't know country girls *were* so pretty."

"Didn't you? Quite a lot of things you didn't know about the country, aren't there? Notice that tall girl in the sleeveless red dress? Dark hair and eyes, and a smile--she fairly mows 'em down with that smile. Wait till you see her dance! She could go straight from this floor to a Ziegfeld revue and get the curtain calls till the rest were green with jealousy."

"Then why doesn't she? She *is* stunning."

David was looking rather steadily at the tall girl on the opposite side of the room, who had happened to glance across at him as he was speaking of her, and with whom he had exchanged a particularly friendly smile. Ross had noted it, and had wondered if he were among the ranks of the mowed-down. She could hardly blame him, she thought.

"Mean that?"

"Mean what, please?"

"Would you send that girl into the chorus?"

"You just said she could be a headliner."

"Even if she could--would you?"

"Of course I would. When I've seen her dance, if she's as unusual and accomplished as you think, I'd suggest to her to go and be trained for stage dancing. It must be only country

dancing she does now."

"Country dancing, as she does it, would be new on Broadway. She shouldn't be trained; she should be put on exactly as she is, with a country boy for a partner. They'd bring the house down."

"Then you ought to bring it about--or let me. I know several producers quite well. It's been all in the way of my work."

"I don't," said David, with his eyes still on the dark-haired girl, "quite agree with you. I don't think it would be worth the price for Molly Marvin--or for whichever of the boys succeeds in marrying her."

But there was no time to discuss this. The grand march ended, the dancing began. Ross watched, for the first time in her life, an amazingly intricate, amusing, and fascinating affair called *The Tempest*, a real old-time country dance, with an old country fiddler to play for it and another man to "call off" the changes. She watched it with much more than the natural interest with which she would have studied a performance so new to her, because David led it with Molly Marvin, in the sleeveless red dress that so lighted her dark beauty.

When Miss Hester had come to him and asked him to do this he had demurred.

"The *first* dance--with anybody but Ross? Go to."

"I know. But the young people all consider you as much host as I am hostess to-night. We decided to open with the country dance, and then have a modern number. Molly expects you, since you've done it with her so many times before, and you're both so sure of your steps. If Ross will excuse you I know she'll be rewarded by seeing one of the sights of the country."

"Oh, do go," begged Ross.

"Then you'll let me have the first after this?"

"I will--though I hadn't meant to dance."

"You won't be able to help it," he prophesied. And when she had seen him dancing with Molly Marvin she knew she wouldn't want to help it.

XIII

After all, a borrowed notebook and pencil go into action up here in the country. There actually is something to record--something that has come right down out of the Blue!

There were twelve couples in the dance, and they were all more or less skilled in the labyrinthine mazes of the complicated succession of steps. But none of them could have led as did David MacRoss and Molly Marvin. Ross couldn't take her eyes off them. To the fastest dance music she had ever heard played, both put into the performance all the spirit and grace, all the gay opportunities of the swingings and entwinings, the posturings, the flinging themselves down the line to meet each other, the more dignified marching back, that professional dancers put into quite other effects. Ross hadn't realized David's capacities in social situations until she saw him now. Both he and Molly were usually laughing into each other's faces as they met and parted, and when the steps brought them together for a minute they were always exchanging bits of talk which Ross found herself wishing she could hear. Very good friends, she should say they were, and by all odds the most attractive pair on the floor.

Not dance the opening modern dance with David, when he should come to claim it? Nothing could now keep her from it. She wasn't tall and wonderful to look at, like Molly Marvin in her scarlet frock and round bare arms. But she knew well enough what she could do--and she wanted to do it--with David.

He came to her flushed and smiling, wiping his brow.

"If you don't think that sort of thing, kept up for a good fifteen minutes, is football exercise, you've never tried it."

"I never have. But it was splendid to watch. I never saw anything like it. You exerted yourself in a great cause, and gave me an entirely new sensation. But don't you want to cool off, instead of taking me on for the next?"

"Not much. The sooner I get you out on that floor the better I shall like it. I'll put my head out of the door and get a breath of fresh air, and be ready. *The Tempest* is the one country dance that tests my respiratory apparatus to the limit. Yet Molly vows she could keep on for another ten minutes and not turn a hair. I rather think she could. Her lungs are in admirable condition."

"It did seem something of an endurance test--for you--in a heavy coat. Your partner has her pretty arms and neck uncovered. That's why she doesn't mind it."

"I suppose so. It's a hard decree, the coat necessity. Now in my shirt-sleeves----But even in the country it's not done, strangely enough."

The music began again shortly. Even *The Tempest* dancers were ready for more after the briefest interval. David and Ross moved off to the strains of the latest popular dance music, which Ross had last heard played in a famous hotel dining room in town.

She was little, her bright head came only to David's shoulder. Her dancing was of a different sort than Molly Marvin's. But it fitted David's in its own way as perfectly as had that of the country belle.

"I feel as though I had a bit of thistledown in my right arm," murmured David when they had circled the room several times in silence. "It takes no more than a breath to waft you along. How do you know what I'm going to do before I do it? I flattered myself I got in some steps that would be new to you."

"You did. I've had considerable experience, I suppose. You forget I'm not the infant I seem like when you begin to transport me."

"I thought you were all absorbed in work, and seldom took a chance to play."

"Oh, did you? I have several friends who insist on my playing now and then. I do love to dance. Sometimes I----"

Suddenly she pressed his shoulder. "Oh, please stop," she breathed. "Let's go outside."

He obeyed amazedly, and with some anxiety. What now? Was she ill, and was the fun all over so early? He had been moving on air ever since they had first swung away together; must he now walk on earth again?

But Ross was not ill. "That notebook and pencil, please--quick!"

He gave them to her. She backed up against the wall in the chilly anteroom which was the only place short of outdoors that he could take her to, and began to set down dots and dashes with great rapidity. Her brows were knit, her mouth puckered, her whole aspect one of intense concentration. She paused, went on, paused again, bit her pencil, finally slashed an immense dash across the page, and tore it out of the notebook. She folded the paper, slipped off her white shoe, tucked in the paper, and slid the shoe on again. Then she looked up. David thought he had never seen such glittering eyes.

"Caught that one on the wing, didn't you?" he observed. "Too bad to step on it the rest of the evening, though. Couldn't you have left it in the notebook and trusted it to me?"

She shook her head. "Must keep it with me. It's the first time my brain has jumped like that at anything in weeks. It makes me simply wild with joy to know I can go on again."

"Of course you can go on again. You were worn out, that was all. I know the feeling--of not having any more in you. It's awful while it lasts. I'm delighted that you got something here so early in the evening. Who knows what your brain may jump at in the next dance? Let's go back and try."

The next dance was well begun, but David swung her lightly into it. It was a waltz, and many of the dancers were making a mess of it, since other steps were more popular and more often called for. But David and Ross's waltzing was something to look at, and all at once they discovered that they were being left alone upon the floor, while the others withdrew to watch them.

"Let's let 'em have an eyeful," whispered David. "Give me leave?"

"Go ahead. I'm game." Ross was ready for anything now, in the excitement of having captured and imprisoned an idea for work.

It was a pretty thing, the impromptu swayings and hesitations he led her into. Both had seen so much of the most fetching stage dancing, it was an easy thing for David to improvise and Ross to follow his steps and pressures. He attempted nothing intricate, but the simple grace and

rhythm of the pair's movements were so fascinating to watch that the orchestra itself went on playing long after the number should have ended, its eyes fixed upon its interpreters. David had finally to give it a laughing gesture to bring it to a standstill, and then the hearty applause of the company rang to the rafters.

"I wish to heaven I could keep you for myself the whole evening," breathed David in Ross's ear as they slipped back into the crowd. "That is--if you were willing."

"Of course you can't. You must be nice to everybody, to-night of all nights, with your sister opening the place."

"I must. But I'll bring you partners for every alternate dance. The ones in between belong to me, by your leave. I'm not going to miss those, if Hess doesn't take me by the ears--and even if she does. See anybody you wouldn't mind having?"

"Plenty, of course. But I'd like better to sit with Miss Hester."

David laughed. "Don't believe you've been noticing Hess. She's stepping out with the best of them--and the worst. No, you'll have to be friendly too. About a dozen fellows are looking at you--want to ask you out and aren't sure whether I'll let 'em. You know--or maybe you don't--you're a hit. There's nobody like you in the room. Now that you've let yourself go you're a little red-headed flash of magnetic energy. *Now* I know why you're Ross Collins and can do--what you can do.... Going to let me see what you wrote just now?"

"I don't know. Come--you must fix things and be off. I'm not going to let Miss Hester begin to be worried."

"She won't *worry*. She'll cut the knot, true to form. All right, I'll forestall her and bring you a partner." He glanced about him. "I can choose from five right now"--and promptly made his choice.

So Ross danced every dance. From the hands of one and another of the husky, red-cheeked, pleasant-mannered country boys, some of whom she enjoyed and others she endured, she came back with every other number to David. It was like being transferred from the touch of homespun to that of velvet. It was also like getting home.

He said something like that himself. "Come back where you belong."

"It does feel like that," Ross admitted.

For an instant he involuntarily drew her closer, then forced himself to relax his hold to the point where he had scrupulously kept it. David MacRoss was not of the sort who make a public embrace out of a dance. He was much too fastidious for that. When he should hold Ross Collins tight in his arms--if he should--it would not be under Chinese lanterns and the noting gaze of many eyes. He didn't dare think about that now, or he might even forget the eyes.

Promptly at midnight it was all over. Before the clock in a near-by white church steeple could strike the hour the orchestra had played "Home, Sweet Home," and the people were reluctantly leaving.

"Sunday is Sunday up here in the country," David explained, putting Ross's coat upon her. "That's why we begin early. After all, the hours before midnight are as good as those after, aren't they?"

"When they've been like these hours," Ross admitted.

"Had as good a time as that?"

She nodded. "And got my wings back too. Or that's the way it seems."

"That's the nicest thing you could say. Mayn't I see where they took you? You don't know how much I want to."

"Perhaps--when we get home."

On the lowest stair, when they reached the house, she sat down and translated her shorthand into long, while David stood by, eagerly waiting. Finally she handed the paper up to him, watching his face as he read.

"It's in the rough, you know," she warned him.

He read it three times over. It was only twenty lines--but what lines! Equal to--or better than--anything he had ever seen of hers. He was suddenly happier than he remembered being in a year.

"You little genius!" he said, gazing down at her with eyes darkening with pleasure.

She stood up.

"Of course I'm not, but to have *you* think so----"

"Why *me*?"

"I suppose because you're so--what you are."

"What am I?"

"The name *David MacRoss* seems to cover it," said Ross.

"I can't," declared David, "pursue the subject. No modest man could follow up an enigmatic yet tantalizing lead like that. But I'm rather hoping----"

"I'll tell you what I mean? I will. Don't you know yourself at all? Don't you know what you're like?"

"I do. Nothing much. Just a countryman--with a touch of town to take the edge off my rusticity."

She looked him straight in his absorbed gray eyes.

"If we happen to meet again, down in town, I'll take you to see what I think you're like," she promised.

"Good! And then I'll take you to see what I think you're like. A bargain like that certainly does insure our meeting in town. Who could resist finding out things about one's unknown self?"

"Nobody. Good-night. I've had a wonderful evening."

"Why not stop downstairs a little longer? I can make up the fire in there in a jiffy--the one you--er--rested--so comfortably by last evening. It's only twelve-twenty."

"I may permit myself to slumber by a country gentleman's fire for one evening," admitted Ross from the fourth step up, "but not for two, consecutively. Just now--I never was wider awake in my life----"

"Neither was I. Then why----"

"But given that couch, and the luxuriously lapping warmth of the fire, *and* the fact that I must have danced at least a dozen miles to-night, and I might turn into the Dormouse again."

"I shouldn't mind--much. I've spent unhappier evenings than that last night. See here--this particular winter evening can never come again."

He took a step up after her, entreaty in his look.

She shook her head, retreating upward. "I wouldn't run the risk, for anything, of spoiling a quite perfect day--and memory. In the next hour both might be ruined by some frightful mischance."

"Such as--what?"

She was now more than halfway up the stairs, and continuing steadily to ascend. "Such as your going to sleep yourself. I couldn't bear that. Good-night--and thank you for everything."

"Go to sleep myself!" David's inflection suggested not only the utter rejection of such an idea but its impossibility.

"One never knows. And so--I'm gone."

He watched her out of sight, listened for the closing of her door, and then ran lightly up after her. She didn't know, and he didn't intend she should, that his own room was next hers. It might mean nothing to her, but it meant a lot to him.

XIV

WELL! *The country proves positively dangerous! High explosives are stored there, which let go unexpectedly. The train can't bear us back too fast to the town and safety.*

On Sunday morning it was snowing heavily.

"A blizzard," suggested David at the breakfast table, "would be great stuff. It would keep our red-headed guest with us a day or two more."

"It wouldn't," was Miss Hester's view, "any more than it would keep me. I too am due back in town in the morning. I should go if I had to ride on a snow plow, and take Ross with me."

"Then that's settled," agreed Ross. "I had an idea, when I woke and saw the snow coming down like this, that I'd better catch the morning train to make sure. But if I may ride with Miss Hester on a snow plow----"

"There is no morning train, my child," David explained, "on Sundays. Your one chance is the five o'clock. So eager to get away from us then?"

Ross and Miss Hester exchanged glances, smiling.

"It was discovered long ago that there's nothing equal to play," declared the older woman, "except work, which surpasses it. David knows that perfectly. He knows that if he succeeded in keeping you here with misrepresentations about blizzards and trains you would be miserable and he would then be unhappy himself."

"I've heard," said her brother, "of speeding the parting guest, but I've never known it done with such explicit, and I may say indecent, haste. It comes, Ross, of the habit of having private secretaries usher callers into her office and then extract them again in precisely four minutes, at the notice of her buzzer. I've even had it done to me. A certain look comes into Miss MacRoss's eyes which says, 'I'm all through with you. It's time to go.' And I meekly stand up and make for the door--before the secretary can lead me out."

"Then he stays outside and visits with the secretary--she *is* an agreeable girl," conceded Miss Hester. "David, what are you and Ross doing this morning?"

"If Stuart Chandler had been preaching in our four-corners white church I should have taken her to hear him just to show her what a country preacher can be like. He isn't, but instead an unknown quantity who expects to raise a budget for something or other. So I'm not risking prejudicing her against a building where the pulpit desk on one occasion resounded to the thumpings of the great Jonathan Edwards--or so tradition has it. Instead, I'm going to have the Three Musketeers over, and give her a treat."

"A good idea," Miss Hester agreed. "They're spoiling to come. I had to refuse them yesterday, to leave you and Ross free."

"Do you like children?" David inquired of his guest.

"I really don't know much about them. My sister hasn't any--and my own childhood is so terribly far behind----"

"Oh, is it indeed!" mocked David. "Mine isn't. When I get the Three Musketeers tumbling over me I'm a boy again. They keep me from losing that school-boy complexion." David rubbed his clear, ruddily tanned cheek. "Wait till you see them." And he went to the telephone.

Ross wasn't keen about seeing them, but she couldn't say so. Afterward she remembered the scenes of that Sunday morning as among the prettiest and most enjoyable of the whole visit. Also, they gave her a new view of David, who seemed to have many sides, each one quite different from the rest.

The Musketeers came tumbling along within ten minutes after the call. They belonged to a neighbor, and their names, as David presented them, were John, George, and Mary--good, plain, old-fashioned names. But if the names were plain the children were not. From the first Ross found she had to like them. As for David, it was quite clear that he adored them, especially Mary, who was four, and adorable, if any child of that age ever was. John and George were sturdy youngsters of six and eight, and the whole trio were something new to Ross. They were extremely good-looking, they were as well mannered as could be expected at their age, and their spirits were bubbling.

Ross sat and watched the games that immediately began, and couldn't take her eyes off David MacRoss, though she tried to hard enough for pride's sake. Probably no man shows to better advantage than when playing with children of whom he is fond. David was an expert at the business, and as unself-conscious as the children themselves of the fact that the four together constituted a charming spectacle. When the most boisterous of the playing was over, the children out of breath, and the time ripe for quieter diversions, the picture that David, John, George, and Mary made as they sat in a group on the hearth rug while David held Mary on his lap and told stories was one Ross never forgot. Nobody could, she thought, who had seen it. The potential father of a family was David: a man who would want children of his own. The thought made Ross's heart stand still.... Well, he must marry the sort of girl who would feel the same way about it. Perhaps Molly Marvin. With her splendid physique Molly would make a wonderful mother. Ross became suddenly a little afraid of David MacRoss. A man who loved children like that--she'd better not see too much of him. Yet she continued to watch, fascinated.

"And," concluded David, his chin resting on little Mary's chestnut brown head, "the mouse *skittered* back through the hole in the wall and into his nest. 'My dear,' said he to his wife, when he had got his breath, '*never* go out into the dining room when that rat-terrier they call Binks is there--nor let the children.'"

Mary shivered deliciously. "Nevva," she repeated, with determination. "No, indeed--they mustn't."

"Mr. David," questioned George--George was the questioner of the group--"can a mouse breathe?"

John shouted. "Oh, George, what a silly question!"

"It's not at all silly," Mr. David defended. "How is George to know, if he has never seen a mouse breathing? Next time, old man, I catch a mouse, I'll show you. When he's frightened he can breathe about ten times as fast as you can, till his little sides are all quivering."

"I can breathe fast," declared George, and began to demonstrate the fact. A fast-breathing contest ensued, after which David kissed Mary on both round red cheeks, shook hands with

John and George, put their coats and overshoes upon them, and sent them home. Two hours had gone by with great rapidity, though Ross wouldn't have believed such a thing could be, with only children--and a young man--for entertainers.

The remaining hours vanished with even more celerity. When she went upstairs to pack her little over-night case Ross looked about her big square bedroom with its four windows and its air of comfort and beauty, and thought of the comparative cubby hole in which this winter she was sleeping and working. It looked out on a narrow court, between high-rising walls, and there was no time of day when an electric light wasn't necessary to make it habitable. During her whole life, she reflected, she had slept in similar cubby holes, though she hadn't thought them especially undesirable. Most New Yorkers, unless they were prosperous above the average, were used to getting along without sunlight in their sleeping quarters. What of it, when there were so many other places to go?--amusing places, exciting places, where electricity either rivaled the sunlight, or was dimmed into artful color effects to give a sense of seclusion where there was no seclusion.

Oh, well--this visit was just an incident. That night she would be back in her own room, and all this spaciousness and beauty would seem like a dream. She lived in the big world--she thought of Manhattan as the world--not back here among the Connecticut hills. Take David and Hester MacRoss out of this house, and it would lose its high lights as surely as though the shutters were closed--it would be a lonely place where she wouldn't want to stay.

Presently they were all on their way to the train, which Miss Hester was taking with Ross, David driving them through the still fast-falling snow, and having to put his motor into low gear in order to pull through some of the drifts which were forming in exposed places. Miss Hester was looking very trim and tailored, quite a different person, all at once, to Ross's observation, from the one whom she had seen going about her country home dressed for work and comfort; different even from the resourceful hostess of the dance. She carried a brief-case and a small dressing case, both of the finest leather, and her whole appearance was that of the woman of city affairs. A certain terseness of speech was now noticeable, in contrast to the more relaxed and humorous manner which had characterized her heretofore. It was easy to realize that here undoubtedly was a person who was going to an office where she would sit at a desk and make decisions and push buttons, give orders and grant interviews, quite as David had sketchily suggested. Who *was* Miss Hester, anyway? If Ross hadn't been her guest, she herself would most certainly be plotting to try for an interview with so interesting a personality on the way down by train.

In the middle of a drift, on the other side of which another car was waiting to come through in the track David was making, he suddenly called out of the window to the other driver.

"Hi, Doctor! Please stop a minute. Want to speak to you."

Under his breath he said to Ross, "Eyes and ears open, please. This is our best friend--and everybody else's, too. You mustn't miss him."

The two cars stood side by side: one a shining, luxurious sedan, the other a battered, dingy old roadster with flapping curtains.

"Good-morning, Sam." Miss Hester's tone was that of the friend who is glad of a meeting.

"'Morning, Hester. Off again? Good luck!"

"How goes it, Dr. Sam? Heavy sledging?" This was David.

"Have to put on chains if this keeps up."

Dr. Samuel Reade had a lean worn face, a pair of observant brown eyes, a cheerful smile, and a general look of having been at work without interruption for many hours on end. Across the space a slight tinge of ether was wafted to Ross's nostrils.

"I didn't mean the weather. Up all night, I suppose."

"Night's the time for work--less disturbance," replied his best friend.

"More disturbance, I should call it, for you. Dr. Reade, let me present you to Hester's and my guest--Miss Ross Collins, of New York. We've been trying to show her metropolitan eyes that we have some things up here in the country worth looking at. You're one of 'em, you know."

The doctor lifted his old felt hat for the second time, and the observant eyes met Ross's. Though he was undoubtedly all of fifty years old, and tired out, she felt as though she were looking at a man whose favorable or unfavorable opinion of her might count heavily.

"David MacRoss has an Irish tongue in his head, I expect you've found out, Miss Collins," said Dr. Reade drily, "in spite of his boast of being pure Scotch. It's best to take him well diluted, in either case. You'll miss your train, Davy, if you don't drive on. There's a drift that'll slow you down considerably, a mile this side of the station."

"All right, but Miss Collins has at least had a glimpse of you," David called back as the doctor's car started to grind its way into the drift.

"Be gone!" came back the gruff retort, and the brief encounter was over.

"Are you good at snapshots?" David glanced into Ross's interested face.

"Is he what I've heard of as the 'country doctor'? I didn't suppose they existed any more."

"They do, or how should we get along up here? And I'd like to state that no city specialist can be found, in my opinion, who can touch the work of a man like that, except in the specialist's own narrow field. And even then his specialized knowledge needs the broader wisdom and experience of men like Reade. As for me--and I can speak for Hester too--given an emergency of practically any sort, calling for quick diagnosis, immediate decision, and instant action, and I'd rather trust my life in the hands of Sam Reade than summon a whole bunch of men from New York--without calling him first. While they were getting here I might snuff out, but I wouldn't if Reade stuck by and kept life in me. He might or might not use them when they got here, but you can bet he would if he needed them, and no jealousy in him, either. The chances are, though, that the crisis would be past before the train pulled in. And I've known more than one famous physician or surgeon from the city who came to consult with Reade and remained to find out how in blazes he does what he does."

"He has a tired, nice face," Ross said, "but I don't quite see how he could be as well trained as a city man. Or, if he were, how he could be content to practise up here in the country."

"The country." David turned to glance over his shoulder at Miss Hester. "They keep on feeling that way about it, no matter what you show them, don't they?"

"You're in too much haste, Brother," warned Miss Hester. "You can't make converts in two days to your particular point of view. And why want to? You and I were brought up in the country;

Ross has known the city since she was born into it. She could undoubtedly show you a number of things you with all your visits to town haven't yet discovered."

"All right, I'll give her the chance, though I think I know her New York pretty well by now. I'm coming in next Saturday morning, Ross. I'll be busy all day, but may I take you for dinner----"

"No, I'll take you for dinner, if you'll come to my sister's apartment for me. There are just one or two places I'd like to show you," Ross responded.

The appointment was made, the station was reached, the train was more than caught, for it was ten minutes late. During those ten minutes host and guest paced up and down the platform, while Miss Hester sat inside the little station making notes of her own.

"Not sorry you came?"

"How could I be? I feel like another human being."

"You look like another one. Going back enthusiastically to that typewriter?"

"Well," Ross considered, "it's always hard, you know, to strike up the old pace, after even a short vacation. Shall you go back to your attic haunt crammed with new ideas?"

"I shall go back with one fixed idea," said David MacRoss. "And that's that you and I are friends. You've brought something new and worth having into my life; I hope I've brought--or can bring--something like that into yours. I know you feel--you said it--that it takes time to make real friends. That's true too. But once in a while it's a matter of pretty immediate recognition, isn't it? Or mayn't it be? Not impossible?"

"No, I don't think it's impossible. And of course I like you and Miss Hester immensely. Why shouldn't I? You've both been wonderful to me. And I don't mind trying out your friendship idea. But--I must warn you--I've been on my good behavior up here. You've no possible notion how difficult I can be. Tempery, unreasonable, impossible. In other words, red-headed. Sometimes, if you see much of me, you won't like me a bit. I can truly be horrider than anybody you ever knew."

David looked down at her, smiling. "How you scare me! In other words, you're a high-tension wire, and it's safest not to come near you. I'm to put on the rubber gloves, and still look out for short circuits. All right. Don't you suppose I've already recognized a few facts about you? If you weren't high tension you couldn't carry so heavy a load. Danger always did attract me!"

Ross looked up at him. Her eyes, those brown eyes, so narrow between their thick lashes--David thought now that he never had liked large round eyes--gave him a strange look.

"It always did attract me, too," she said.

"Then"--his words came quickly, and very low--"when I see you again I'm going to suggest something unquestionably dangerous."

"Do suggest it now. I need nothing so much as a little excitement."

"Poor child! It hasn't been very exciting up here in this neck of the woods, has it? Well--I'm ready to suggest it. As a matter of fact, I lay awake most of the night thinking about it, and wondering whether I could stand it to hold myself back and pursue the ancient and honorable methods, or whether I should cut through them with my own. You know--I've been wanting to marry you ever since we reached Thirtieth Street on that walk in the rain."

"Oh--oh--*oh*!... How *could* you--spoil everything like that!"

It was a queer startled cry, and it made his heart jump uncomfortably.

"So that's the way you feel about it?" he asked gravely.

She turned away, taking a pace or two, then coming back to speak fast and breathlessly.

"On my honor, I didn't dream you were going to say anything like that. I didn't! I thought--never mind what I thought--when I egged you on. Just some escapade when you should come to town--a murder trial or an all-night trip in the Chinese quarter.... I--but I shouldn't take you seriously, I know. Of course you were just trying to give me a shock, to amuse me in the parting moment."

"I was meaning to give you a shock, but I didn't intend it to be amusing."

"It--isn't. It's deadly upsetting, that's all."

Far in the distance came the whistle of the approaching train.

"I'm sorry," said David simply. "Of course it was a mad mistake to explode so soon. It's just that--I can't explain it--but I don't know how to let you go even so far away from me as New York. I want to keep you--somehow--anyhow.... Never mind--forget it. I'll begin all over again. Just don't put an end to our beginning friendship, here and now, because of my rashness."

"I invited your rashness. It's like me to take a chance on anything anybody may be threatening to say or do, for what I may get out of it. You may as well know that about me--cold-blooded little dissecter that I am."

"I shouldn't call you precisely cold-blooded. You may be a dissecter. Every writer is--has to be. But you won't use the knife on me, just now, will you? You'll stay friends?"

"I'll stay friends," agreed Ross, with a sudden gentleness in her voice which warmed him a little. "Of course, it doesn't make a woman exactly angry with a man--unless she detests him very much--to know that something about her has made him take a leap in the dark toward her like that."

"I'm thankful if it doesn't."

The train whistled again, now much nearer. David said to himself that he had never known the misguided train to come so fast--a Sunday train, too. It was actually hurtling toward them, around the curve, as though it were bent on taking Ross Collins away from him at the exact moment, when, through his own fault, everything was in a mess. And Hester was coming out of the station. Hester, too, was cutting the last chance short. Not like her to do that. But then she could have no possible notion that her usually level-headed brother, who derived from a long line of New England ancestors who had deliberated carefully before taking action, could have committed himself to so much as a hypothetical proposal of marriage after his third--only his third--meeting with a red-headed woman writer, even one with an established reputation equal to that of Ross Collins.

David couldn't get out a further word.

"We're lucky the train isn't any later," observed Miss Hester.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Ross.

Now what did she mean by that?

The train bore them away. David stared after it. At least the smile which Ross had given him from the platform, as she turned to look down at him, was all in the circumstances he could have asked a smile to be.

Why shouldn't it be? As the train rushed along, Ross, gazing out of the window while Miss Hester, after a few abstracted words which her companion hardly heard, became again absorbed in her notebook, was saying to herself:

"David! How did I ever keep from throwing my arms around your splendid strong neck, right there on the platform! Of course we never, never in the world could hit it off, married, even if I hadn't crossed marriage definitely off my program for life. But--just to have made you want me enough to tell me so to-day, because you couldn't wait! To have caused a conservative New England country gentleman like you to lose his intelligent head and take a gorgeous leap into the unknown like that--it's worth having lived for!... How on earth did it happen--and me looking like a wilted cabbage leaf? Or--I did look like one when I came. Maybe not so much so since that first evening's rude but refreshing nap on the couch by the fire. Anyhow, bless you for having given me the thrill of my life. But--oh, David, you've got to be resisted. You're not for me--nor I for you. I'm that little red-headed devil of an Irishwoman, Ross Collins, brought up on Broadway. My mind is about as deep as a puddle on Broadway's pavement on a rainy night; maybe it can shine, but it's with light reflected from a million street signs. Your mind--why, I couldn't satisfy it--couldn't *touch* it! And if I could, I'm not a marrying woman, Davy--and that settles it, absolutely."

"Yet," she considered, after some further turning of the matter over in that shallow mind to which she owned, "I wonder if I've the strength of character not to see him again--which of course is what I should nobly refuse to do. I--doubt it! I expect I'll jump into the middle of the fire--and then wonder why I'm burned! And the scars will show for life, most likely, and I'll have to jest at 'em.... Oh, well! I should be good at jesting, since it's my trade!"

XV

The town meets Ross at the station. What a glorious place to get back to. Why did she ever leave it? This is the place to be, in the very centre of things. No doubt of it.

The Grand Central Terminal, on a Sunday evening, seemed ten thousand miles from the small country station where Ross had taken leave of David. She came out into its thronged mazes with the sense of having wakened from a peaceful dream to the familiar rush of everyday life. Well, this was home--not the other. She was bound to like getting back to it. Here were people, every kind of people, hurrying along with her; this was where things were happening. She came out into the brightly lighted streets and into the noises of the traffic--muted to its Sunday comparative quiet and yet humming with the familiar sounds--and said to herself that here was where she belonged. For one country dance, for one glimpse of an unusual country doctor, were a hundred possible contacts, each one likely to stir her creative mind into activity. These were what she wanted most, weren't they?

One contact, certainly, was at her elbow. A slender, black-haired young man--or not so young perhaps as one might think at first sight--with a thin face and eyes which looked as though nothing ever escaped their attention, had been waiting for Ross as she and Miss Hester came up the ramp from the train. He hadn't joined her until she had seen the older woman into a taxicab and turned away. He had noted the parting--noted Miss MacRoss. He happened to know her by sight as well as by reputation, as he knew nearly everybody. He whistled softly to himself.

Then he came up to Ross. "Your train's twenty minutes late," he said. "Had to linger up there in the country, did you? Like it so much as that?"

"Why, Tom Thayer! How in the world did you know?"

"A sleuth like me--not know? 'Sorry, Tom, I'm going to be away over the week-end--taking the one thirty this afternoon.' That one was easy."

"You don't mean you----"

He nodded. "Did a bit of hanging round, that's all. Why not? When you make dates with D. MacRoss in my hearing----"

"But I didn't."

"Not this one--the first. And walk from the Fifth Avenue Hospital clear down to Sister Ethel's in the rain--turning to sleet--I'd be pretty dense not to guess where you're going when you say you're off for the week-end. Since Miss MacRoss always comes back on this Sunday-night train I cleverly--oh, so cleverly--deduced the now proven fact that you'd be with her. Come on--let's get out of this. If you can walk four miles with David you can walk one with me."

Ross didn't mind the walk. She had covered many miles about the city with Tom Thayer. He was a special writer--extraordinarily expert--and he had taken her to many places where she couldn't have gone alone, in a common search for copy. But she certainly didn't like being followed up quite so closely as this. Thayer discovered it before they had reached Forty-first Street.

"Displeased?" he inquired, peering to look under her hat brim. "Or merely annoyed?"

"Why should you do detective work on my affairs?"

"Well, now--why shouldn't I? Don't you think I care where you spend your week-ends? How the devil you can bother with a solemn country writer for solemn magazines like MacRoss is more than I can see. You're a sparkling fountain; he's a stagnant pool--and muddy at that."

She opened her lips--and closed them again. She wasn't going to defend David against the cynicism of Tom, and thus give herself and her interest in David away. Of course Tom would characterize the work of a man like David in precisely that way, whether he knew anything about it or not. Skepticism--irony--satire. They were the breath in Tom's nostrils. Ross had found acquaintance with him very stimulating; she enjoyed his originality and was amused by his wit. But quite suddenly, though she had always been quite as quick as Tom to inveigh against "solemn" people, she found herself privately and passionately refusing to place David MacRoss in this category. He might write serious and thoughtful articles for the type of magazines which Tom considered both dull and futile, though they were not so regarded by cultivated people of another sort. But she knew, without knowing much about it, that David's mind and Tom Thayer's were equal to the same thing and therefore equal to each other--keen apprehension of much that goes on in life. Their tastes and standards might differ as the poles; but if they were to engage in discussion it would be a case of diamond cut diamond, and nobody would know beforehand which should be victor--if either. A "stagnant pool" indeed!

A vision came to Ross of David dancing *The Tempest* with Molly Marvin. "Solemn" had been about the last adjective applicable to him then. Laughter, grace, charm, chivalry--he had shown them all. Oh, well--of course Tom Thayer had his points too, and she appreciated him and his comradeship. But she was exasperated by this uncalled-for attack upon another man, even though "attack" in modern parlance was Tom's middle name, and nothing else was to be expected of him. He gained his living by attacking everything, making light of everything, game of everything, comedy of everything. That was why he had been of such use to her, because in a more delicate and subtle way that was her "line" too. Only, now and then she spared the butterfly's wing, the bloom on the peach. Also, she could do the heartbreaking things; Tom Thayer couldn't, and wouldn't, and frankly admitted it. "I'll leave the sob stuff to you," he was apt to say, "though I'll admit you make it more convincing sob stuff than anybody I know. Actually forces a reluctant tear from my own stony eyes once in a while."

"Must have been a sad visit, up among the Connecticut tombstones," he now challenged Ross, when he couldn't make her rise to his characterization of David MacRoss. "If you left 'em resting in peace, why memorize the epitaphs? You look as though you had one on the end of your tongue."

"I have. 'Let sleeping dogs lie.'" Her glance flashed round at him.

He whistled again. It was his effective way of expressing amazement coupled with ridicule. "I'm going to start something if I keep on, am I warned? Of course I'd like nothing better, but never mind.... All right, we'll drop the country and its chilly calm and talk about the town and its tempery touchiness. I've a nice little court trial on for you in the morning--promises excellent drama. By the way, for this evening----" And he proposed at least six different ways of spending it--what there was left of it, and to his mind everything was left of it at only ten by the clock on the Metropolitan Tower. But Ross refused them all, and they came to the end of their walk down town.

"I may by morning, Tom," she said, "be ready for your courtroom--and probably shall. But for to-night I've ever so much to do."

"Have to unpack this two-by-four"--he indicated the small case in his hand--"and tell your sister what you've been doing. She'll want to know, you know. This extreme reticence you've preserved with me won't go with her, if I know sisters."

"I suppose not. I'm sure I shan't mind. And what's the use of telling you, when you know so well everything one does without being told?"

"You do my indifferent powers of observation and inference too much honor. I don't know quite everything about that visit, though I certainly wish I did. I can imagine finding Miss Hester MacRoss interesting. She's an astute person--I might even say personage--and has her place in the scheme of things. I do her that justice, because honesty forces me to. And you know honesty"--his tone became a drawl, as it frequently did when he was being insolent--"why, honesty is my chief characteristic--when I'm not lying. But on my word, Brother David, beside his sister, is pretty small potatoes, to use an ancient simile befitting his provincial habitat."

"You know," said Ross Collins, turning upon him suddenly like a small enraged cat, "I've often thought you quite the most sagacious man I know, in spite of your being capable of pretty nearly anything that calls for audacity. But I've never understood before how just plain stupid you could be. Do you expect to make capital with me by running down charming people whose bread I've just eaten?"

"Well, I did hope to stab you into comprehension," retorted Thomas Thayer grimly, betrayed into a complete loss of his judgment in dealing with Ross Collins, returned from a visit he had been furiously jealous over her making, "of the undoubted fact that bread, even buttered with the finest of dairy butter--and possibly even spread with jam--is no diet for a sophisticated palate like yours. Cocktails, caviare, oysters, champagne, breast of guinea hen--they're the food your brand of delicate genius needs."

"You are perfectly ridiculous--and unbelievably rude."

"Granted. You ought to be used to that. That's why you like to go about with me, because you never know what I'm going to say or do next. And by the way, it's my colossal nerve that gets you into places where you couldn't force yourself and so provides you with fresh thrills out of which to pull your stuff. Do you think D.M. could ever furnish you a thrill?"

She went up in the lift without saying more than a curt good-bye. She was for the moment very nearly hating Thomas Thayer, though she knew well enough that she'd meet him at the courthouse in the morning, and be glad enough of his company and his enlightening comments. She always had to forgive Tom Thayer in the end, even after the violent quarrels which they really both enjoyed, because, as he had said, he was of such use to her that she couldn't spare him. She understood perfectly that he was devoted to her interests, and she was entirely used to his arbitrary ways of showing it. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have minded the sort of thing he had been insinuating about David MacRoss, nor have considered it coarse--as she did--if it had been said of a man to whom she was indifferent. But somehow when she thought of David--well, he certainly didn't need her championship; he was unquestionably a bigger man than Tom Thayer. But she couldn't stand hearing him sneered at. This attitude of hers, she realized, would bear looking at, and she looked at it squarely for several hours before she went to sleep.

Her not going immediately to sleep was, however, not wholly due to recollections of David MacRoss. When she opened the door into the Cheneys' apartment with her key she found a gay Sunday-night party going on. She tried to slip into her own room but her brother-in-law, Kendall Cheney, caught her in the act. He was coming somewhat unsteadily down the foyer with a bottle of gin in one hand and a cocktail shaker in the other. He was decidedly care-free of spirit.

"Hi, there, Ross! Just in time."

"Hush! I'm going to bed. Don't tell Ethel I'm back."

"Bed! I like that! Haven't you had enough bed, up in the country? What else is there to do there but sleep? Come along and help me squeeze some lemons. I've invented an absolutely new f-fizz."

"No, thanks, Ken dear. I've an early appointment for the morning, and I've got to have a clear head. So have you. Better not invent any more new drinks to-night. Remember the last time you were late at the office?"

"Oh, ho, little sister! Been going to church up in Connecticut, have you? Any new Blue Laws there now? Don't try to bring 'em down here."

"I won't. But I'm going to bed. Good-night, and be sure you don't sleep too *tight* when you do sleep."

"That's a good one. Well, if you must. See here--you don't look so pinched as you did a few days ago. More life--more color--or is it rouge? Anyhow you're worth kissing, I vow." And he came close.

She evaded him, and closed the door in his face, smiling at him as she did so, however, for she was fond of Ken. He was apt to be rather silly when he had taken about as much as he evidently had to-night, but he was a good sort, a kind if not super-intelligent brother-in-law, and she didn't like to offend him. It struck her, as she softly turned the key to make sure he didn't follow her, that if men knew precisely how they looked when at that stage of intoxication they wouldn't really fancy themselves in it as they did. And if women knew----But the way women looked at that stage was something Ross particularly detested. The sight of it, out of her own coolly observant eyes--for her eyes *had* to be at all times observant because that was her trade--had many a time restrained her from following the same road to folly. Not that she never had followed it, for perhaps red-heads find it particularly difficult not to let themselves go when occasion offers. But having now and then in the past found herself where she hadn't meant to be as regards loss of ability to co-ordinate her steps and senses, she had set herself a narrow limit beyond which no one could now tempt her to go. And now that she had met David MacRoss, though she knew nothing whatever of his views upon the subject, she understood quite as well as though she had been told that he would have a particularly strong contempt for those who were accustomed to let their appetites override their reason. Unquestionably it was David MacRoss who was guiding her acts to-night, though neither she nor Tom Thayer nor Kendall Cheney knew it. Otherwise she might have gone with Ken to squeeze the lemons, and to accept a sample of the new "f-fizz."

She wanted the influence of no cocktail to keep her from thinking straight this night about David and his amazing offer.

The next day was precisely like hundreds of others which she had lived in the past--or a fair sample of them.

In the morning the courtroom scene, with a judge on the bench whom she and Tom Thayer both much admired. Tom's attitude had completely changed over-night; she couldn't have asked him to be more courteous or companionable. A hurried lunch in a place famous for its good food, because she could there meet a woman who would tell her several things she wanted to know. Half an hour in a newspaper office, half an hour interviewing an actress, half an hour rushing through files of magazines in the library, to get track of a dimly remembered paragraph. Twenty minutes in a theater agency, trying to secure seats for a popular play because it might have a suggestion for her. And so on. Always hotly following the scarlet thread which might lead her to treasure. And at night she was tired, triumphant, and yet soon slightly doubtful after all as to whether the column she had written was as well worth being triumphant over as she had thought while she had set it down.

For Ross Collins's main support, aside from the *Lady of Leisure*, was a daily record of events in Manhattan, as she picked them up in the anonymous rôle of a sharp-eyed young woman about town. It had in the beginning made a hit with the general public, and it was continuing to do so, in the columns of a popular newspaper. It really threw off sparks of wit in every paragraph, and the rows of dots which were cunningly set between the quick, vivid, mirth-provoking sentences served to point up the brilliancy of it--as though the writer paused to laugh, or to make a merry gesture, or to take a sip of wine. Sometimes Ross could dash off her copy like lightning, her brain working resplendently; again she had to grind out her quips and jests, as ordinary writers do. But on the whole, until Jimmy French went away and left her wondering amazedly if he had been the source of half her inspirations, she had had a comparatively easy time of it.

Now, to-day, in spite of Tom Thayer's help, which he had never given with more eager generosity, the lines when she had set them down and considered them critically seemed forced; they even dragged. After all, she found herself wondering, *was* life in the Big Town the only life?... But of course it was--she knew that. Why, there could be no possible question of it!

XVI

MISS HESTER *plays a difficult part with superb poise. She gives sound advice, moreover, but refuses to take any. In spite of this latter indictment, what a woman she is!*

During the winter season Miss Hester MacRoss was accustomed to spend five days of the week in New York, at a quiet apartment hotel, in order to be in close touch with her office down town. The other two days found her in the Connecticut home. It was early in the evening of one of the days in town that her brother David walked in upon her, in the dignified quarters she had made seem a bearable substitute for the country place she altogether preferred.

"Hess, I want a talk with you."

"All right, Davy; there's nothing to hinder."

It had looked, as David came in, as though there were everything to hinder. Miss Hester had been deep in a pile of typescript. Blue prints were spread upon the table before her, photographs of apartment interiors lay beside them. As consultant to an important firm of architects, this woman held a high position. But she laid her work promptly aside, after the fashion of the people who have most to do and therefore consume no valuable time in making a fuss about it.

"I see there's nothing. Only that same enthusiasm for your job that keeps you at it after other working women have gone to the theater."

"I meant to go to-night myself, only this was so much more interesting. Sometime, Davy, I'm going to be able to convince Mr. Leslie Graham that his tendency is to standardize. He doesn't know it, thinks his whole idea is to get an effect of individuality while sticking to necessity. Some day, you know, I'm going to be a free lance--consultant to the whole realm! Then I'll pick my clients, and what fun that will be!... Take that chair, my dear, and fire away."

David reversed the chair's position, sat down astride of it, and looked his sister in her fine, steady eyes.

"Hess, I want to marry Ross Collins if I can get her. I hope you don't mind, my dear."

Miss Hester regarded him with that straightforward gaze which characterized her when matters of significance were set before her. She seemed in no wise disconcerted.

"There's nothing, Davy," she responded pleasantly after a moment, "like firing a broadside at the enemy at once, instead of merely sending a warning shot across his bows."

"You're not my enemy! I know you want me to marry--or thought I knew it."

"I do, by all means. And if you've suddenly made your choice why should I object? You're your own master--as I am my own mistress. We came to that understanding long ago."

"True enough. But I gather the idea that you think I'm taking a long chance in making a change of front like this one. Well, I've known Ross Collins exactly two months now, and during those two months I've probably seen her ten times. We've spent a good many hours together, about town. And I'm going to marry her if she'll have me, though she's given me every reason to think she won't. She valiantly and determinedly supposes she isn't going to marry anybody. That

point of view I'm attempting to change by seeming not to attempt to change it. We're playing the old game of being friends--just friends. She plays it extraordinarily well--much better than I do, because she's taken me off my feet, and I haven't taken her off hers. And I believe I've proved, by staying a bachelor till thirty-three, that I'm not easily taken off my feet."

"Yes, you've proved that. But I knew you would be, sometime, Davy. You've had all the makings all along."

Her manner was so completely that of the reasonable woman trained by long experience not to betray her real feeling unless necessary that it was difficult for him to be sure just how she felt about it--except that the information was bound to be something of a shock, no matter how cool she kept. He couldn't expect it to be otherwise, after all these years of companionship in the old home, even though the two had lived quite separate lives of their own.

"You've known I had the makings?"

"Of course I have."

"You like Ross, don't you?"

"Very much."

"You can see why I--feel as I do?"

"Perfectly. She is unusually electrifying, even to me, in a way all her own. Not beautiful quite, but that doesn't matter with all that magnetism. Her mind is quick, vivid. I can see how it matches yours, while it is of an entirely different consistency. No, I don't wonder at your interest in her."

"*Interest!*" He breathed deeply, with a sharp shivering sound in the intake. "Hess, I never in my life expected to feel like this--that's all I can say. I've hoped I might, but I didn't expect to. You and I come of generations of restrained people, who didn't let themselves go. You never have. I thought probably I never could. Now--all in heaven or hell I want is to let myself go, and glory in the chance."

He got up abruptly and took a turn up and down the long room, as though his own confession amazed and unnerved him for an instant. Miss Hester watched him, and a peculiar expression came into those steady eyes of hers.

"Then let yourself go, Davy," she said, almost fiercely, "and thank the good Lord that the thing has hit you like this."

He turned back to her quickly.

"Hess--you wanted to be able to do that, too."

"Yes." She spoke quietly again, but he saw what he had never seen so clearly before.

"Sam Reade----"

"Don't, my dear--please. I've made my own decisions as to my own life, and I still think they were wise ones--for me. Never mind me. I'm busy--content. And I want you to be--as happy as you will be if this is the right choice."

"It's the only one. She may refuse me, but not if----"

"Not if those generations of restrained people have their way in you; people who through their

very restraint accumulated stores of power to transmit to you. There's only one barrier, Davy, and I think you know what that is."

"I do know. If I can make her willing to marry me at all, she may not be willing to live in the country."

"No. Shall you then move to town?"

"No." A strange look of obstinacy came into his eyes, in spite of his admissions of a moment before. "She'll come to me--I'll not go to her."

"Then," said Miss Hester gravely, "you may as well realize at the outset that you'll not be dealing with a girl of the past generation--not even with one of your own decade. If I know Ross Collins's type, even if she marries you she will do it on condition that she is to lead an almost separate life from yours. Should you not mind that? Think it over well."

He had already thought it over--and over. He had not spent those many hours with Ross without getting to understand her views of independence. They had discussed every subject men and women do discuss in these days, and David was thoroughly aware that she considered her own two small feet to be adequate to stand upon without other support. He had, however, set his teeth in his determination to have her, and the almost certain knowledge that in that case a battle was ahead had no power to turn him aside.

"Hess," he said, and looked at her with a look which stirred her pride in him to the full, the while it made her heart heavy because of what it implied of threatened change in their own relationship, "if at the start I could see her only one twenty-four hours out of a week--and that may be what I'll have to face--I'd still go into it with my eyes wide open. I said that she'd come to me--I wouldn't go to her. I might have said less arrogantly that in the end I'd hope to make her come to me. If I couldn't do that the marriage would be a failure--according to my views. If--even though it took a long while--I could bring her to me, I should know it was a success. But I'm ready to take my chances."

Miss Hester was silent for a minute or two. Then she smiled--a thoughtful, beautiful smile, which touched him very much because he knew so many things about her life which had made it a difficult one, and which, if she had been any ordinary woman, would have caused her attitude toward him, in this crisis, to be that of a sister helplessly jealous of any younger woman who might come between them.

"David, my dear," she said finally, "I want your marriage to be a success. I think you are capable of being master of circumstances. If you care for a word of advice from me--only one word--I'd say: Never give up that resolve. Be the head of the house. If you can't do it in the beginning, you must do it in the end. Bring her to you; don't go to her."

"This," said David, getting up to come over to her chair and put his arm around her shoulders for a moment, "from one of the most independent, competent, forceful women executives of the city! One who takes orders from no man."

"Davy," said the woman executive, for whom an outer office down town had all day held not less than half a dozen waiting men or women, "I quite often, when I'm tired of giving orders for myself, wish I could take them for a while, even from some man! I know that very soon I might want to be giving them again, but in those occasional weak moments, you know----"

Her smile was whimsical, but behind it David thought he read a touch of real regret for that which, several times in her life, Hester had refused to consider.

"Hess! For God's sake why don't you give in and take them from Sam Reade! *His* orders--why they'd be the most considerate, reasonable orders in the world. Not really orders at all--except when he was swearing mad over something with which you'd have had nothing to do, and then he might let go for fair. But you'd understand him--you bet you would. He'll be dead in two years more from overwork if you don't save him. He's the best in the world, Hess."

But Hester, no longer smiling, answered him with sternness: "David! I beg of you--I forbid you!"

"All right. I'm sorry.... I didn't mean to open that again.... I'll have to be off, I'm afraid."

Her former manner returned, the friendly smile and speech. She held out both hands. "God bless you, Davy. *I* do, you know!"

"What a sister!" he said to himself as he went down in the lift to the lobby and the street. "What a thundering fine woman! And what a devil of a pity for Sam Reade--if not for her!"

XVII

David's plans are knocked into a cocked hat, as plans frequently are. Yet cocked hats have had a great place in history, so why rebel?

Then, without warning, all David's plans were hit in the head by an extraordinary happening. Where he picked up the bacilli he never knew, but they got him, nevertheless, and at absolutely the most inconvenient time in his life, so far as he could see.

He had kept an appointment with Ross--it was the next evening after his talk with Hester--and had had dinner and the evening with her. But somehow or other things didn't go as he had hoped. For some reason she seemed absent-minded throughout the entire dinner. As for himself, he wasn't feeling quite up to his usual form: his head ached dully; a certain hitherto practically unknown sense of lassitude had been upon him all day. Nothing he and Ross did together was a success. During the dinner a newspaper man, Thomas Thayer, whom he knew slightly and Ross knew well, had come over to them from a table close by, and had talked--much too amusingly for David's peace of mind--and had lingered interminably. David had felt wooden beside Tom Thayer. He hoped it was due to the headache, for he was ashamed of being jealous of another man's entertaining qualities.

Afterward they went to a play which David had picked out after reading much high praise of it from the critics. It turned out to be the last thing in the world he would have cared to see with Ross Collins just now. Though highly stimulating and admirably acted, the atmosphere it created was one so antagonistic to the one he himself was anxious to create, and Ross herself was so carried away by it, he realized unhappily that he had played a wrong card. This would be no time to carry her off on any wild steed of impulse toward marriage.

So he mentally crossed the evening off his books as a dead failure. It had done nothing disillusioning to himself; being with Ross had inevitably heightened his own longing for her, in spite of his physical ill feelings, which he didn't at all understand. But he imagined he had cut a sorry figure, and that if she had begun to like him before, he must have disappointed her thoroughly--perhaps irretrievably. They parted under considerable constraint on both sides. Hang it all! How on earth had it turned out like that?

Three days later Hester, back in the country for the week-end, scanning her brother attentively at the breakfast table where he had eaten little and said less, asked him abruptly:

"Mind or body, Davy?"

"Seems to be body," David owned. "I've felt like the deuce the last day or two, but thought I'd be all right soon. To be honest, I feel like a ton of lead this morning, and can't imagine what's the matter."

Hester came around, felt his pulse, and made other sisterly inquiries into his condition.

"Better drop into Sam Reade's office," she suggested.

"Nothing doing. It's not as serious as that. I'll be all right."

David pulled himself together, got up, and walked off briskly. Then he stopped suddenly. He was dizzy, and he was conscious of a dull pain. He'd felt it and a certain soreness for some

days, but had paid it no attention.

Hester telephoned Dr. Reade, who dropped in on his morning rounds.

"It's nothing at all," explained David. He sat huddled in a big chair before the fire, his hot hands holding his fiery, throbbing head.

"Yes, I see it's nothing. Only that you feel rotten. And as a husky fellow like you isn't used to that, you think it can't be so. All right. Where's the discomfort, particularly?"

David indicated the general locality. The doctor went through the usual examination, listened to what history he could extract from an unwilling patient, and ordered him to bed.

"See here!" David questioned him sharply. "You think I've got appendicitis, I suppose. All that punching on my right side----"

"If I did I'd have you on your way to a hospital before the clock strikes. But I don't think that, and as your own bed and your own room out here are much the best place for you while you lie by for a bit, we'll put you there while we make some tests and find out just what germ you've picked up."

So that was the beginning of David's highly annoying run of typhoid fever, which came to a spanking crisis at the end of three weeks, kept him in bed for three more, and then permitted him to be a lanky but slowly reviving convalescent able to sit in a chair and try his legs at intervals to discover how incompetent they had become. He had had not a particle of interest out of the whole affair. Even his nurses, who might have lent a little color to the monotonous scene, had been picked for their competency rather than their charm. David, while deeply grateful to them both, had been thankful to see them go. The undoubted fact that they had vied with each other in their attentions to him because even while suffering from typhoid he had been not unattractive to them, had made no impression whatever upon him. Why should it? They had both been extremely plain of face and neither was much under forty years of age.

It was at this stage of his affairs that Ross Collins came to see him, giving him the surprise of his life.

After that dismal failure of an evening in town with her, and when he had been ordered to bed, he had miserably made up his mind that his only course now was to lie low, in more than one sense of the word, until he should be himself again. Having left with her the impression that he was himself a heavy-weight when it came to competition with an experienced city-bred man, for example the spirited Thomas Thayer, he saw no way to change that impression. Certainly there would be none until he could be again the David MacRoss she had talked with for so many unforgettable hours; whom she had danced with at that memorable country party; and who had given her at the very beginning of their acquaintance a whole week-end of fresh experience which had set her brain working, so that she had been inspired to produce those scintillating twenty lines of verse. He didn't see how he could send her gay and sparkling letters from his sick bed to hold her attention during his absence, so before he climbed into that bed he had contented himself with a brief line. It was written with considerable difficulty at that, because he was feeling so abominably that he could hardly hold his head up long enough to finish it:

I'm mighty sorry, but I seem to have some sort of illness which has made Dr. Sam Reade send me to bed. When I'm about again I'll let you know--if you care to have

me. Meanwhile, I hope you'll forgive me for having treated you to what was probably the dullest evening you ever spent.

He hadn't even bothered to explain that he had been ill on that evening, and so hardly responsible for its dullness. But she had guessed it, and her prompt note of reply had made reference to it. She had known he couldn't be feeling well that evening--which had been far from dull for her because she had liked the play so much. (Here David groaned.) She hoped his illness wouldn't be serious or long. Meanwhile, since she was at the moment terribly pressed for time because of a chance she had to see something she had never seen before, i.e., a railway wreck of unusually spectacular quality, she was very regretfully his--and signed her name with a splash. Undoubtedly a most unsatisfactory sort of note to scan several times over in hope of extracting something comforting, and then to tuck under his pillow merely because it came from the person it did. The handwriting, anyhow, was worth studying--when he should feel more like it. But one or other of his nurses had tidily removed the note, and it had become lost. All he could be sure of was that it was written in the heavily dashing hand of a six-foot man in a hurry, and so didn't seem at all to represent little Ross Collins to his imagination.

When he had been able to get up into a chair, at the end of the six weeks, he had wanted to ask her to come up, and had said so to Hester. Then he had taken a long and scrutinizing look into his mirror, and had said resignedly: "Never mind. Maybe in another week I'll look less like her invalid father."

But Hester, feeling very sorry over the long delay in his plans, had sent for Ross without telling her brother, had met her at the train herself, and had brought her to the door of the living room in the late afternoon of a dull day in early March.

"Go along in, my dear, and wake him up," Hester whispered.

For now it was David who was asleep on the couch before the fire, and Ross who was vividly awake. She went softly into the room, half lighted by the flames, and stood looking down at the long figure stretched out so weariedly there. With the doctor's permission, David had been walking each day a little more about the house. Half an hour earlier he had completed what seemed to him like an unending journey of ten minutes by the clock, pacing up and down the long room. He was impatient to get back his strength and finish up this time of exile in a hurry. Who knew what the coruscating Thomas Thayer might have done with Ross in his own long absence from her?

He had dropped upon the couch, in his dressing gown of black and white flannel, his unmuscled legs shaking from the effort, his spirits low at thought of the weeks yet ahead before he could hope to be fully his old lusty self. Typhoid cases always recuperated slowly, Sam Reade had told him; but the only way to get back those muscles was to begin to use them. It was hard on David, who had never had such an illness in his healthy life; he didn't know how to pull himself up out of this slough of weakness.

Standing there silently, Ross slipped out of her coat, took off her hat, drew up a chair close to the couch, just where the firelight would be sure to touch her face, and waited. Miss Hester had told her how low in his mind David was, and that both his sister and his doctor had agreed that he needed something to brighten the outlook. Miss Hester had thought it was David's new friend who could do it. Having brought Ross there, Hester went away. Odd, she was thinking, that it should be David's sister who was taking the very steps likely to dispossess herself of the

old home, owned by both, but not to be shared, if she knew what was wise, an hour after David should marry.

David moved a little upon the couch; then, not having been deeply asleep, slowly opened his eyes. He sensed gradually, as he wakened, that someone had come in and was sitting near. Hester, of course; she had been a dear to give him so much of her precious time. But--there was nothing new to say just now to Hester. If it could only be Ross Collins, there by his fire--by some touch of magic....

It was *not* Hester. His eyes opened fully as they caught the ebb and flow of flamelight upon something of a lovely clear green. It was a frock--upon a slim, small figure; it *was* Ross, sitting there, and her bright hair was gorgeous to see in that same shimmering flamelight. He stared and stared, and his heart came into his throat, while she smiled at him, watching him with the narrow, dark-fringed eyes which had haunted his thoughts since he had first seen them.

"How do you do?" said the voice he remembered, and Ross reached out her hand. "I'm so glad you're getting well."

"Are you real?" he asked thickly. He caught at the hand and held it. "Or am I having those typhoid dreams again? But I never could touch you, in them--something awful always happened to separate us. I *am* touching you now, am I?"

She had to move closer to let him continue to hold her hand, which he had no idea of stopping doing. Why should he? Hadn't he held hers while she slept, worn out, on that same couch? He sat up, and drew her to a seat beside him.

"You seem to be quite glad to see me, David. That makes me glad I came."

"Glad to see you! Good Lord! How did it happen?"

"Your sister. I'd no idea you weren't yourself again long ago, until she sent me a note."

"Well again--and not coming to see you as fast as I could get there? I thought Hester would let you know. But she has now--and I suppose that's time enough, since you couldn't have borne it to look at me before now. I'm pretty poor looking at yet, I'm afraid."

"You're a little thin, of course. But--since you waked up--I am able to recognize you," she assured him with a flash of mirth in her eyes. "It may be just the manner, not the face. Those interesting ways of yours don't seem to have been affected by your illness."

"Don't they? I'm glad you find them interesting. But that last evening we spent together----"

"Are you still worrying about that? You were obviously not yourself, but who is--always? I wasn't myself that evening, either--until the play waked me up. I did thoroughly enjoy that play."

"Your enjoyment of it," he said, with a tinge of grimness in his voice, "was what worried me most. The play wasn't what I thought it was to be."

"It was superb."

"Admitted. But it couldn't possibly put you in the mood to listen to what I had to say to you, and I didn't venture to say it. Also, I was in no state myself to put it convincingly. So it's had to wait all this time. And now--when I have another chance--look at me!"

She smiled. "I am looking at you. I came up here to look at you. As I said, except for a slight thinness you're not appreciably different. A quite attractive pallor and general air of melancholy give you a sort of resemblance to a poet."

"A poet!" He threw back his head and laughed as he hadn't laughed for seven weeks.

She nodded. "A quite virile sort of poet."

"Thanks for the concession. But I can't have an air of melancholy *now*!"

"It still lingers--the melancholy you've been suffering from because you couldn't get out and stride around the country, shooting rabbits--or whatever you do shoot in the country."

"It might be ostriches, for all you know about the country! As to my air of melancholy--if it does still linger, with something inside me bursting for joy that you're here--it must be because of the thought that you will go away again. If I didn't know how to let you go before, how can I do it now?"

She looked away for an instant, and he realized that he had forgotten what a piquantly engaging profile she had. "You're not going to begin firing that sort of thing at me again, are you?"

"Look back at me, please. No, I suppose I mustn't begin firing, because, though I'm by no means out of ammunition, I'm temporarily unhorsed, and in no condition to ride away with you when I've disabled you. But as soon as I'm well, I give you fair warning----"

Her fingers released themselves and slipped around upon his pulse. She seemed alarmed.

"Come, let's talk about less exciting things," she proposed. "It's beating like a trip-hammer."

"Of course it is, with you holding it. And a good healthy change it is from crawling along so slowly since the fever left that I've wondered if I'd skipped a couple of decades and become a more than middle-aged man. Let it beat like a dozen trip-hammers----"

"David," said Miss Hester's voice at the door, "now that you've seen your guest and assured yourself that she is real, suppose you let her go up to her room and do whatever she wants to do before dinner, which is very soon to be served. She's to stay till to-morrow night, you know, and there will still be time to talk to her."

"Very well," agreed David, "if I may go on along up with her for company. I too want to go to my room and do whatever I want to do before dinner."

So they ascended the stairs together. David felt a singular new competency in those flabby muscles of his. Instead of taking the stairs like a more than middle-aged man he went up like one of at least not over forty. He would have run up if he could, but the effort seemed inadvisable. He must conserve his strength for the coming evening. And besides, that which he wanted to do in his room would take an appreciable amount of that so small strength.

When, twenty minutes later, Ross came out of her room, David, who had been waiting just inside the open door of his own, came out also. Both had made a definite change of costume. Ross's green silk afternoon dress had become one of another character entirely--one of those remarkable transformations modern dressing permits a woman spending a week-end to make without having brought along a wardrobe trunk. The sleeves were gone, the neck line had lowered to a desirably revealing level, a long string of pearls dripped its impression of luxury

and enhancement over the green silk. Ross's flaming hair had become a miracle of audacious beauty in its subtle arrangement of slender coils and curls. Altogether, she had turned herself into a picture.... As though she had needed to do so!

In the dim light of the upper hallway David stared at her. She stared back, and with reason. He had managed to get himself into informal evening dress; his tall figure loomed gauntly in the black and white of it.

"My dear David MacRoss!" Ross cried softly. "You look like Hamlet in modern dress! How did you ever get up the courage to do it? It must have taken every ounce of pluck you had."

"It did," admitted David, breathing somewhat heavily from fatigue. "But I did it, not for the love of Hamlet, as you suggest, but for love of you."

He came up to her. "You didn't need to make yourself," he said rather thickly, "any more upsetting to an invalid than you were already. But you seem to have done it. And by doing it you've taken away the last shred of caution that was left in me. Remember how long I've been shut up here with two solemn-faced nurses. I haven't had a glimpse of anything like you--if there *were* anything like you--which there isn't--for two whole months. Please--don't deny me! Mayn't I----"

With sudden compassion she lifted her face, her eyes hidden by the fall of her lashes, and David kissed her. It was not the kiss of the man past middle age he had been feeling like before she came, for at this moment he had become exactly thirty-three again, his own age, and he had never suffered a run of typhoid fever nor of anything else to deplete his stores of virility. The rush of blood through his veins bore evidence to that. Thank God, he was alive once more!

"Now," said Ross, a trifle short of breath herself, "we're going down to dinner. Evidently it's madness to stand and look at each other up here. I seem to go to your head--and you, momentarily, seem to go to mine."

"It's not my head you've gone to," whispered David dizzily, as she put her arm through his and made him come along with her to the staircase; "it's my starved old bachelor heart."

He would have been reeling as he descended if she hadn't held him steady. From dressing gown to dinner coat, requiring studs and cuff links set into his shirt, and the tying of a tie, was a long step. Even food for his heart wasn't at the moment as necessary as food for his stomach, and he now realized this. He didn't even try to speak again while he and Ross walked through the lower hall into the dining room and she led him to a chair.

Miss Hester, coming in a moment later, paused in astonishment before her brother's long form, in a slightly limp attitude as he grasped the chair arms, his pale face smiling up at her triumphantly even in his evident weakness. She took note of his clothes, of Ross's effect of beautifully groomed evening simplicity and her air of anxiety.

"Well, well!" she said. Then she went to the door of the serving pantry and gave an order. Two minutes later a glass of strong cordial was in David's shaky hands, slipping down his throat, and his color was improving.

"Wasn't it absurd of him," Ross asked, "to dress for me? As though I should have minded the dressing gown."

"I minded it," gasped David, over the last drops of the cordial. "I couldn't be myself in skirts."

"Now that you've treated us to the spectacle of yourself in male attire," observed Miss Hester drily, "hadn't you better go sensibly back to your couch and have your dinner sent in?"

"I'll be hanged if I will," declared the invalid. "I'm fine now. Come on--let's have the food. As a matter of fact, it wasn't the dressing that upset me. It was--the trip from my door to the head of the stairs. I rather lost my balance on the way. You see, Ross came out of her room at the moment, looking like--that!"

"Evidently," replied Miss Hester, with an approving glance across the table at the agreeable conjunction of pearls, green silk, red hair and gleaming white arms, "our guest would have been safer in fustian."

"Not a particle safer," disputed David. "What is fustian, anyway? I use the word recklessly, but I never did know its meaning. And Ross couldn't be safer in anything. She's at the mercy of a poor devil recovered from a devastating illness, and now ready to burst into action."

"Well, don't burst too fast, my dear, that's all we ask, or Sam Reade will be after us."

"He told me, this very morning, that he'd made me his last professional visit, and that I was to be released from domination. When I'm ready to go to bed to-night I'll go--and not before."

It was a merry dinner. And if Hester MacRoss said to herself that it was only a matter of hours now, she said it as gladly as could be expected of a sister to whom this younger brother was extraordinarily dear. But not, on account of that, to be kept to herself, even if she could.

XVIII

A good hearty quarrel is something not to be expected between host and guest. But it seems to have been inevitable. When two persons find fences too high between them, they can at least make faces at each other through the knot-holes!

But David had reckoned without his host. When he and Ross actually got down to talking things over he found himself confronted by a new problem--in other words, a new Ross Collins. And yet, he had to admit, she had certainly tried to make herself known to him long ago.

Reinforced by the cordial, the dinner, and the remembrance of those two marvelous minutes in the upper hall, David had placed himself beside his guest upon the couch, feeling remarkably fit to tackle the matter in hand. He had said: "Now!" in a tone of high anticipation. Then the amazing thing began.

"Yes, it's time we said 'Now!'" agreed Ross, in a lovely but firm voice. She sat looking into the fire, and her small fingers were not in his but were nervously twisting the long string of pearls which fell into her lap. She didn't look at him.

That was certainly an odd thing to say, it struck him. It sounded businesslike in the extreme, like the monosyllabic mandate of a young person who meant to bring a philanderer to terms. Of course she didn't mean it that way, but it gave him an odd feeling--a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. If she didn't mean it *that* way she meant it in a way even less to be desired. He looked long at her audacious profile before he found anything to reply. Finally:

"Just what----" he began. "You mean----" Again he floundered.

Ross looked about at him then. She smiled.

"All I mean is," she said gently, "that we're taking a perfectly fatal course for two people both of whom have their work to do. You're an old bachelor, I'm an old maid, both committed to at least the attempt at a career, or something like it. We've no business to be holding hands or snatching kisses. Before we knew it we should both be swept away on a high tide of emotionality. We started out to be good friends. Let's go on being that, and keep our heads."

"I don't want to keep my head," objected David stoutly, "or to have you keep yours. If we care enough for each other to--" he stuck for an instant at saying it, but it had to be said if he was to make his meaning clear--"to be parties to a--kiss--like that one, we care enough for more. Or I do. And I could swear that you do--or did, at that moment."

"That's just it, David. I did--at that moment. And I probably couldn't keep on that way and not be undermined. But I can't *be* undermined. I've sworn to myself to keep free of entangling situations, and make a name for myself. It may be only a little name, but I want to make it. And I can't do it and be made love to by a man like you."

"Why not? I don't want to interfere with your making a name for yourself. You have a very well-known and admired name already, of which I am immensely proud. I shouldn't put a stone in your way. On the contrary, I should do my best to take stones out of your way. I could do that, too."

"But for every stone you took out of my way you'd put up a high concrete wall instead. You

might not mean to, but you would. You're the sort of man who----"

"You don't know the sort of man I am."

"I think I do."

He shook his head. "You don't."

"Have you ever," questioned Ross more lightly, "taken a good look at your own profile in a hand glass as you stood at the right angle before a mirror? Or in a triple mirror, when you were having a suit tried on?"

"I certainly haven't. What man would?"

"Plenty. But not your sort of man. That's exactly the point. You don't know what your profile is like, therefore you're a real man and not an actor. But I do know--and it gives away certain accurate information about your actual self."

"A woman's idea of character analysis----" began David with some impatience. But he had to let Ross interrupt.

"I don't know much about character analysis, but when I see a nose like that, and a chin like that, and then hear a man say he wouldn't put a stone in my way--why, it's like hearing a hunter with a gun on his shoulder remark that he wouldn't for worlds take a potshot at anything."

"Does all this," inquired David, with sudden sternness, "mean that I'm being warned not to pursue my intent to ask you to marry me--which I've already virtually done, anyway?"

She nodded. "Exactly that. I'm refusing you before you actually ask me, which is a bold thing to do, and I know it. I'm considering that you haven't really asked me--you've only indicated that you might. I want to stop you right here and now, you see. Before you lose your head any more than you've already done, and before I lose mine. Don't you see it's the only way?"

"No, I don't. All this talk about losing heads is foolishness. If two people of sufficiently mature age fall in love with each other and marry, is that a proof that they've lost their heads? I should say it might much more truthfully be said that they've found their heads--found their proper and fitting mates, and have sense enough to know it."

"I haven't admitted," said Ross, very low and quietly, "that I've fallen in love."

David turned upon her, almost savagely. "Then a kiss--like that--is nothing to you except a moment's excitement. You might have taken it from any man? Don't tell me that."

"Have you never"--something sparkled in Ross's eyes--"kissed a woman before? Don't tell me that."

"Of course I have. I'm no monk. But--not like that, Ross. That meant something that never happened to me before. It meant--to me--not a moment's excitement, but--why, I can't tell you what it meant to me. It meant I'd found the woman I must make my wife. Not only the wife of my flesh, but of my spirit--a far rarer thing to find."

His tone had dropped to such shaken gravity that she could say no more for a space. She had to let that statement have its due respect. And it almost had its way with her. For an instant of thrilling intensity she very nearly put herself into his arms. It took all her will not to do that. But Ross Collins was a dogged little person. She had made up her mind what she was going to do.

She hung determinedly to that. She was not going to marry out of impulse a New Englander with Scottish blood in his veins--blood that would congeal into granite when their wills happened to clash, as they inevitably would. The fact that David MacRoss, for all his pallor and leanness, had never been a more appealing figure than now, as in his black clothes he sat beside her, summoning all his strength to overcome her, made hers a difficult task. The profile which she had aspersed was not only rugged, it was very fine. She wanted to be overcome! But--she wouldn't be.

At length, unable to bear the silence longer, he broke it. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?" he asked huskily.

"Of course it does. It means a tremendous lot--from you. But I'd made up my mind before I came up here to see you that I wouldn't let you go on with--what I thought you probably would--if you were strong enough. I came as that friend I felt I was--and wanted to be. Your friendship *does* mean ever so much to me, David. I want to keep it. I want to see it grow. It's going to be a big, inspiring thing.... About what happened in the upper hall--please don't make too much of that. You had been ill. You put up a touching plaint about having seen nobody but two faithful, homely nurses. You were shaking with the weariness of dressing, and you looked like a small boy who hasn't had a mother, and asks to be taken up in somebody's lap. So I----"

"Don't say any more," begged David's voice, with a break in it. "I get the idea you're trying to convey. You took me in your lap, and told me a bedtime story, and then put me down again--and told me to run away because you were busy. I see."

He got up and took a turn or two across the room. "All right," he agreed. "We'll have just the kind of talk you'd like to have, here before the fire. About the fine art of friendship and how it shall be manifested in the future? Because if that's all you have for me in the present, of course I'll hang onto that--if you think you're really willing to give me that much grace."

"Why, David! Now you *are* a little boy!"

He sat down again, turning toward her a grave face. "I was. I won't be any more. Let my recent illness make my apology. I've grown so used to slumping about the place--and you did rather take the backbone out of me, for the moment, comparing me to a small boy. My fault, for taking so much for granted. We'll begin over again. You do agree to go on being friends?"

"Of course I do."

"May I come to see you once a week, when I can get about again?"

"Just what for?"

He was baffled. "Well! Can we be friends, and not meet?"

"That's precisely what I'd like to try."

"With what end in view?"

"Must there be an end? Why not let things develop as they will?"

"How are they going to develop if we don't meet?"

She swung herself about upon the deep couch, tucked her little silver slippered feet under her as she sat, and faced him. She spoke with great earnestness, looking meanwhile like an adorable child about to explain a new game to an older playmate.

"David," she said, "ever since I've known you I've had an idea in my head about what I'd like to do--with you."

"Let's have it."

"I've read more than one book in my life consisting of letters written by a man and a woman to each other. Some I liked very much, others I thought very silly and futile. But the idea seems to me sound. How can a man and woman get to know each other better than by letters? Or how make a more absorbing book? For of course we should be making a book together, if--if it turned out that our minds fitted as you think they do. And if they didn't fit, then the arguments and discussions might be even more absorbing."

"You mean," he asked dubiously, "we should write real letters to each other, out of our own lives and thoughts--and then make a book of them?" He shook his head. "They'd be too much a part of ourselves. Either we'd have to forget the possible book--which would be impossible to do, now you've mentioned it. Or we couldn't be our real selves. We'd be acting parts, with an eye on the gallery."

"Well, in either case wouldn't it be something terribly interesting to do?"

"Terribly! There'd be terror in it--for me, anyhow. I certainly don't----See here, Ross. Such an attempt would have to be one thing or the other. I couldn't put my heart on paper, to make a book of. I could play an imaginary part, I suppose, but----"

She broke in eagerly. "That's exactly what I mean, my dear man. It wouldn't be David MacRoss and Ross Collins writing to each other. It would be--well, John Doe and Mary Roe."

It made them both smile, and that eased the tension a little. But then David turned sober again.

"I'm afraid I couldn't play that game with any spirit. I'm willing enough to write letters to you----"

"Then come along and do it, and forget the book. And meanwhile, don't see me at all."

"Don't *see* you--at all?"

"No. What I really mean is--let's explore each other's minds without any personal contact. I'm truly awfully eager to explore yours, and you see I can't do it when you're holding my hand. Or meeting me at the top of the stairs. Or even meeting me on Times Square."

He stretched out his long legs toward the fire, shoved his hands into his pockets, and slid down in his seat. He looked very puzzled and unhappy, and his looks didn't belie his feelings.

"Meanwhile," he said, "I suppose you'd be going about with that--with Tom Thayer and other of your friends."

"Of course I should. Tom is invaluable to me. So are one or two other writing men, who in one way or another keep my brain stirred up. What of it?"

"Nothing of it, from your point of view, perhaps. A good deal of it from mine. I can't quite understand you."

"Of course you can't. And that's exactly what I'm trying to show you."

She got up and stood before him upon the hearth rug, with her back to the fire. It was a strategic position, and somehow reversed the usual situation. According to ancient custom it is

the man who stands in a judicial attitude upon the hearth rug, and the woman who sits, looking up at him, while he expounds what may be in his mind. But Ross's little figure there, with the firelight making a sort of aura about her, didn't look at all judicial. Instead, it was so arresting an outline that David feared it might be difficult to keep his mind wholly upon what she was saying. Yet he found he had to do it.

"We've now met perhaps eight or ten times," she began. "And you want me to marry you, out of hand. For some inexplicable reason----"

"It isn't in the least inexplicable."

"For some inexplicable reason you, a man born and brought up in the New England tradition of looking before you leap, are trying to bring me, a woman born of people who leaped before they looked, to do the rashest possible thing in the world--marry without our knowing anything at all about each other. And when I suggest a way of getting to know each other----"

"I know everything about you," David suddenly insisted, making the most unwise statement a man can make to a woman. He sat up, put his hand in his inner breast pocket, and brought out a thin notebook. He opened and took from this a much worn magazine clipping. He unfolded it, read it slowly through--as though he hadn't long ago committed every word to memory--and held it up to her.

As she took it from him Ross's own hand was all at once unsteady. One glance told her that she was betrayed. It was a bit of verse she had written in a passionately unhappy and unguarded hour, and sold in an hour still more unguarded, because she needed the money. She had regretted it ever since. It was the one time in her wary experience that she had actually committed her real self to paper--and to print.

She stood there, looking with blind eyes down at the words. Then she lifted her head defiantly. He was cocksure enough to think he knew everything about her, was he? Of course he *did* know, from those very lines, the most important thing about her. But she would never admit it--never.

"If you think," she said, in as cool a voice as she could manage, "that this is anything but a poor effort to put another woman's anatomy into a portrait, you're much mistaken. It was a brutal thing to do--I admit that. But I was frightfully hard up, and her story was so beautifully tragic. She's dead now, so she can't mind. But suppose we don't keep this record of her agony any longer. I hope nobody--nobody else in the world--ever clipped those lines and kept them."

And she turned and dropped the paper into the fire.

David sprang to his feet. He put both arms about her.

"That was a gallant lie, dear," he whispered. "But it's no use. *Now* do you know why I want you so? For every word of that exactly responds to something in me, and I *know* you wrote it--of yourself. If two people feel like that can't they--don't they *have* to--be one in it?"

She was silent but she didn't resist him. She couldn't, for he held her too close. Then all at once she put her head down on his shoulder and he felt her shiver. Upon which his heart gave a tremendous thump of joy, and nearly leaped out of his breast. His head upon hers, his redoubtable chin upon her silky soft hair, they stood until Ross had recovered herself.

"Oh, what a fool I am!" she breathed.

"Why! Tell me *why*!"

"Because I've sworn not to give in to this thing. I *won't* give in to it."

She released herself from his reluctant arms, pulled out an entirely inadequate handkerchief--a mere wisp--and wiped her eyes, delicately blew her little nose, and otherwise put herself to rights. She even, such is the craft of women, even of women writers--some of them, whose heads are not too far in the clouds--she even walked away from him across the room and made use of some mysterious device for removing all traces of tears. When she returned she was at least outwardly herself again.

She so addressed him, in an astonishingly controlled, even vivacious tone. How could she? David wondered, and was obliged to concede that he didn't know quite everything about her, after all--or about, he supposed, any woman. If such a storm had swept him--as it had--he couldn't and hadn't been able to remove the signs thereof. He felt, and knew he looked, as though a strong wind, accompanied by rain and lightning, had blown through all his being.

"David, this is absolute madness. What I'm about to say is final. I don't intend to marry anybody. I can't--it would be the end of all I've hoped for. A man like you has a--an influence upon me that I have to avoid. I----"

"*Any* man?" He had to demand that.

"Of course not any man. *You*--if you must have it. You can see that, anyway."

"If you admit that----"

"But that's not all. It's not half. The greatest reason, as I tried to indicate to you before, why I can't and won't see you any more is that I'm afraid of you--and the better I like you the more I'm afraid of you. In spite of all your pleasant and beguiling ways you're a born dictator. No woman with a spark of independence would be safe with you. You might think, while you're rather violently in love, that you wouldn't keep the whip hand over her, but you would--oh, yes, you would! And *that's* why I'm going back to town to-night."

"Not to-night! There isn't any train."

"That's a gallant lie too, David. There is one, at midnight. I can't stay here, to-night and to-morrow. I only came up because Miss Hester wrote me you were ill. You can send me back to the station, I know--you have the car and the man. Or if it's too much trouble I can telephone the station."

"I'll send you back," said David. "It will be no trouble at all." The New England profile had by now become more a New England profile than ever, because of the way the lips set themselves between his sentences. Ross looked at it with something like the fear she had avowed. And David had been mistaken in thinking he couldn't erase the signs of storm as she could. He could. He was now, all in a moment, a studiedly courteous Connecticut country gentleman.

"Thank you. That's good of you," Ross said. And suddenly she regretted this wild decision. After all, she hadn't needed to be so rude as that.

"But before you go," David went on, with apparently entire coolness, "I want to give you one assurance. I've stuck to my guns to-night--because I'm a dogged sort of chap, I suppose, as you yourself have indicated. But since you've decided the matter as you have, and since your greatest anxiety seems to be lest you may see me again, have me following you up and making

life miserable for you, I promise you that you're in no danger. I'll neither come nor write."

Her head went up. "That's fine. I hope you won't even think of me."

"Why should I? I shall put you out of my mind. I have my own work to do."

"In that case, naturally, we'll also set aside those ideas of yours for friendship. There are too high fences between us for that."

"Naturally. It would be impossible to attempt to occupy any such neutral ground."

"Impossible."

He stood before her, facing her, towering with straight shoulders and eyes like steel. There was about him now not the slightest look of invalidism. If he had tried to prove to her before that he was not nor ever would be a despot, he now was proving with equal force that he possessed all those qualities of male domination of which she had accused him. No fear of his allowing himself to be played with by any woman. He might be gentleness itself if his reason approved; if it didn't he would be hard as iron. As for his pride, she had roused it past mollifying.

"Let me wish you," he said quietly, with a straight look, "all the success you deserve. I'm sure it will be very great."

"Thank you." Her answering look was fiery. "Of course I wish you the same. And--shall you mind very much if I tell you I'm sorry we ever met?"

"Not in the least. Why not be frank? It undoubtedly would have been better, since we've disturbed each other's lives--for the time being. But that's quite over. As I said, you've nothing more to fear from me."

"Nor you from me."

He went to the telephone and called up the small house of the gardener who was also, upon occasion, the chauffeur. He ordered him to be at the house in half an hour. Then he summoned Miss Hester.

"Our guest is leaving," he said amiably, "on the midnight train. It's too bad she has to go, isn't it? But it seems she must. Henry will take her over."

"Leaving?" said Miss Hester. She was a woman, as has been indicated, of exceedingly quick perceptions. "I'm sorry, my dear. But of course, if you must----"

She went on to speak of other things, filling gaps. They badly needed filling, but she was equal to it.

And presently Ross was on her way, alone with Henry in the closed car. Her small fists were clenched, and beside Henry she was silently crying. Yet when now and then Henry, as a privileged person on the MacRoss place, where he had been many years, spoke of something beside the way, Ross answered in a clear, even voice, such as women somehow manage under the most difficult circumstances.

Behind, at the house, long after Miss Hester had gone to bed--without a particle of questioning, astonishing woman that she was, but only leaving a pat upon her brother's shoulder as he sat before the fire--David thought the thing over. And the more he thought it over the more convinced he became that agreeing promptly to send Miss Ross Collins to the

train had been the one thing to do. Which may prove that he really did know something about women, after all.

But even the exercise of such wisdom, if wisdom it was, presented to him little comfort. Everything had definitely come to an end. He hadn't the slightest intention of doing what he had assured Ross he wouldn't do--follow her up. She had made her decision, and it was against him. It was a blow, but he could weather it because it had to be weathered. It was one of life's bitter experiences, which was bound to leave a scar. But scars were inevitable; he could wear his where it wouldn't show. Fortunate when wounds were made where coats could cover them!

XIX

Now *we* are *in difficulties indeed. The wires are short-circuited, with the usual result--no power. What is to be done?*

"And *now* what?"

Ross said it to herself during the sleepless hours which followed her return to town.

"What have I done? Cleared the track for my train's right of way. I can go hurtling along it now, unhindered. No reason why I shouldn't. I couldn't be bothered with distractions like that. I'd never get anywhere.... It was best to come home to-night, too--of course it was.... Nobody knows what might have happened in the next twenty-four hours--especially after a regular quarrel like that.... Queer how putting on that dinner coat changed David from an invalid I could pity to a man I couldn't.... I suppose it must have seemed a little abrupt--insisting on rushing off like that, at midnight. But what could I do! I *couldn't* keep on being near him.... What *does* make him so interesting? He isn't so terribly good-looking--or is he? It's his ways as much as anything, I suppose--that unconscious effect of being on his own ground, where his ancestors have been for generations before him. He's at a disadvantage here in town. Yes, of course he is.... Or *is* he, really? Oh, I don't know.... Go to sleep, Ross Collins, and forget him. Dismiss him from your thoughts. All right, I will!...

"When I came out of my room and saw him standing there, looking so black and white and handsome and--shaky--how could I have helped----Oh, *that* was no mistake.... I'm glad I didn't miss that, anyhow.... One doesn't want *never* to be kissed like that, just because one intends to stay single. A kiss like that is an event, to put in one's notebook ... *or to keep out of it*. It doesn't need writing down. But it must stand alone. David's not the sort of man to bestow kisses just to make notebook material for writers like me, though I *could* do a thrilling sonnet about a moment like that. But I won't--don't worry, David, I won't. I'm not such a sentimental idiot. Neither am I such a traitor.... I'm a hard, cold young person, who intends to live only for her--oh, *art*! I haven't any art. All I have is a little talent for putting words together to make people laugh--or cry--or swear. A tinkling, tawdry little talent.... Yet--it can be more than that if I give it all the chance there is. And to do that I have to stay here. He would never be willing to live my sort of life here. And I could never live his sort there. Smothered in snow in winter, and in daffodils in spring--roses and hay in summer--red leaves in autumn. Lovely--but the quiet would kill everything there is in me.... Go to sleep, and forget it--him...."

She did go to sleep at last, but it was near dawn.

The next evening, after a day in which she ground out the necessary copy, found it like making bricks without straw, and assured herself that this sterility was the direct result of going up there into the deep country for even a few hours, she decided what she must have. Music. Music always gave her what she needed--the stimulus, the excitement, the dreams--even put the words into her brain. When everything else failed, music was the one thing that couldn't fail. So she went alone--she much preferred to be alone, because many people chattered so between the numbers--to Carnegie Hall, that magic place where sound, magnificent sound, would assail her ears, beat upon her brain, make it come alive.

The orchestra played a full Brahms symphony, while Ross sat, a little motionless figure, taking

no note of anything or anybody about her, closing her eyes, deliberately giving herself up to the inevitable effect upon her consciousness of those waves of sound. Sometimes they soothed her, sometimes they made her blood dance, always they were delight or melancholy or comedy or tragedy. She was as helpless under the beat and swing of the great conductor's baton as were his players--she did his will even as they. But strangely, to-night, not one vision for work would come to her through this medium, as it almost invariably did.

Then suddenly--it was well along in the program--the great orchestra swung into the rapturous, swelling notes of the Liszt *Liebestraum*. A hundred times had Ross heard it, had heard it scoffed at now and then, by devotees of the newer school of music as outworn, unadulterated sentiment. False criticism, that, she had felt, and hadn't minded, for Liszt had always swayed her, and nothing had power to do it except that which had in it genuine emotion.

To-night--why, what was the *Liebestraum* recalling to her mind? Where had she heard it last? Of course--up in the Connecticut country, on the Sunday afternoon of her first visit. David MacRoss, with his 'cello, Miss Hester, with her piano, had brought out that glorious, heart-tearing *crescendo* just as the great orchestra was doing it now. The two instruments, even in their smaller way, had suggested all the passion and power of the theme, as it filled the quiet, candle-lit room, with the dim painting of the four musicians above the two players. Ross's closed eyes could see it all. And as she saw it, it was suddenly almost more than she could bear.

David's face, bent above the 'cello, had been for the time a face of still delight. It had put a spell upon her, as the face of a musician absorbed in his task often did. She had not forgotten that look. He hadn't shown it again. The music over, he had become once more the whimsical, or thoughtful, or practical man of the house. She remembered that the same arm which had wielded the 'cello bow so skillfully had sawed the wood which was piled in such orderly precision behind the house. He had told her he couldn't get exercise enough in any other way to offset his hours of desk work. A sturdy, well-muscled arm was David's. A sturdy, well-muscled heart was his, also. Yet when David's bow had been lifted as the last tenuous note of the *Liebestraum* died away, he had said, without looking at anybody in particular, "That thing always does something to me I can't define. Suggests something I've never yet found--something waiting. As the Bible says: *It is high. I cannot attain unto it.*"

At the time she had tried to harden her own heart to a suggestion like that. She wouldn't even admit to David that it touched her. But to-night, alone by herself in the crowded hall, she couldn't get away from the effect of the throbbing cadences. David--David--what had David done to her? *This*, certainly, had been no place to come to try to efface his image! To-morrow she must try something as far removed from the *Liebestraum* and its dangerous influences as possible. How about "Stars and Stripes Forever," or some jazz tunes, next time? Much safer. She would go where she could get them.

XX

Ross's *notebook functions again. Everything is all right now. The disturbing elements are eliminated. We go on as usual.*

To-morrow proved to be another day.

It was full of incident; all an avid copy seeker could have craved. Early in the morning Ross got caught in a subway train jam of frightened people. The train had stalled between stations for an unexplainable length of time. Just as everybody was beginning to be uneasy loud cries from around a curve assailed their ears; then came a drift of smoke. The cars were choked in one of those terrifying packings of human beings in which nobody can move. Ross, with her head as usual far below the heads of those about her, had begun to wonder if she could get on much longer without a breath of fresh air. She lifted her eyes appealingly toward a big fellow with a swarthy face who was shutting off her supply of oxygen and said: "Please--could you give me just an inch more room?" He showed her a stolid countenance--evidently he was not afraid--but he managed to get his arms down and to lift her up by degrees, raise her to his shoulder, and hold her there, as one might a child. This caught the attention of others and some of them laughed. "That your baby?" one of them queried, with his tongue in his cheek. Others, thoroughly alarmed, began to try to shove toward the doors, with guards shouting: "Keep back there--keep back!" If it had not been for her rescuer Ross realized that she might have been crushed dangerously among the passengers, who seemed to be all of the ponderous physical types. Two girls began to cry hysterically; a woman fainted; men swore brutally. Then the train began slowly to move, stopped, moved again, stopped again, with the smoke coming in more thickly, while a high falsetto voice shrieked: "Oh, for God's sake, *go on*!" Finally they were off, at increasing speed, and a groan of relief went up. Three minutes later they were at a station, elbowing and mauling their way out, one and all, whether it happened to be their destination or not.

The big fellow who held Ross carried her out, and in spite of her protestations made his difficult way with her up the stairs to the very street. As he set her down he was grinning.

"Little goils like you need a noyce," he stated. "The sub ain't no place for you, such times."

"You've been very kind," she thanked him.

"Don't take much kindness to be good to a little goil like you," he answered, grinning. "The sub ain't no place for you, *any* time, I'll say."

She slipped away in the crowd and hailed a taxi. No more subways for that day, at least in rush hours. She had long ago decided that question, though every so often, when in a hurry, she broke her resolve. Insult or injury waited for her there when the mob ruled; what use courting it?

At one o'clock she went with her sister Ethel to a woman's luncheon at a popular hotel, a great political club affair. Ethel promised her something worth while for her pains--personal contact with a distinguished woman speaker from England, and the opportunity to hear an equally distinguished American statesman who was to reply to her. Ross detested women's luncheons of that size, but she owed Ethel some compromise, and the Englishwoman ought to be worth seeing if not hearing. So she put on her smoothest daytime array and went. The notebook, as

always, went with her. One of her devices, on such occasions, when bored or irritated, was to take it out by being as rude as she liked on paper, while preserving a serene face and registering close and absorbed attention. Club women always understood the use of a notebook, and if they didn't know her, thought: "Oh, a reporter or writer." Or if they did know her: "That clever Ross Collins never misses anything. Wonder what trick she's taking now."

This particular trick was merely a running comment:

> Big hat on right, small on left. Brains under small hat, vacuum under big. Politics and clothes make strange bed-fellows. Deaf women should stay away from crowded luncheons. Deafening noise like ten million fiddles out of tune, with subtones of Stock Exchange in a panic. Minded to stand up, rap for attention, and say pleasantly: "Ladies, isn't this sudden silence delicious? What about going on from here at a lower pitch?" Imagine faces! Think Lady Linden would laugh--looks like a good sport. Her hat not like royalty's hat--very American and becoming.
>
> Suppose food very good. Not hungry. Ethel eating too much--will put on another pound of undesired flesh. What of it? Women--women--women. Why do they care to come here and eat? They all eat too much, and they can't afford to. How they do jabber! What about? Not one in ten knows what she's here for. Rank injustice! Can see whole group at table on left who do know. Bright, strong faces--some really beautiful. Well-groomed women--intelligent to last degree.
>
> Lady L. speaks. Great stuff. Doesn't take herself too seriously. Clear, logical, convincing--or maybe it's that outrageously upsetting charm of hers. Deaf adder on my right keeps whispering, "What did she say? I didn't *get* that," and pokes her ear trumpet in my face.
>
> Shook hands with Lady L. Tall, sinuous, graceful. She had to look down a mile to see me. Said: "It's so very encouraging to have our young people interested and thinking about these things." Felt about sixteen, and what I said sounded like it, no doubt. But I have her booked. Have the whole thing booked. Will go home, do paragraph about it.
>
> Later: Oh, how cocky! But I did the paragraph.
>
> ... Up in Connecticut I got the best thing I've done in moons, at a country dance.... But was that Connecticut?... Or was it David?

The day ended with a visit to Jimmy French at the hospital; plucky Jimmy, lying on his face in a plaster cast, and able only to cock an eye at her. But what an eye!

"I'm coming on fine, Ross. When I get tired of it this way they heave me over and I lie on my back. You don't know what a ripping change that is till you've worn out your stomach sitting on it. Tell me the news."

Jimmy would have made marvelous copy, but she couldn't use him. She could only give him the best she had, sparkle for him as she hadn't been able to sparkle for anybody else that day, and take away with her the wondering conviction that nobody could ever tell beforehand who would have in him the invincible stuff out of which heroes were made.

"If Jimmy can stick having his back broken, I ought to be able to stick living my life by myself

and not giving in to an absurd emotionalism. I won't give in--I won't!

"What good would it do if I did? David said he was through. When New England says he's through there's little doubt about it. As a matter of tradition, no doubt whatever."

XXI

The attic workshop is also a busy place, and the chips fly merrily. The unexpected visit of a charming young person is delightful, but after all a mere interruption. The sound of the sandpaper and plane is heard again even as she goes down the stairs.

A convalescent from a serious illness may not have much power to resist the unhappiness following a complete reversal and overthrow of his plans. But a well man, especially if he is of a determined nature to begin with, may carry on successfully even though things aren't going in the least as he would like to have them.

It was a sturdy philosophy which brought David MacRoss back to complete and sound health within the month following Ross's abrupt departure. He had said to himself sternly that it was no use lying about and whining; having got out of that invalidish dressing gown, he would stay out of it. Therefore the next morning he had come down dressed once more like a man of property and affairs. Two days later he went for a drive with Dr. Sam Reade. A week later he took a fairly long walk. And a month later, as has been said, he was his vigorous self again, showing no sign of his late illness, either in body or mind.

The evening with Ross Collins had begun to seem to him like some sort of strange and wretched dream. She had sent back a cool but courteous note to Miss Hester, as became a guest. To himself she had sent not even a message. As he thought over that final exchange of hard blows there seemed nothing to do about it. Her earlier enthusiastic suggestion that they write to each other letters which might conceivably make book material, as a method of exploring each other's mind, had seemed to him quite impossible. Anyhow, she had wiped that proposal off the slate when she had declared that she didn't intend to marry anybody--that marriage would be the end of all she hoped for. Women had said that sort of thing before, he supposed, and men had ridden it down and married them. But for himself that statement had brought the whole affair to a conclusion. No use attempting to play the game of friendship with a woman with whom he was in love. Best to put her out of his mind and go back to his attic workshop and the work to be done therein.

He went at this, hammer and tongs, after the old simile. Once in perfect health again, David was no man to let even a sharp disappointment take the capacity for work out of him. Whatever happened or failed to happen, work was the breath of life, and plenty of it was waiting. A big bundle of galley proof accompanied by a publisher's letter urging haste gave him something to set his teeth into as a starter. In this revision he lost himself pretty completely, for he had put his best into the book copy, and the sight of it in printer's type spurred him, as always, to make that best even better, if he could. Probably those last refinements which go into the long sheets of proof are the ones which give any writer the keenest pleasure. The long, hard labor is over. The work has been done as well as he knows how to do it. It is there before him, but he has one more chance to find a better word, to point a phrase more surely, to delete an infelicitous sentence in the bright light of a final reading, and to substitute one which makes his meaning clearer even to himself. Nothing could better have suited David's need to get back at his workman's bench than this most interesting yet not too heavy task, in its use of the metaphorical sandpaper, oil, and pumice which should make each surface smooth as was in his power. This done, he could begin again on some other piece of craftsmanship, which should

call for the swinging of the ax, the wielding of the saw and plane and chisel: labor for which his restored vigor should be fully adequate.

Bent over his desk, his eyes hawklike in their critical search for his own shortcomings, his blue pencil ready to pounce, David was unaware of an impending visitor until she stood before him.

"David! Did typhoid make you deaf as well as dumb?"

It was a familiar young voice, and a beloved one. David dropped his pencil and wheeled about in his chair.

"Susan! How the deuce did you get up here without my knowing? Bless your heart, it's good to see you!"

She sat upon his knee, both arms flung for an instant about his neck in an embrace which he heartily returned. Then he held her off to look at her.

"My word!" he exclaimed. "A winter in Paris has certainly left its mark. Am I holding a girl or a fashion plate?"

"Both, I hope--though I don't care specially about looking like a fashion plate, after all. A comparison more human would please me better, Davy dear. But I *am* quite elegantly got up, I admit. Mother never goes halfway, you know. Still--up here in the country I shouldn't mind discarding these correctnesses and getting into my old green leather jacket--if it's still here."

She slipped out of a costly fur coat, pulled off a trig hat, and stood before him, a young figure bordering on a plumpness which nevertheless had its own rather luscious beauty. He eyed her appreciatively, yet with an appraising discernment.

"About five pounds too heavy, Sue," he commented. "It's all right now, but when he weighs a hundred and fifty--and not an ounce too much for him--what'll *you* weigh?"

"Who?"

"I don't know."

She laughed. "There isn't any he. You're my only love, Davy, just as when I was fourteen. Of course I've played around a bit--who wouldn't? But I always come back to you, you know. Some day I'm going to marry you, out of hand, whether you want me to or not."

"Are you indeed?" David sat back in his chair, enjoying her, as always. This girl, Susan Sylvester, the daughter of a sister's second husband and therefore, though in the family, in no wise related to him, had always seemed of his own blood. When he had been slightly more than twenty and she seven she had called him Uncle David, but that appellation had long since been discarded for the more familiar one. He loved Susan dearly, as she loved him; they had had the best times in the world together.

She eyed the galleys of proof before him.

"You seem knee deep in June," she observed. "I suppose you don't want me to tell you all about the winter, right now."

"I'd like nothing better. But these have got to go out by night. You see my illness delayed getting my stuff into proof until two months later than schedule, and now this bundle has been rushed up to me with what amounts to a command to go through it and be quick about it.

Where are you? Back at the old home for the season?"

"Yes, and of course we can drop over again to-morrow, Mother and I. But I just had to look at you and Aunt Hester a minute. I'm dashing over to hug the Mortons, but couldn't go by this house."

"I should say not. See here, Susan"--he was looking at her fair hair, exquisitely waved--"isn't this a shade or two lighter and brighter than it was?" He put up his hand and touched it as he spoke.

"Certainly it is. Don't you like it? Everybody does. Why go to Paris if not to be improved? And when you rudely suggest that I'm five pounds too heavy I want you to know that if it weren't for the cleverest *masseuse* in Paris I'd be a good twenty pounds overweight. She's taught me how to keep it down, too. So you needn't be worried. When you get ready to marry me I'll be the perfect weight--just a delicious morsel."

"You're that now."

"Thank you. Yourself--you're a trifle thin yet, but looking much as you always have. Tell me what this is you're working on, and then I'll go--till to-morrow."

"See for yourself."

She bent over the sheet which he had been blue-penciling. "*Hepzibah*, *Hiram*, *Dr. John*," she murmured. Her pretty and expressive face lighted. "Oh, Davy, have you done another *Country* book? Glorious! What's to be the title?"

"*Country Neighbors*. Directly following *Country Crossroads*. Same locale, same characters. Think it's a good title?"

"Splendid! Are you still keeping the author's name dark? Why *do* you, when the *Crossroads* made such a hit?"

"It didn't make a hit, my dear. It just happened to take the fancy of certain people who were born and brought up in the country, and still longed for it from their electric-lighted offices, or their small and dark apartments. Those were the only ones who enjoyed it."

"Nonsense! Frightfully sophisticated people were crazy about it. Maybe you won't believe me, but a woman on shipboard, in the chair next mine, wrapped in the swankiest furs you ever saw, got it out of the ship's library and simply devoured it. In a Bostonian accent which marked her for at least Beacon Hill, she recommended it to everybody, including me. I had to bite my tongue in two to keep from telling her that *Caleb Cox* is also David MacRoss, my pseudo-uncle and best pal, writer of highly judicial and much appreciated articles in various magazines devoted to economic and social subjects. She would have adored hearing that; it would have enhanced the book for her. I warn you, Mother almost did tell her. She opened her mouth to do it, but I gave her a frantic signal. Of course we couldn't be such traitors as to give you away, since you've sworn us to silence. But don't you ever mean to tell, Davy?"

"Why, since I get such fun out of keeping behind the scenes? It gives me absolute liberty to say what I like. And do you suppose Dr. Sam Reade would go on unconsciously and recklessly giving me material for *Dr. John* if my own name on the title page identified the region for the curious who always want to know who sits for every portrait? Never."

"I suppose he wouldn't--the old dear. And of course Aunt Hester would stop being *Hepzibah*,

on the spot. All right--only some day, when your *Country* books get to selling in green-leather-bound sets, I'm going to break parole and shout the lovely truth to an astonished world."

"When," agreed David, "we reach the green-leather-bound set stage I'll give you leave. That gives me quite a margin for secrecy--twenty years, at least. And meanwhile----" he glanced inexorably at his proof again.

Susan gathered up her coat and hat, and David went with her to the top of the steep stairs.

"I'm glad I'm back," she said as she descended, "if only to be in the same country with you again. How I ever did without you almost a whole year over there----"

"I should say you did a plenty without me," he called after her. "Turned yourself into a dyed-in-the-silk Parisienne."

"Don't you think it! Wait till I hunt up that old green leather jacket I left here, and I'll show you I'm that same country girl. It's coming spring, and I intend to tramp all the lanes with you, exactly as of old."

With a wave of the arm back at him, she disappeared, a blithe and vivacious young person, as ever.

"Not much spoiled," he said to himself as he went back to his desk, "though her mother has done her best to do it. If that fur coat cost less than two thousand it was because Alice beat 'em down. And Sue's precisely twenty, if I remember.... She's going to hunt up that old green jacket, is she? Well, my child, you'll have quite a hunt."

He spoke advisedly, for the green leather jacket in question hung at the moment upon a hanger in his own closet, carefully concealed beneath a seldom-worn garment of his own. Even Hester, if questioned by Susan, would hardly think of looking for it there.

XXII

BOOKSHOPS--*and books. One of these is taken home and read until two in the morning--a mere tale about the country though it is. Yet the reading of it has a devastating effect.*

There was a certain small bookshop in the West Fifties into which Ross Collins was accustomed to drop whenever she happened to be in the vicinity. It was the last word in artful bookshops, which means much in New York, where are to be found some of the most enticing places of their sort in the world. This one was rather famous, as well, being kept by two women who not only knew their job but were themselves persons of position and influence. It was well worth coming into their shop to meet them.

Miss Hallam, sitting before a Governor Winthrop desk which was no reproduction but had been brought down from her old home in Connecticut, looked up with a welcoming smile as Ross came to her elbow.

"Snatching a minute to read?" Ross asked, with a glance at the open book which lay upon an array of business sheets. "It must be something pretty absorbing to hold you like that, with two unwaited-upon customers at the front of your place. Did you know? Miss Grant seems to have gone out."

"Bless me!" Miss Hallam sprang up. "Thank you for telling me. I was so deep in this I didn't notice." And she went forward, with an appraising glance at the customers. One was doing well by herself--the sort who preferred to browse around and not be bothered by a saleswoman at her elbow until she was ready to ask questions or to buy. The other wanted attention; she had been about to demand it.

Ross picked up the book which had had the power to make so keen a business woman as Eleanor Hallam oblivious of an opportunity. It was bound in green cloth, with black lettering and a stencil of black pine trees in silhouette springing from the lower edge of the cover. The title was *Country Neighbors*, the author one Caleb Cox. Both title and author were unknown to Ross. She turned the pages idly at first, then with a pricking of interest. Arresting bits of green pen-and-ink sketches adorned the chapter heads, done by--as she promptly recognized--a famous illustrator. She dipped into a paragraph here and there, and was caught by a style of the utmost simplicity, clear, concise, telling. It was a way of saying things on paper she had once much admired, before she had been waylaid by more modern subtleties and indirections, tricks of phrase-turning, reachings after originality which sometimes became mere obscurities, mannerisms which were by no means always admirable. There were none of these in this author's pages; his words could involve no reader in wonderings at a genius which could at no pains be understood.

Ross remained standing before the Governor Winthrop desk, no longer dipping into paragraphs but reading steadily ahead because there seemed to be nowhere to stop without losing something. The author, who frankly wrote in the first person but remained the minor actor upon the scene, was having a fine visit with a country doctor--*Dr. John*, he called him. The two men were enjoying a real comradeship as they smoked and talked. *Dr. John* had just experienced a great relief over an almost unhoped-for improvement in a case he had braced himself to lose,

while still fighting doggedly to the last trench. Tired but happy, he was telling his friend *Caleb* about it, not expansively, but in sharply drawn sentences, with short, almost choked silences between.

> "Only eight years old, but the doggedest little shaver!... He'd had an anæsthetic before--had had a mean time getting under, too. Hadn't forgotten it. He knew what it meant ... but he laid himself down with a will--as your Stevenson puts it--and said it was all right with him if I said so.... Jiminy cripes, Caleb, that was enough to put me out of commission, knowing his condition and his chances.... But a fellow has to stay in commission--somehow. The Lord only knows how, sometimes.... And then to have things suddenly go wrong, just as they seemed to be going right.... But we won't say much about that part. It's--hell, you know--times like that.... But--he's better!"
>
> "He's better!" I echoed--and envied Doctor John with a deep, not quite a bitter envy. What had I ever done to match just one such battle for a child's life as that?

Miss Hallam came back to her desk and Ross. Both customers had left the shop; it was a rainy morning--which was why Ross had chosen it to drop in.

"You're ensnared--just as I was?" Miss Hallam observed. "Do you know, I think this new book--it's just out--is even better than *Country Crossroads*. And I've quite worn my copy of that out, rereading it, and lending it about."

Ross looked up reluctantly. "Have you?... Just a minute, please," she said, and went on reading to the bottom of the page where the chapter ended. Miss Hallam smiled, and waited.

"That's precisely the way I feel about it," she said, as Ross laid the book down, keeping a hand on the cover. "Caleb Cox certainly knows his country. The odd thing is that he is really quite somebody else--the author of sound, straight-thinking articles on serious subjects, as far removed in style as can be imagined from that of these sketches. The articles--under his own name--are found regularly in one of the best magazines, and they've given him a considerable reputation. They read as though he lives in the very thick of affairs--as he must, in a way. But he hangs onto his anonymity for these pictures of country life. They're done with such a sure yet delicate touch, as he might pick a rose or a cornflower in his own garden. But true to the life, as I know life in the country."

"Do *you* know life in the country?" Ross asked wonderingly.

"My dear child, I was born and brought up in the Connecticut hills. The old home is still there, my greatest possession."

"But you've been everywhere in the world; I always think of you as a confirmed cosmopolite."

"Cosmopolites don't keep bookshops," argued Miss Hallam. "And you're utterly mistaken. I may be a traveler, now and then, and still earn my living in Fifty-third Street. But if I'm a confirmed anything it's a countrywoman. Didn't you know that if you're born with the smell of new-mown hay in your nostrils you never cease smelling it, no matter how used you become to more subtle fragrances?"

"That's something I certainly didn't know," admitted Ross. "You see, I was born in Bank Street."

"Oh, really? In that once desirable old quarter which still holds a dignity of its own away down

town? But to come back to *Country Neighbors*. If you don't know Caleb Cox's work I'd advise you to make yourself owner of him at once--unless being city born and bred you've no taste at all for the country. And even if you haven't, you can't afford to miss his original and shrewd philosophies. Such an observer of life! And genuine through and through. That's the best of him."

"You know him personally, then?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. His country home and mine aren't twenty miles apart. I've always known the family. He has a remarkable sister, one of those women who are a real force in the world, though they make no fuss about what they accomplish. One or the other of them drops in here every now and then. Seeing either of them instantly creates for Miss Grant and myself the atmosphere of home and family."

Influenced by these enthusiastic recommendations, as well as by her own interest in the paragraphs she had dipped into, Ross carried both *Country Crossroads* and *Country Neighbors* away with her when she went. She forgot about them, in a press of work, for several days. But going to bed one night tired and more or less depressed by a day full of sordid experiences, she bethought her of her purchase.

"I think I'd like to smell a little new-mown hay," she said to herself as she piled her pillows behind her back and turned on her reading light. "Not that I have the least idea what it does smell like. But it may take the reek of the lower East Side out of my recollections for a while, and that will be something. Probably the book will soon put me to sleep, which will certainly make it score heavily with me. Oh, but I'm dog-tired!"

So she began upon *Country Neighbors*. She had not read a dozen pages before a suspicion as to the identity of their author began to creep upon her. Miss Hallam's statement that his name was fictitious but that he was well known by his own had roused her curiosity. Just what it was which first made her think of David MacRoss she could hardly tell. The clue lay subtly in the turn of a phrase, an angle of observation; presently it was to be pursued in the characters themselves, drawn with almost the fidelity of portraits by a writer confident of his concealment behind a pen name. The book was written in the first person, but Caleb Cox didn't himself appear as a prominent figure. He made himself merely the interlocutor, the interested friend, or the exasperated observer: always the explorer into other people's minds. But even so, unconsciously he had drawn no meager picture of himself.

As for his characters, some of them she could recognize. Almost at once she knew that *Dr. John* must be Dr. Sam Reade. Her one glimpse of him, together with David's comments, could assure her that there was the prototype for this rugged, hard-working country physician and surgeon, who would break a leg any time rather than not get to the bedside of one who needed him, yet could rip out savage scorings of some cur who deserved them, or beat him up if he got in the way. In these pages *Dr. John* was drawn with a pen which softened not one hardness, nor blurred one failing, but pictured the man as he was: dogged, blunt, at times seemingly antagonistic to every law of man, but to be counted on as one counts on the surest things one knows. To Ross the picture was admirable to a degree.

She thought she knew Miss Hester when she met her, though Caleb Cox hadn't touched the sister of the city. It was the Hester of the country home, of the rural activities, of the farm and garden, that he had drawn, and drawn her restrainedly but surely. Indeed, in all his

characterizations of the country people--the postmaster, the storekeeper, the traveling salesman, the school teacher, the preacher--one felt that restraint had been Caleb's watchword. He had been determined not to sentimentalize about these people. If a man had a wart on his nose Caleb left it there; if he was more or less of a rascal Caleb didn't smooth him over or make him out a saint. When, on the other hand, he loved him like a brother, he likewise kept back the too affectionate phrase, and somehow carried the sense of his affection all the more engagingly for that. On every page was humor, on many was pathos, and on all was penetrating understanding.

Then there were the children. Caleb Cox had made much of the children. John and George and Mary fairly rioted and scampered through certain of his chapters like elves, or tiptoed through them, full of childish secrets. Writing of the children, Caleb had let himself go, as though here, at least, he needn't fear being too ardent. Whimsy, jollity, imagination touched every line he had written of them; Ross acknowledged to herself that she had never read anything so charming. Yet the realization of David MacRoss's love of children frightened her, as it had frightened her before. A man like that wouldn't think married life worth living without children.... Why, in heaven's name, then, Ross asked herself, did she read this book? Why did she allow herself to play around the edges of the utterly impossible?... Having made this inquiry sternly of herself and closed the book with a snap, she opened it again and went on reading.

Then she came suddenly upon--to her--the most surprising thing in the book. All along she had noted the character of a middle-aged farmer whom the writer had called *Hiram*. He had thus named him by an old-fashioned, homely name which has been seized upon for no sufficient reason by numerous writing folk when they wanted to bestow a supposedly rustic title upon a yokel, hired man, or other untraveled and unlearned human being not heavily endowed with ideas. David's *Hiram*, though at first sight and superficially of this class, began to show upon further acquaintance the possession of a more than ordinary common sense, a grasp of general affairs, and a pleasant wit which was bound to endear him to the reader. *Hiram* had an antagonist as he had an antithesis in the shape of a grumbling old miser who existed--he could by no means have been said to live--upon the adjoining farm. This individual, named *Jedediah*, Caleb Cox had drawn with a pains which did not spare his crudities and meannesses, yet with an appreciation of his lonely, because self-isolated, condition. He had made *Hiram* appreciate this also. The conversations between the two, as held over the boundary line between the two farms, were among the choicest in the book.

Thoroughly interested in *Hiram* at last, as a most intelligent human being, Ross now came to a page or two which challenged her very innermost beliefs. The writer, in the character of the questioning new-comer to these parts who couldn't find out half enough of all he wanted to know, nor talk too long with the farmer *Hiram*, who seemed to him in certain subjects a wiser instructor than many a college professor he had known, had put to him one of his own disturbing doubts.

> "Hiram," I said, coming out with it impulsively, as we two returned together from a funeral in the little country churchyard, "do you believe in God?"
>
> Hiram, somber in his unbecoming best suit, but with that peculiar look of his which I delight in bringing forth, the look which says before the speech that the question interests him and he will give the best answer he can, replied:

"Caleb, I do--because I can't help it."

"Why can't you help it?"

"Why, because He won't let me, I guess. He puts Himself before my face and eyes. I can't shut 'em so they can shut Him out."

"Then you believe a God made this world, and the men in it? Deliberately made it, and them, by a plan?"

Hiram paused, looking off over the fields across the valley to the hills beyond.

"I've never seen much about this world, or about any of the people in it," he said, "that didn't seem to me to be made by a plan. Why, you can't make anything worth makin', Caleb, except by a plan, can you? And it takes a mind to make a plan. The bigger the thing that's made, the bigger the mind that made the plan. A man has always seemed to me a pretty big thing. I know I couldn't have thought one out," he added, smiling. "I couldn't have thought out one hair on his head."

"So the origin of man seems to you as simple as that, does it?" I questioned, enjoying my pursuit, as always, yet a little awed, as I often am, by the directness of the other's thinking.

"No, it don't seem simple to me," Hiram replied, thoughtfully. "Not simple at all."

"But you think that the God you believe in made the universe, the world and man, all by the lifting of a finger?"

"One lift apiece?" inquired Hiram, with a quizzical look. But he was sober enough as he went on. "I don't know *how* He made it, and I don't expect to know--not in this world, anyway. But I couldn't be fool enough to look around me, on a day like this, and imagine the whole thing just happened, without any sort of sense or power behind it, any more than I could look at this darned old black suit of mine and imagine it just fell together of itself. It may fall apart that way, and prob'bly will, if I keep wearin' it to funerals and weddin's long enough. But it didn't fall together without somebody cuttin' it out and sewin' it up."

"That's a pretty old argument, Hiram. Can't you do better than that?"

Hiram turned a strange face upon me.

"Caleb," said he, "*would you rather not believe in God*?"

And to this I had no answer. But Hiram had.

"It's always seemed to me," he said thoughtfully, "that when a man tries awful hard not to believe a thing, it's because he don't want to believe it. I wonder, now, why a young man like you should feel like that. You look to me, all over you, as if God did an extra special job when He made you."

"Oh, no. He didn't, Hiram. He bungled the job."

"He don't bungle His jobs. Men do--afterward, sometimes."

We walked along in silence for several rods before Hiram said musingly: "D'you know, Caleb, that man we buried to-day--he believed in God. Maybe where he is now--

wherever that is--he's kind of glad he *did* believe in Him, *before God had to prove it to him*. It must have made it more like gettin' home."

Something about that quiet speech closed my lips. What was the use of trying to argue with a man who felt like that? A man who didn't speculate--a man who somehow "knew whereof he believed."

Ross laid down the book at two in the morning--because she had finished it.

"David," she said, addressing it where it lay upon the table beside her, "I know that's you. It's just possible I mightn't have suspected it if Miss Hallam hadn't unintentionally given it away by telling me that Caleb Cox isn't your real name. Yet I almost think I should, solely on internal evidence. I don't know much about those important articles of yours under your own name, but I seem to recognize you here, in every page."

She got out of bed, went to a chest of drawers and took out from it a small gayly bound book, published a few months before. Its bright blue and gold cover carried the title *A Lady of Leisure*; it had caught the public's fancy, and it had sold almost into the hundred thousand; was still selling. Into it she had put all the vivacity, the delicious wit, the irony and sparkling cynicism of which she was capable. If a hundred thousand people had bought it, ten hundred thousand had laughed over it. It had been a brilliant and amazing success, so everybody had said--or nearly everybody. It wasn't supposed to carry a moral, though perhaps, all unwittingly, it had.

She laid the two books side by side, a strange little smile distorting her lips.

"As far apart as the poles," she whispered. "Imagine the *Lady* as the wife of Caleb Cox? I can't."

She put the two books away. But when she was in bed, and the light out, she found there was something else to be said.

"*Is* the *Lady* the real I? Not by a million miles. I'm a little, hard-working, middle-class person, who merely goes about and notices--and *apes*. I've aped the *Lady*, not been her. But does that bring me any nearer David MacRoss? No, it pushes me infinitely farther away. He's put more into that book than ever has been in me, or ever will be.... The only thing--the terrible thing--is, David, I seem to *have* to love you.... Oh, God--what can I *do* about it!"

XXIII

PLAY-MAKING *in a hospital, which would seem no place for a play. Yet one is staged, and its audience appreciates it to the full. There is even a dramatic critic present.*

"Well, Jimmy, how goes it?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Ross."

That was always the answer she got. Jimmy lay in a plaster cast, so many hours of the twenty-four on his back, so many on his face. Being changed from the one position to the other was a fresh ordeal every time it was necessary. Jimmy's face had grown thin and pale; little lines had been written into his young features, but his smile was still brave, if sometimes forced. But it never had to be forced for Ross. He had managed to get his schedule worked out so that her bi-weekly afternoon visits synchronized with the period when he lay face up, and could look at her if she sat at the foot of his bed. On the days when he expected her his nurses had learned to take special pains with his hair and hands.

He lay in a ward, because he couldn't afford a private room, and there was nobody to afford it for him. Ross gladly would have done it if she could, but with the period of his confinement to his bed so indeterminate, as both the consulting surgeon and the staff admitted it to be, there was no use in anybody's trying to finance a private room. Besides, Jimmy preferred the ward--said so loudly, and meant it as far as his best hours were concerned, when he could chin with the not altogether unamusing Italian merchant on his right hand, or crack jokes with or at the expense of the convalescing Irish taxicab driver on his left. At other hours, when the pain was worst, he wanted to crawl away into a hole somewhere, where he might moan unheard. As he couldn't, he valiantly suppressed the moans for the sake of the ward.

"Oh, I say, Ross!" Jimmy breathed it softly, but his blue eyes shouted it. "Gosh! They said it was spring outside, but I wouldn't believe it. Now--I know it."

She was in gray from head to foot--French gray, that perfect shade which red-heads with camellia skins wear so wisely. Beneath her small gray hat her dark-lashed eyes smiled, hiding the pity which wrung her afresh each time she saw him. A red curl curved upward upon either cheek. In her gray-gloved hands was a big bunch of pussywillows, straight from the country. The whole ward turned upon its beds to look. Jimmy French was privately envied from as far down the long room as eyes could strain to see her whom they called "his girl." They had been used to seeing her in sleek black with a heavy fur scarf; the sight of her in this symphony of pale gray convinced them all that a change of seasons had occurred.

Ross nodded at the Italian merchant and the taxi driver, and gave them a pleasant word apiece; then she sat down close beside and facing Jimmy. Tommaso and Pat, as soon as they could drag their eyes away from her, rolled over and considerately turned their backs upon the pair. They understood that Jimmy was much worse off than themselves; let him have his girl to himself, in so far as their self-sacrificing backs could indicate their withdrawal. The occupants of the beds farther afield hung on a little longer, but they presently had visitors of their own. Ross and Jimmy were left to the half hour's talk which Jimmy would remember and turn over in his trained memory until he could have repeated it word for word. It must last him till she came again.

"Got some good news for you, Ross. Doctors say by June they may get me up on the roof. I understand this is April. That's only two months."

"Oh, Jimmy! In a wheel chair?"

"Guess not. Sitting up's going to be another bag of tricks. Cot. But that'll be something. Nurses say there's one corner where you can see a bunch of trees--if they wheel you over to the edge. That'll be slick."

Active Jimmy French, dashing through crowds, cutting corners, dancing the newest steps, never quiet, never dull--come to this! A bunch of trees, to be peered at wistfully from a corner of a hospital roof! Ross began to talk fast.

"I'll be here to see. That reminds me--a play I saw last night. *Green April*. Want to hear about it?"

"Do I! Go to it! Don't leave out a line. Tell me the cast. Tell me----" He paused. "Who took you?"

"Tom Thayer."

Jimmy frowned. "Sometime that bird's going to get you liking him more'n you do me."

"Never."

"Oh, well." He drew a deep sigh, and the frown melted. "All right, fire away," he said. "Anyhow, T.T. doesn't have you sitting beside his bed twice a week. And he doesn't have--what I have when you feel that way. I'm the lucky guy, after all. Go ahead. I'm all set."

She went ahead. It took Ross Collins to describe a play, as Jimmy well knew. She could make you see and hear it all, from the rise of the curtain to its last drop. She began: "The first scene was a little Italian street at night ..." and went on from there without pause, as though she were reading from a book. Only to Jimmy French it was much better than any book, because of Ross's face, her illuminating little gestures, the modulations of her voice. Once off on such a description and she seemed to lose herself in it, concentrating furiously in order to make no inversions in the sequence of the events, no breaks in the give and take of the dialogue, which she could at many points reproduce almost word for word. She might have been an actress, Jimmy had told her many times, so quick a study she would have made, so great was her aptitude for mimicry, so sure her sense of dramatic situations.

Her voice was a low murmur, sometimes a mere whisper, not to let it carry about the ward. Tommaso and Pat strained their ears but they couldn't get more than a word here and there. But somehow nothing was lost to Jimmy by this muting of the drama. Rather to him it gained, by the very intimate quality of it. And if now and then a visiting voice across the ward offering sympathy or advice in guttural or nasal accents cut across Ross's low tones, Jimmy, also used to concentrating in the midst of distractions, hardly heard it. With his blue eyes fixed on Ross's, his receptive faculties functioning in unison with her powers of giving, he was lost to everything except the little stage she was setting for him, and the movement and speech of the actors upon it.

When she was done he lay thinking about it. A dramatic critic in embryo was Jimmy.

"Some hokum, of course, but I should say a lot of the real thing. As you get it to me, the high lights came fairly often. It won't go, though, with the crowd, will it?"

"I doubt it. Too imaginative, and too far over the heads of all but those of a certain type. It must have been very costly to produce, and the cast is so good it seems a pity if they can't carry it to success. Tom Thayer gives it a month to run; says everybody will have seen it by then who will ever care to see it."

"T. T. himself too hard-boiled to appreciate it, eh?"

"Curiously--no. I should have said that too. I saw him more than once getting rid of a tear, the way men do who are ashamed to admit that anything has touched them. He used the corner of his play-book to relieve an apparently itching nose, but he didn't deceive me. I should have been better pleased if he had frankly taken out his handkerchief and blown his nose, as I saw Judson of the *Comet* doing. The man who wouldn't have cried at that particular point would have been made of granite--I shouldn't have trusted him with a sick dog. As for me, I was drowned--and you know I really don't cry easily at a play. It was the simplicity and restraint of the acting that got me; it was a mere gesture that finally finished me--the slightest gesture imaginable. But it told everything that was heartbreaking."

"I know." Jimmy's eyes fell. They were red, even at hearing the thing in the telling. He had to get away from it. "That man over across the ward," he whispered, "is an old soldier--top sergeant with the Sixty-fifth in France. They had to do something pretty bad to him yesterday. He wouldn't even have a local anæsthetic, the nurses said, and when they brought him back from the op. room he was suffering like hell. But we didn't hear a sound from behind his screen. They said they put the screen there only so the fellows on either side wouldn't see his face. He couldn't keep it out of his face. To-day the screen's gone, though the pain isn't. Look at him when you get a chance.... That's one thing about being in a ward, Ross. You don't miss seeing what bucks you up and makes you play up yourself."

"You don't expect me not to look at the obverse side of that shield, Jimmy!"

"Look at it all you want to. One such shining light as old Sergeant Callahan puts out a whole lot of guttering candles--and they do gutter at times, I admit it. So do I myself, you know. Other times they're just funny. There's a fat Dutchman down the ward who's on the strictest kind of a diet. It makes him mad all over again, every time the trays come up. The men on either side of him have 'em loaded--the best the kitchen can produce or the nurses smuggle. Dutchie gets a glass of milk. Then he explodes. 'Vy should I haf not von t'ing de odders haf? I pay de same. I am here to co-oberate, but I moost haf my botatoes.'"

Ross laughed, for Jimmy was an inimitable mimic and could take off to the life any foreign dialect, gesture, or facial contortion. Even though his white, haggard face upon the sheet--he was allowed no pillow--was far from resembling that of the plethoric Dutchman who carried an outrageously high blood pressure and looked it, for the moment Jimmy, puffing out his cheeks and squinting his eyes, managed to resemble him. Tommaso and Pat, catching the guttural tones and recognizing the origin of the tale, choked in their blankets. No doubt but Hans Lieberman, quite without intention of his own, was the life of the ward--next to Jimmy French and in complete contrast to that pitiful but plucky patient.

The hour was up; it was time for Ross to go. It seemed to Jimmy that it was always time for her to go, that she had barely come when the warning was given and visitors must depart. There was no denying that visits, even from so welcome a friend as she, tired him, but he could bear that. He always dreaded the moment of parting, even though she never failed to give him

something to live on till her next coming. His eyes begged for that, though he never asked it; he had nobody else in the world to give it to him, so Ross was generous. The pressure of her lips, wherever she was minded to leave it--on hand or brow or cheek--was something that T. T., Jimmy figured, was not likely to get--not even though he were to be beaten up by fate as Jimmy had been. T. T. was too tough a customer to make her want to bestow caresses upon him. It was his own boyish blue eyes and fair hair and general babyish look, he said to himself, that made her so kind to him. He supposed he seemed to her about fifteen, lying there in bed. He didn't flatter himself that he was more to her than a younger brother. Well, he could be thankful for that--and was.

The kiss touched his cheek this time--that was where he liked it best, since he couldn't expect better. He supposed that if some day the doctors said he was going to pop off, she might----But no use thinking of that now. He didn't intend to pop off if he could help it.

"'Bye, Jimmy dear. I'll be here two minutes before four on Sunday, and bring you something you've never seen or heard of. Be good now, and go to sleep."

"I'll try. So long. I'll be looking forward to what I've never seen or heard of. Take a squint at the Sergeant as you go out. I don't guess he'd mind if you went over and spoke to him. Hasn't had a friend in to see him yet, and he's been here three weeks."

Ross followed this eager suggestion, and was rewarded--not by the patient himself, who only grunted at her, though not uncivilly--but by Jimmy's grin as she glanced back at him.

XXIV

JUST *a brief encounter, but upsetting to resolves not to be upset. These things will happen.*

Hurrying through the long corridors, Ross came up behind a tall young man walking with two children, one on either side. The smaller, a girl, he was holding by the hand; the other, a sturdy boy, was looking up into his down-turned face. Ross caught familiar outlines. Could it be--yes, it was David MacRoss, and the two children were the George and Mary whom she had watched playing with David on that Sunday morning, two months ago, in the country. Her breathing quickened a little at the sight. Should she let them see her, or should she slip away down a convenient side corridor just ahead?

She couldn't go. She must see more of them. They were, as they had been in David's home, an interesting group. One was missing--she remembered there had been John, the oldest child. Why were they here? Perhaps their mother was ill.... But it was David whom she was studying as she slowed her own pace behind them. David, whose profile, as he answered George's hushed but eager questions (she recalled that it was George who was always the questioner) was quite as strikingly fine as she had remembered it. And she had remembered it some thousand or so times since she had seen it last. Putting memories out of one's life wasn't as easy as it might be; she had discovered that.

The group paused outside a door. George looked around. Mary, following his gaze, looked around also. Finally David, with his hand upon the knob of the door, turned his head because the children were staring so hard. Children's memories are surprisingly good.

David's glance fell upon Ross, in her exquisite spring grays which so became her and had made a whole ward watch her in appreciation. His eyes met hers. He let go of the knob of the door and went toward her. Acquaintances they were, certainly, if not friends; and even acquaintances greet each other cordially in hospitals, where either or both may be in trouble over someone who really is a friend.

"How do you do, Mr. MacRoss. How do you do, George--is it?--and Mary."

"How do you do, Miss Collins. Yes, these are George and Mary."

They shook hands all around, the children absorbed in the face beneath the small gray hat. Both George and Mary had thought it such a pretty face, and had wondered why the lady hadn't come again to Mr. David's house.

"I hope," said Ross to David, "your sister isn't ill here."

"No, it's John--George's and Mary's brother. He was rather badly burned a week ago in a big bonfire, and has been here ever since. But he's doing well now, and I brought his brother and sister in to see him to-day. We're just going in. We have ever so many presents for him, as you see."

Ross looked at the little parcels which she now saw that George and Mary were carrying. David had a larger package under his own arm.

"I've got a book, and a slingshot I made," proffered George.

"Got 'nother book, an' f'owers," explained Mary.

"And Mr. David's got a game John can play with the nurse," added George. "We can play it with him, too, next time we come, maybe."

"That's very nice," agreed Ross. "Please tell John I'm so glad he's getting better."

"So're we," George declared. He gave a little skip. "John got burned *aw'f'ly*."

Over the children's heads David's and Ross's eyes met again. In spite of the endeavor of each to keep the encounter purely neutral, it was as though hidden fires leaped up and were instantly suppressed.

"How is your friend, Mr. French?" David inquired.

"Coming along very slowly, but not surely at all."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, it's very hard for him. But he's infinitely plucky."

"And very lucky, to have so good a friend as you coming often."

"It's well worth coming for, just to see his valor--which should be recognized by a medal, if medals were given for sheer endurance."

"If they were there would be thousands of them handed out in hospitals. Even young John in here would get one. He's hardly made a whimper."

"That's splendid. Of course you are all very proud of him. Don't let me keep you standing outside his door. I'm sure he's waiting impatiently for you. Good-bye, Mr. MacRoss. Good-bye, George and Mary."

"Good-bye, Miss Collins."

"'Bye, Miss Collins."

Ross walked on down the corridor, shaken by the meeting, brief though it had been, and well as she had played her part of pleasant casualness. Seeing David MacRoss was a thing she couldn't do and remain secure in her conviction that she had taken the only conceivable and necessary course. He was so desirable, he was so disturbing, he was so dear! And she had put him a million miles away, and he would never come back.... She didn't want him back.

She wanted him back with every fiber of her restless, unsatisfied self.

XXV

ANOTHER *hospital, but no play-making here. How to go on!*

"Gramercy 2793."

"Thomas Thayer speaking. Is Miss Collins in, Mrs. Cheney?"

"I'll call her, Mr. Thayer."

Ross stopped pounding her typewriter and went to the telephone.

"Ross, I've some bad news for you. Pull yourself together."

"Oh, Tom--tell it quick."

"All right. Your friend Madge Winthrop was hurt in a bad smash on the Boston Post Road last night. Out with Nick Gilbert--run into by a wild party getting back to New Haven. Gilbert was killed out-right."

"*Oh!... No!*"

"She'll come out all right, probably. Just bruised and shaken up. At a private hospital. Thought maybe you'd like to go up. Taxi waiting if you do."

"I'll be down in five minutes."

It took longer than that, for there was indeed some pulling together for Ross to do. Nick Gilbert! And Madge caring for him as Ross knew she had, though she wouldn't marry him.

"Mighty nice chap," Thomas Thayer said soberly. "Best of that bunch, if the poorest--or because of that, maybe. I'd swear whoever was tight he wasn't. Tough luck. And not one of the other crowd got more than a broken leg out of it. The Fates and Furies seem to take a peculiar delight in socking the wrong fellow when it comes to a crash like that."

Ross couldn't talk about it. Poor Madge! She knew she couldn't see her, but she could send in a message. She wrote it on the way up to the hospital, during a traffic stop:

Dear, if you want to see me have them telephone. I care so very much, you know.

Three days later Madge sent for her. She was sitting up, white and big-eyed among her pillows, her arm in a sling, a wide bandage about her head, binding her fair hair.

"Ross, I wanted to see you so--more than any of the others."

Ross sat down beside her, took the nervous, chilly fingers in her own. "I'm glad you wanted me. I've thought of nothing but you, Madge."

"Oh, Ross, why did it have to be Nick? Why couldn't it have been one of the others--if it had to be anybody. He was worth more than any of them."

"I know. Of course he was."

What was there to say to comfort her? But Madge wanted to talk. She had talked to nobody, she said.

"Ross, if I had only married him! If I only hadn't had those silly ideas about not marrying. Oh, I'd marry him now, if he were alive only for one hour, just to have his name--his dear name--to wear!"

"You think that now, poor child, and it's very natural you should. But you wouldn't have thought it if this hadn't happened."

"Ross," Madge fixed her friend with burning blue eyes and spoke solemnly: "I did think it. I knew it all the while, even when I was refusing him, over and over. I loved him--oh, I did love him! I just put him off because--well, he was poor; he couldn't have given me what I thought I must have. I was afraid--afraid I'd want the things I'm so used to, and not having them would spoil my life. Nick never would have been able to give them to me. My family always would have been sorry for me. But I see everything so differently now. What would anything have mattered beside being his wife? Oh, Ross--if you care for anybody enough to marry him, do it--don't put him off. Nothing can make it up to you if anything should happen to him--nothing. I've got to go on forever *wanting Nick*!"

Ross could do no more to help her than hold her hand and gently touch her hair, until the agony of self-torture had somewhat spent itself. Her heart was aching heavily for her friend, and somewhat for herself. Had she too lost what she might now never have?

"I thought I didn't want children, Ross," the slow, unhappy voice went on again. "That was one thing that held me back. You know how we've talked about it--how it didn't seem to us worth all the time and pains, even if one did marry. But now--oh, I *should* have wanted them, once I was married to Nick Gilbert. I know that now. His children--they would have been such darlings. Can't you see them--looking like him? They *would* have looked like him. Black eyes like his always repeat themselves in children--not blue eyes, like mine.... Ross, how can we be so mistaken sometimes? We discuss and discuss these things, and think we've arrived at such wise conclusions. We think we know how to arrange our lives--we're so independent. No man for us--or only the perfect man. Let everything go except our own independence--keep our heads in the air--be so arrogant about it. And then everything comes to an end, like this. Oh, why--*why!*"

Ross couldn't tell her. She could only go on being sorry.

Her life seemed to revolve around hospitals.

XXVI

Much discussion of books lately out, and a report is made upon the author of one of them. It seems that all *authors are not frumps--and how strange that is! Remarkable how David is able to preserve his attitude of entire detachment.*

"David--look!"

Susan Sylvester laid a blue-and-gold jacketed book on David's knee. The title sprang out at him: *A Lady of Leisure*. Below was the only too familiar name--Ross Collins. Something inside David's breast seemed to move disturbingly at the sight.

Suppressing all possible outward signs of this inner response, David opened the book. But he had small chance to examine it; Susan was talking too fast and too excitedly. He was obliged to listen. In truth, he wanted to listen.

"I've met her, David. It was a perfectly wonderful experience. You know how keen I've been about her things. Especially this *Lady of Leisure*. All the girls are. I never dreamed any of them knew her--my special friends, I mean. Of course she's older--quite a bit, though she doesn't look it. But yesterday Natalie Ward gave a luncheon for a guest of hers from the South who knows Ross Collins, and so she invited her. We all had the surprise of our lives. And it turned out that Ross is a perfectly tremendous friend of Madge Winthrop's, Virginia Winthrop's older sister--they were at Bryn Mawr together. You couldn't get anybody much more prominent socially than Madge, you know. So our crowd had the thrill of our lives, meeting the famous R.C."

"Very interesting. What were your impressions? Is she a lady of leisure herself?" David's eyes were upon the book. He was turning the pages automatically, with his ears pricked for Susan's words.

"She says not. She just doesn't pretend to be. She says she's the hardest poor working girl in New York. But oh, David--she *looks* exactly like the *Lady*. She's the prettiest thing. Little and red-haired--just enough of it showed curling around her ears onto her cheek to prove it. She was all in the most perfect gray--French gray--and a lovely fur piece, and one little string of pearls, quite probably real. Her eyes--the girls were simply enchanted by her eyes, they're so *mysterious*."

David smiled at the tone in which Susan pronounced this adjective.

"Big and round, I suppose," he suggested hypocritically, with a clear memory of the eyes in question. "Makes eyes at you, does she?"

"I should say not. Or, rather, she can't help doing it, just by looking at you. But they're not big and round. They're the strangest eyes. They're mere glinting slits between wonderful, almost black lashes, and set just the *least* bit slantwise. With her red hair the effect is *most* unusual. When she laughs, which she does quite often--or rather she gives the effect of laughing without being boisterous or giggly--she bowls you right over. You absolutely have to watch her, she's so fascinating. She has a queer voice too--surprisingly deep, for such a little thing, but with a sort of vibrating quality in it. A *delicious* voice!"

"What does she say with this delicious voice? Is she as amusing as her work?"

"You really are interested, aren't you, Davy? I hoped you would be, for I'm so mad about her I have to talk of her to somebody. You see, it's the being crazy over her things all this time, and then suddenly seeing her. All the girls say that writers are so disappointing; only a few of them ever look like what you want them to. But Ross Collins--they all agree she might have stepped right out of her own pages, so you can see how satisfying the experience was. And by the greatest luck I sat exactly across the table from her, and didn't miss a thing."

"I judge," commented David, lighting a cigarette and getting up to roam about the room with one hand shoved deep into his pocket, because he couldn't sit still any longer, "it was you who had the big, round, staring eyes, fixed firmly upon the object of your overwhelming interest. I can see you clearly, with that absorbed regard which didn't miss a thing. How Miss Collins must have enjoyed you!"

Susan promptly slapped the hand which held the cigarette, thereby strewing the floor with ashes. "You know very well I wasn't rude about it. But how could one help watching her--and listening to her?"

"She sparkled all the time, eh, like fireworks?"

"Certainly not, you old cynic. She just made dry little speeches, now and then. She said the most unexpected things. But she listened a lot--much more than she talked. But somehow, even when she was just listening, you--well, *you felt her there*! I don't know how else to express it."

"Very annoying," mused David. "Who wants to feel people there, all the time? Like knowing there's a pickpocket next you. It's your brains Miss Collins is trying to pick, I infer."

"I suppose she is--only she doesn't make you feel *that*. She seems to enjoy what other people say--oh, so discriminatingly. And she had reason. The rest of them aren't dolts, you know. Quite a number of the girls are really unusually clever--I should say so. Katherine Colt--Anne Lloyd--Audrey Cortland--Madge Winthrop herself, who's such a friend of Ross Collins's. Only Madge wasn't there to-day, of course, on account of poor Nick Gilbert. They could all play up to her--oh, more than play up. It was quite the jolliest luncheon I've been to since I came home. Only--what I'm trying to make you see is that Ross stood out. But not--this is what I want to impress on you--not in any arrogant or showy way, you know. Not as though she meant to. If she had been like that of course it would have spoiled her completely for us."

"I see. And I see still more plainly that you are infatuated with this person who picks brains for a living. Did she, by any chance, get a chunk of treasure from yours?"

"She seemed to endure talking with me," declared Susan, drawing up her plump young figure with a semblance of dignity. "We had quite a few minutes by ourselves in a corner, while the bridge tables were being set out. I bragged to her about your being my uncle--you may be sure I didn't miss doing that. She said she'd just been reading *Country Neighbors*."

"What!" David wheeled about--he had been strolling away from her at the moment. "You don't mean to tell me you----"

"Wait a minute, Hot-head. Certainly I didn't give you away. I never mentioned David MacRoss to her at all. But why shouldn't I say that Caleb Cox is my uncle. She's very brilliant, but she couldn't possibly connect you and Caleb."

"Did you happen to tell her where Caleb lived?"

"Well--I did. But what of that?"

"Nothing of it, perhaps. Only you startled me. I begin to suspect that such secrets aren't altogether safe with you, Miss Sylvester."

"Now see here." Susan came up to him and laid her hand on his arm. "She couldn't possibly put two and two together, because though she's got one two, she hasn't got the other, has she? And I should think you'd like to know what she said about *Country Neighbors*. If I'd written a book and Ross Collins said what she did about yours, I'd be pretty thrilled. Of course I won't tell you if----"

"Do tell me. I'm looking for thrills. And you're quite right in your surmise that no writer can stand knowing that somebody has said something nice about his book without breaking his neck to find out what it is."

"Very well--only you don't deserve it. She said she stayed awake till two in the morning to finish it--and then couldn't go to sleep for thinking of it."

"Sounds a trifle oracular," said David, stifling a desire to catch Susan to his breast out of sheer delight in this speech. "I've known books I disliked intensely to keep me awake, trying to formulate a crushing criticism that I might print next morning."

"If she disliked your book," declared Susan, nodding her gleaming fair head emphatically, "I dislike chocolates. She said she knew absolutely nothing about the country or country people, but that that book made her feel suddenly that she'd missed something that could never be made up to her. There--are you satisfied?"

"I'm not only satisfied," replied David, with a queer sparkle in his eyes, "but I'm also, my dear, what is called 'divinely discontented.' Which means that I'll not be able to rest till I've made the acquaintance of Miss Collins. Now that you know her, won't you be able to bring us together?"

Susan's face fell. "Oh, I'm not so keen about *that*. You might fall in love with her. And then what about me?"

"Have I been noted for my tendency to fall in love?"

"No--but I think you've had your moments," said Susan Sylvester, with such a knowing air that David laughed irresistibly.

At his insistence she somewhat reluctantly left *A Lady of Leisure* with him. When she had gone he neglected everything else to read it through, from cover to cover. When he had finished it--it took but a couple of hours--he said to himself that though the book was mere froth of quick-wittedness and gayety--froth that melted in the mouth leaving a delicious taste if no substance--he believed a woman who was capable of that was capable of infinitely more. What about that clipping he had carried about with him so long, and which she had ruthlessly burned? And what a satisfying thing it might be to live one's life with one who could make such charming play as that. Would he rather a wife should be learned in the sciences, the philosophies; able to write ponderous papers on ponderous subjects? Emphatically, he would not!

But--he had vowed he wouldn't follow her up and try his luck again. Once was enough for a MacRoss to be refused by any woman.

She had stayed awake until two in the morning to read his book, had she?

Well, what of it?

XXVII

Will Ross go to the country again--again?--*for business reasons, this time? And stay four interminable months? How can it be thought of? Still, she thinks of it.*

The middle of May; warmth and sunshine on the city streets; patches of green to be seen if one took the trouble to go where they were tended. It was hard working at Ross's window opening on that narrow court which sunlight never touched. She was restless, unhappy, bothered by a sense of something lacking in her work. The *Lady of Leisure* was hard put to it to keep up her effervescence, now that Madge Winthrop was in retirement. As for other products, the gay bits of verse, the pungent paragraphs, the quips and quirks of her former productive moods--Ross had never known such difficult days.

Into a futile morning came a telephone call from Miss Eleanor Hallam. Could Ross make time to run up and see her on a matter of business at the bookshop? Ross welcomed the suggestion. Anything to get away legitimately from the heavy going of her task. She flew up as fast as the subway and a taxi across town could take her.

Miss Hallam met her almost at the door.

"This is so good of you, my dear. I'm quite distracted this morning with certain complications in our affairs, and when I suddenly thought of you I fairly ran to the telephone. Do sit down and let me tell you about it."

They sat down at the back of the shop, beside the Governor Winthrop desk. Two young women at the front were waiting upon customers. Miss Hallam deliberately placed her chair with its back toward trade. Her usually serene, high-bred face showed a tinge of trouble.

"I'll plunge right in, if I may. Patience Grant and I conceived the idea, some time ago, of opening one of those country bookshops which competent business women with fine imagination have made so successful in various places. Last winter Miss Grant had a delightful little old house left her by an aunt, up in Hamerton, Connecticut, and since she didn't want it for her own use she was ready to dedicate it to our joint interests. We've had a beautiful time getting it ready--if you had happened to drop in you would have heard all about it."

Hamerton, Connecticut! No doubt about Ross's absorption in what she was hearing, from that moment.

"The house stands close to the village street and very low upon the ground behind a white picket fence, an ideally picturesque setting for a bookshop which will appeal to the summer people who fill the region. It had nearly everything one could ask for at the outset, and we've supplied the rest. Fireplace, a few good old pieces of furniture, hooked rugs on the rubbed brown floors, stunning old prints on the walls--you know the sort of thing that makes background in such places. We've put in a quite consistent, quaint-looking show window, bookshelves and tables; and we've ordered a perfectly gorgeous lot of books. And since we're so busy here we'd engaged a very promising person to manage the shop, a Mrs. Arthur who lives in Hamerton--a pretty widow of perhaps forty, intelligent and agreeable, who knows books fairly well. A week from next Saturday was set for the opening day. One of us was going up--probably myself, just for the day. We've sent out cards. And now, my dear Miss Collins, out of an absolutely blue and cloudless sky we receive, this very morning, a special delivery letter

from Sally Arthur announcing her sudden marriage to some old admirer, and her instant departure for other scenes, presumably unencumbered with the need for selling books!"

Miss Hallam's look was of mingled mirth and dismay. Evidently the situation amused even while it distressed her. She picked up from her desk a heavy gray envelope covered with stamps, and took out a letter, glancing over it.

"Isn't this beautifully casual?" She read aloud a short paragraph:

> "*I'm truly sorry to disappoint you at so late a date, but I know you will understand that weddings have to go through in spite of bookshops. And I'm sure you'll have no difficulty at all in finding one of those attractive, well-educated, knowing girls New York is full of, to manage the place much better than I could have done.*"

"Well," Miss Hallam went on, "we did think at once of any number of attractive, well-educated, knowing girls who would be competent enough to manage a bookshop. But not of one who could give to the place just what Miss Grant and I have set our hearts on--and what we hadn't found even when we engaged Mrs. Arthur. We want somebody who could also give the printer of the little Hamerton *Weekly Chronicle* a half column or so which would so combine gay village gossip and book news that it would be really unique. You see, any number of interesting people come to that region for the summer, among them a surprising number of authors and painters, with a distinguished musical composer thrown in for good measure. And to write such a column and make it amusing, informing, and still inoffensive, is going to require more art than shows upon the face of it as one thinks it over. So you see----"

She paused, smiling a little, to scan Ross's intent face.

"What *do* I see?" Ross asked. "Do you want me to suggest somebody?"

"Yes--yourself, if you don't think us too audacious to ask it. *Would* you consider doing it, for the summer? Neither Miss Grant nor I can think of anybody we should be so charmed to have. She is going to Canada very soon to visit her mother who has been seriously ill. I can't possibly leave this place. I do think if you would take the job you might get a tremendous amount of suggestion out of it. By the way, we have some unusual friends, David and Hester MacRoss, who live in Hamerton. You must know who David is--he belongs in your world of writers. And you may know that Miss Hester is a very well-known--in her field--consultant to architects. Injects both imagination and feminine practicality and good sense into the plans for interiors which the best of architects now and then leave lacking in certain details--and their women patrons notice and object. Also she's by way of becoming quite celebrated among those of her profession for her articles and addresses on subjects in her line. Altogether, she and David are well worth knowing. I've no doubt at all that the MacRosses would be a great help to you in getting hold of news about the people of the region, native and acquired. I'd be delighted to write them about you. Undoubtedly they already know you, by reputation. I recall that their niece, Susan Sylvester, a dear child, bought several copies of *A Lady of Leisure* not long ago, for gifts."

"I already know them--slightly," Ross said, after a moment's quick thinking. It certainly wouldn't do not to mention the fact.

"Do you? All the better, then.... Oh, it's just occurred to me. I heard it only yesterday, and hadn't

really registered it yet--that David is sailing for England next week, to be gone till September on some commission. I'm sorry about that. But I'm confident Miss Hester will be there; she's very busy with a lot of new apartment buildings in the best locations. She spends her week-ends--and often half the week in summer--at their lovely old place in Hamerton. But she always has time to give to Hamerton's interests.... Excuse me for just a minute, please."

While Miss Hallam went to the front of the shop in answer to an imperious patron, Ross sat considering. Her thoughts were in confusion. Could she possibly think of leaving the city for the summer, even to try so interesting an experiment as this undoubtedly would be? Could she undertake the job? Did she want to go to David MacRoss's home town, even though he was not to be in it? All sorts of objections occurred to her. Yet there was attraction, too, as Miss Hallam had suggested, in the possibilities offered by so complete a change of environment. Certainly she must find out more about it.

"How does the idea strike you, Miss Collins?" Miss Hallam had returned to her. "Shall we go into it, or does it seem to you extravagant and impossible? I know it may easily be that, from your point of view, and with your own work always pressing. But I should think you might do much of that, right there."

"Of course I'm immensely interested, Miss Hallam, but--I hardly know what to think or say. I'm so tied up here--or it seems so. I should have to give up at least part of my own work for the summer, work I'm devoted to. And of course I should have to take a little time to think the whole thing over. When should I need to go?"

"Within a week, if you could manage it, since the opening is announced for a week from Saturday. You would have to know the stock pretty thoroughly. And then, it would help enormously to heighten the little drama of the opening if you arrived in town and appeared in the streets as long before the date as possible. We do have to plan these stage effects, you know. Besides, one or two more consignments are still to come, and will need to be arranged on the shelves."

They discussed the whole matter at length--terms, conditions, methods. Miss Hallam was a competent business woman. Ross had known she must be that, but it was now proved to her. It was not merely an idealistic and picturesque venture the New England woman was making up there in the country; it was a carefully thought-out and thoroughly guarded investment. She explained that she was not expecting Ross to be responsible for the actual business management of the place; that she herself would keep such management in her own hands, only requiring accurate reports of sales and recommendations of purchases. What she wanted of Ross was that she should be the personality of the quaint shop, in effect the hostess with whom patrons might sit down before the fire on cool summer mornings to talk over a late book or a new edition of an old one. Bookselling at its best is understood to be a fine art; it often is that in the hands of a prepossessing and shrewd young woman. Miss Hallam felt, she said, that Ross Collins could present unusual qualifications for the position. Her reputation alone would serve her well among those who knew her name. Altogether ...

When Ross went away from Fifty-third Street she took with her a definite proposition to consider, with three days of grace only, since Miss Hallam couldn't afford much delay. If she was to accept it, it would mean leaving town by the following Sunday night--six days away--and staying in Hamerton until the end of September. It was now late in May. She had actually

no idea of the route she was taking back down town until she awoke to the fact that she had signaled a Fifth Avenue bus and had found a forward seat upon its crowded upper deck. Very well, though a taxi would have been quicker. This was at the moment the best possible place for a confirmed city person, to whom all the sights and sounds were too old a story to distract her, to begin the thinking out of this new problem.

It would mean the dropping for the summer of the work she was accustomed to do under another name than her own. Out of the city she wouldn't have the daily experiences and contacts which now furnished the material for her observantly audacious column: *What Happens Next?* Would the job be hers again when she should return? She was fairly sure it would, for one of the editors of that daily was a particularly good friend of hers, and he was anxious that she shouldn't grow stale in his service. If he could spare her at any time it would be in summer. But if he couldn't, and wouldn't, and she should lose it! She wouldn't be willing to give up that column permanently, for she enjoyed the anonymity of it, the chance to be at times as caustic and personal as she cared to be. Keeping up *A Lady of Leisure* through the summer could be done, she thought, by one means or another. She really had the trick of it tied down and secure. But--well, even if she could work it all out, and get away, did she want to spend four whole months in the country? And with David absent?

Still, his absence was what made it possible to imagine doing it. He couldn't think she had come on his account.... He might not return before she left the place. She might never see him at all. Then--what use being there? This use: she might find out what living in the country would do to her. For--she had to admit it--she couldn't get away from thinking about David; he seemed to have come into her life to stay, if only in her memory. Before she finally consigned him to being only a memory it would do no harm to discover whether she could endure his environment for any length of time. The plan certainly had a beguiling quality for her; more and more she wanted to carry it out.

XXVIII

OTHER *people's opinions, dissuasions, attempts to decide questions of moment which one can only decide for oneself. Why will they put in their oars? But they always do.*

Tom Thayer, whom she saw later, immediately took the position she might have expected. She had had to let him know of Miss Hallam's offer; there was no use trying to slip out of town without telling him. For by this time she somehow knew that she was pretty likely to go.

"Have you gone stark crazy to think of such a thing?" was his opening comment.

"Don't you think I need a bit of change?" was her counter question.

"A bit, yes. If you're feeling seedy run down to Atlantic City for a week or two. But a whole summer up among the cow pastures! If you're seedy now you'll be seed itself in a month. Hayseed! You!"

"You forget that several of the authors you review make their summer homes up near Hamerton."

"Hamerton! That's the idyllic spot, is it? Where David MacRoss lives. Oh, ho!--I see!"

"No, you don't see, Tom. Mr. MacRoss will be in England for most of the season."

He eyed her sharply. "What's the game? I know you too well not to understand there *is* a game. If there isn't drama for you in a situation it doesn't interest you."

"I hope there will be drama--if I decide to go."

"Oh, you'll decide to go--I can see that in your eye. Something about the whole preposterous idea has taken the reins of that imagination of yours. What is it? I can't conceive anything duller than trying to sell books in a country hamlet like Hamerton. Cheap reprints of third-class fiction--that's what'll be called for, if anything. Drug-store stuff."

She laughed. "Do you see Miss Eleanor Hallam and Miss Patience Grant establishing a bookshop to sell drug-store stuff?"

"They're fooled, if they think they can make anything else go. Once or twice in a season Herbert Copeland may stroll in and ask for the latest English novel. Or Marion Marshall may call for a book of modern plays. But the rest of 'em will send to their booksellers in town when they want surcease from the shrieking of locusts in the trees. Eleanor Hallam came from somewhere up that way; she gets a touch of homesickness for rusticity, and persuades herself she can bring culture to the natives and turn a penny for herself. She can't."

"Tom, you're ill informed. Country bookshops of that type aren't a venture any more, if wisely placed, and you ought to know it, since you know so much."

"You know a lot about 'em, don't you?--since yesterday. Oh, well, I suppose there's no stopping you. But who's going to carry on *What Happens Next?* You can't do that from up among the cow pastures."

"Will *you*, Tom?"

He stopped short in the street. They were crossing from Washington Square to University

Place, to browse among the little old second-hand bookshops. "Me?" he said in amazement, and let out a short laugh. "*Me?*"

"Much better than I can. I'm counting on you. You know more about what happens next in an hour than I in a week. And I'll pay you double my own rates if you'll keep the column going."

They had a time of it, from that point on. Tom fought and bled over the mere notion of his bothering with a task so set off by a marked individuality as Ross's column, which was signed by the name of *Herring Bone*, a touch of absurdity which she thoroughly enjoyed each time she wrote it. In the end, however, he agreed to do it. But he drove a hard bargain. It was to cost Ross no doubling of rates--he wouldn't hear of that--but she was to send him a letter a week--a personal letter, giving him details of her experiences, which he was to pronounce satisfactory or he would throw over the agreement.

"No faking; the real thing," was his exaction.

"I'm going to be most awfully busy, you know."

He gave a deep groan, which echoed through the musty dark spaces of the basement shop where they were alone except for the old dealer who was poking about his shelves in the rear.

"Busy! And I'll be leading the life of an idler, I suppose, doing your job and my own too. I don't know why I consent to this thing, I vow I don't."

"One thing I want you to know, Tom. It's a real pull for me to give up my column, even to you, and only for the summer. I'm frightened lest I lose the hang of doing it. It's just an experiment, going into the country, and at the very last minute I may decide not to go. But as Miss Hallam puts it I do feel that I'm going to get some experience that may be of real use, in spite of your cynical thrusts about the cow pastures. By the way, Tom, have you ever happened to tell me where you were born?"

"No, and I won't tell you now."

"But I've found out. It was in Biddeford, Maine. What I've taken for a native New York accent is really contaminated northeast New England. So who are you to rail against the country?"

"A satisfied exile--and I'll be hanged if I know how you got hold of the damning fact. All right, Ross, run along. But you'll be back in September, thanking your luck to be able to get home where the lights gleam on a hundred thousand purple and green umbrellas on a wet night on Broadway. They'll beat the purple cows on the green grass by the entire home stretch. See if they don't."

Ross had other adjustments to make. Ethel Cheney, her sister, thought the plan utterly foolish. It would be dull up there, horribly dull. Ross would get headaches sitting about in a tucked-up little store.

"If you must go somewhere, why don't you make it somewhere on the seacoast? It will be frightfully hot in the back country in midsummer," she prophesied.

"Miss Eleanor Hallam isn't starting a bookshop anywhere on the seacoast," Ross pointed out. She was packing at the time, having been out and bought a number of interesting frocks for country wear.

"I don't see how you can bring yourself to being a mere saleswoman," Ethel protested. "It

would be different if you were owner of the place. Everybody knows very rich and important women go into trade, but they do it under their own names. They don't hire out to somebody else."

"I'm not a rich or important woman. And do you really think it matters whether I sell books under my own flag or Miss Hallam's? I expect it to be one of the most amusing things I've ever had the chance to do."

"Oh, well--you know your own affairs. Only, with an invitation from the Gunthers to spend August with them----"

"I'd already refused it. Don't you think this little apricot sprigged print is a darling?"

"Of course it's pretty enough, only it has no special style. I should think you'd have to wear some sort of severe, professional-looking thing in a bookshop, even in summer."

"Probably I shall. But I might now and then be off duty for an hour, and venture to revel in something not so severe."

There was no bringing Ethel to see the situation favorably. It was another matter with Jimmy French. He was Ross's chief reason for hating to quit New York.

"I think it's great," he declared warmly. "Even though I'll miss you like the devil."

"But I'm going to write to you at least twice a week," she promised him.

"Thunder, you can't do that," he said, wistfully but firmly. "You'll have to put a lot into making the thing go."

"I can write evenings--and will."

"You're not giving up the *Lady of Leisure*?" he asked anxiously.

"Of course not. But I can do that with one hand tied behind me, now."

He shook his head. "I'm not so sure. Once up there you'll be in a different atmosphere. You'll be more likely to want to do *Lilacs and Lilies* or *Pastures and Milk* stuff. It'll be such a change for you you'll fall for it, for a while, and forget you ever knew a city street."

"Not I. City streets are my school, and I haven't graduated yet. *Lilacs and Lilies* aren't my style, or ever will be. If you'd said *People and Possibilities* you'd have come nearer it. And according to Miss Hallam I shall find people and possibilities up there, patronizing the bookshop."

"I hope so. Of course you will. I came from a little Wisconsin town myself, you know. I've thought of it a hundred times a day, since I've been lying here. I'd like to get back--till I'm well."

"Maybe--who knows?--you'll be able to come up to Hamerton before I leave it in September? Who knows, Jimmy? I'm to be living at a little inn across the street from my bookshop. If you can travel you shall come. It's a promise. And thinking about it will give you a real push toward getting well."

He looked up at her, smiling his wistful smile, and she knew what was in his mind. But he answered cheerfully:

"All right. You can bet I'll think about it. And another thing I'll be doing will be wishing you luck--the best luck in the world."

"I know you will, bless you, Jimmy French. You've never done anything else, and it's made a lot of difference in my will to keep grinding away, as you very well know."

"Has it, Ross?"

"It's made *all* the difference, Jimmy."

She stooped and kissed him on the lips, and went away quickly lest she betray her fear that all the luck he could wish her in the future would come from an invalid's bed.

XXIX

David and Susan attempt to spend a day together, as of old. The only trouble is that their ideas as to how to enjoy a holiday have by now become dissimilar.

"Susan?" David had just got her on the wire, at her home across the valley.

"Oh, *yes*, Davy! Is it really you? How *are* you!"

"Spoiling for something to do."

"What? Oh, of course you're not. You never are. But if you are--really--why don't you come on over?"

"What are you doing?"

"Oh--nothing at all, if *you* want me."

"I do, very much. But I should be sorry to interrupt any----"

"You wouldn't be interrupting a thing. I can perfectly well cancel any little half engagements. The boys will understand."

"But will they?"

"They'll very well have to. When gods arrive the half gods go--or is it the other way around? What is it you want to do, Davy?"

"I thought we might take a lunch along and a book or two and drive down to somewhere on the sound--make a day of it. It's a long while since we've had a day together, isn't it?"

"Eternal ages, from my point of view. I thought it never was going to occur to you to think that such was the case. Will you drive--or shall I?"

"Well, when I ask a girl out for a motor trip I usually drive. I'll come for you within the hour. It's now eight-thirty. Will you be ready by nine-fifteen?"

"I certainly will. But, Davy----"

"Yes?"

"Did you know that Mother has just given me a perfect duck of a roadster?--the swankiest thing you ever saw! It's so long and low it's positively snaky. Fawn color with black trimmings. The top down, of course, and the nippiest windshield! I drove over to show it to you day before yesterday, half an hour after it came, but you'd gone to town. I almost wept! Do let's take it, if you don't mind. I'm so crazy over driving it. I can do sixty-five without half trying."

"In that case I can see it's no use asking you to go in my Old Faithful, though I myself think it's a pretty good car yet. Very well, you may come for me with your new toy, only I don't promise to engage in any speed contest with the tourist traffic."

"I'll slow down at all the corners, darling, to suit your cautious old age. Oh, you don't know how positively overjoyed I am at the thought of a day with you, Davy! I'll be *right* over."

She meant it, and he knew she did. He and she had had many a happy day together ever since the days when she had her first small riding pony, and with her fair curls tied back below her

little soft felt hat had cantered beside him along the country lanes, pleased and proud to be with Uncle David. As she had said, it was a long time since they had been off on one of their old-time excursions. He felt a pleasant sense of exhilaration at having brought the thing about so easily. He knew well enough how many young men were constantly hanging about the impressive Sylvester country home, for the sake of Susan. It was true that they also came for the splendidly surfaced tennis court; the boat- and bathhouses on the lake at the foot of the lawn, equipped with canoes; the two satin-coated riding horses in the stable. And if Susan, who always drove good cars and asked everybody to come along, was now in proud possession of the sort of new and costly motor she described, David had no doubt she would have to disappoint any number of candidates for her favor on this third day of its reign.

By the time he had written a short letter to post on the way, Susan arrived, swinging in through the hedge gateway and around the curve to the doorstep with a skilled smoothness of which she had reason to be proud. A musically contralto horn gave notice of her presence. David appeared with gratifying promptness to survey the "new toy." With his hands in his pockets he walked about it.

"'Swank' seems to be the word," he agreed. "Nothing lacking to make her so. Every gadget there is."

"Never mind the gadgets. Mention her lines, please, her absolute quietness, the perfectly evident power under her bonnet."

"I do mention them, with awe. Your mother has entrusted you with as high-powered a motor as there is on the market, a veritable engine of destruction. You, a mere child! How many pedestrians, should you predict, are going to take to their heels to-day as we pass by?"

"Stop teasing and get in. You know you'd like to drive it yourself."

"Of course I should. Really"--his survey of the motor now included the young person behind the steering-wheel--"I hesitate to trust my life in the hands of such a fashion plate as I see before me. Got up to match, aren't you?"

"It just happens so," declared Susan untruthfully. "Fawn and black are my favorite combination. Come on, hop in. Maybe, later in the day, I'll invite you to take the wheel, but not now. I'm too much in love with Diane to let anybody else lay hands on her. Not a boy has sat in this seat yet, though they're all perfectly crazy to."

"I've no doubt of that. Just wait till I get the lunch basket."

When he came back with the basket, a couple of books, and a brown-covered magazine, Susan laughed.

"All we need is a paper bag of bananas to make us the perfect country picnickers," she observed.

David paused with his foot on the running board. "I thought you liked having lunch on the rocks, out of a basket. You used to."

"Love it," Susan assured him hastily. "It's ages since I've done it, that's all, and the sight of that basket took me back to the days when I didn't think a lunch complete without the bag of bananas."

"We'll get some at the first store we pass, just to renew your memories of your childhood, away

back last summer," promised David, with malice.

He settled himself, and the car slid away. Susan was an accomplished driver, she was looking her prettiest and most elegant, the car really was an enviable possession, and the day was as warm and sunny as midsummer, though it was still May. A sense of well-being pervaded David. There were plenty of possibilities, not only for enjoyment but for contentment--even, remotely, for excitement--in the hours stretching ahead. And he meant to invite them all. Why not? Ross Collins was lost to him; Susan Sylvester was close at hand. A man would be a fool to refuse to enjoy her radiant young presence to the full.

The flight southward down the state suggested that Diane had wings, and that her pilot sat between them. No fault could be found with Susan's control of the power under her plump, small, gloved hands. She took no risks on blind curves, she passed all other cars with due consideration. And when she came now and then upon an unobstructed straightaway the speed she produced, which registered high upon the meter, was no greater than would have tempted David himself, given the chance. His blood ran quite as fast as hers, and appreciating her competency he made no objection to the terrific spurts at each opportunity, though he had to take off his hat in order to keep it from leaping from his head in the stiff gale their pace created, and from which no windshield could wholly protect them.

"What do you think of Diane now?" Susan asked triumphantly, as she slowed down at the signal of a waving flag and a big detour sign. "Pretty smooth?"

"Pretty smooth. As smooth as they make 'em."

"Glad you admit it. Of course I expected every instant on that last stretch to hear you shout caution in my ear. Did you happen to notice what pace we hit?"

"I did. But you're a darned good driver, and have my confidence. I'd merely suggest that now and then we do pass an intersection a trifle more hurriedly than might be wise, if a grocer's boy driving a delivery wagon happened to be hurtling out of it as grocers' boys have a way of hurtling."

"Don't worry. Diane would be by before the flivver could hit us."

"*What's Hecuba to me, or I to Hecuba?*" murmured David.

"Not a thing in the world, on this gorgeous morning. Oh, look--there's the first glimpse of the sound! We always did get it from here, a mile before we expected it.... Davy, you don't know how thrilled I am to be rushing off down here with you! Just as thrilled as I used to be, and that's saying something, I assure you, after my winter in France. We were rather gay, you know. But I never forgot you, for an hour!"

"Oh, come!" David laughed, looking at her with a quizzical yet kindling glance. "Evidently you learned to lie prettily, in France, as you learned so many other things."

"I'm no liar, as you very well know." She turned upon him her round, engaging face. "I don't suppose I literally thought of you every hour, of course. But--in my subconscious, Davy! You know what can go on in one's subconscious. Absolutely complete memory of somebody you care for, without really thinking of him--her--at all. It's marvelous, don't you admit? It was so with you, whether you believe it or not. Why shouldn't it be so? Haven't I grown up to think you the most wonderful being alive? How could I forget you?"

"Susan, I shall have to forbid you to say these things to me so early in the day. You can't keep them up successfully far, far into the night, you know; and I refuse to suffer a drop. For we're not coming back till the stars have been out many hours--and the moon too, if we're lucky, though it rises late to-night."

"I can keep up anything, when I'm with you," vowed Susan. "Ah-h!" She sniffed the air. "There's the first smell of the salt marsh! How I adore it. In five minutes we shall be in sight of everything.... Oh, what's that! The new hotel everybody's been talking about, out on the point? Isn't it stunning! And they say the food is perfectly delicious!"

"Not as good as that we have in our lunch basket. Helma outdid herself putting it up. There's everything you like."

"Splendid! And I'm simply starved already. Where do we stop?"

"Don't you recognize your favorite spot, half a mile down the beach, below the cliffs?" He pointed to a clump of pines standing ruggedly outlined against the sparkling blue of the water.

"Is that it? It looks so unfamiliar, somehow. Oh, yes, of course. The line of the new hotel changes everything. What a peach of a place they've made of it! And look at the rows of motors parked. It must be enormously popular already, as they say it is. Sha'n't we just drive by it before we make for the old spot--where of course we want to go?"

"Certainly, if you like. It *is* a fine hotel, and has plenty of patronage, even so early, I believe."

Susan did like. She drove slowly around the newly landscaped grounds and the long, low, artfully conceived gray buildings, admiring them from every angle. As they passed the ranks of waiting motors she suddenly identified one, a big, black, foreign car.

"That's the Cunninghams'--I'd know it anywhere. From New York. Lucy Cunningham's one of my best friends, you know. She's the most interesting thing! Unusual in every way. And DeLancy Cunningham, her brother, is a wonder. They think he's going to be a sculptor. I'll wager they're here together. I expect they're in the dining room, if they are."

She glanced doubtfully at David. He kept his face straight ahead. No, this was his day. Susan couldn't really want to search out the Cunninghams, no matter how interesting and unusual they were, or what promise of genius they showed. He made no sign, and Susan drove on, out of the stone gateway, only glancing back as they turned into the highroad.

"It certainly is a stunning place," she said--for the sixth time by David's actual count. "Let's get a crowd together and come down sometime for the dancing. They say the orchestra's heavenly. Where do we go? Can we get near that clump of pines?"

"Last summer we used to leave the car back here and walk," David reminded her. "You always wore brogues. Can you make it, in those spike heels?"

"Of course I can. These are really low, compared with some."

He had to help her over the rocks, for the pointed heels proved treacherous on the sometimes slippery barnacled surfaces over which the tide had lately washed. He piloted her to the place, on the beach below the crags with their clinging pines, where he had spent more than one summer afternoon with her. They had built fires there, made coffee, fried chicken, and steamed clams. The very remains of one of their stone ovens, built by them both, were to be seen--or it looked as though it might be one of theirs.

"We aren't cooking anything to-day, are we?" Susan asked, as she seated herself, taking pains with her skirts of fine fabric and delicate color. "I'd hate to get any spots on this. It's my favorite of all the street clothes Mother got me in Paris."

"Why on earth," demanded David bluntly, "didn't you dress for this expedition the way you always have? Put on something that wouldn't spot or tear, and some shoes you didn't have to hobble in?"

"Why, Davy!" She looked up at him, where he stood astride two rocks, and laughed. He was wearing a rough sport suit of gray tweed, with knickers, heavy stockings, and a pair of thick-soled shoes which looked as though they could tramp anywhere. His gray felt hat with its turned-down brim had been cast aside upon the sand; the breeze was blowing through his thick brown hair. He looked the picture of a young man out for a country holiday. Susan, on the contrary, would have fitted altogether into the picture if she had been walking down Park Avenue, with a photographer ready to snapshot her for the Sunday rotogravure edition.

"I'm sorry I don't please you, Mr. Countryman," she remarked saucily. "You see, now that I've definitely grown up, I thought just possibly you might be taking me somewhere for dinner, by and by, and a dance. I wanted to do you credit. So it never occurred to me to make myself look like the youngster I used to be, in sweaters and kilted skirts and a round hat."

"You're all right," agreed David, with a sudden change of front. "You look very correct, not to say beautiful. I just can't get used to this quick transition from childhood to young ladyhood. And I don't like to have to worry about getting grease spots on you."

"'Young ladyhood'! Oh, what a phrase, Davy! You sound like Jane Austen."

"Damnation! Young womanhood, then. Anything to denote the crashing across the dividing line.... See here, look what's in the basket, and forget yourself. I'll tie this lunch cloth round your neck to protect your precious Paris clothes, if you say so."

"Um-m--yummy!" Susan's white teeth bit into one of Helma's sandwiches with a murmur of satisfaction; she devoured tender cold chicken, crunched crisp bits of celery, and seemed to be enjoying everything mightily, as of old, with the appetite of healthy youth. A slice of rich chocolate cake with a cup of steaming coffee from a thermos bottle, thick with cream and heavy with sugar, completed her content.

"I did have," she confessed, "just the tiniest hankering for lobster. I thought of it when we got that first tang from the salt marsh, and when I saw the hotel. But this cake makes up for everything."

"It had better," decreed David sternly. "Chocolate cake was always your idea of heaven."

"It still is--only it really isn't safe for me to eat it often. My slight tendency to overweight, as you so kindly observed when you first saw me back, has to be reckoned with.... What shall we do now? Are you going to read to me? Please do--while I have a cigarette or two."

David wondered, afterward, whether she really heard a word of the choice paragraphs he searched out, though she seemed to be listening intently. Her comments were such as committed her to nothing; they were mere echoes and assents. She sat on a rock with her feet drawn up and her hands clasped about her knees--*that* was an unconscious reversion to her younger days, anyhow. Her eyes were fixed on David or on the incoming waves before her, with

now and again a surreptitious glance toward the distant hotel. And presently he put up the book. What was the use of spoiling a holiday by insisting on his own methods of entertainment?

"Mighty nice," said Susan absently, "to be having you read to me once more. But I don't suppose you'll ever be able to give me such a thrill again as you did when you first read me *Alice*. I must have been about eight years old?"

"Just about--or younger. And you haven't really grown up yet, you know."

"Haven't I, though! If you think that, you're all off. I'll prove it. In all these years I've been looking at you and adoring you, I didn't know why. Now I do. I've just discovered--since I came back from abroad--how dangerously handsome you are!"

David's explosive laughter rang out over the rocks. "Spare me the irony, my child."

"No, but it's true," insisted Susan, unperturbed. Her deep blue eyes continued to regard him critically. "I suppose I always took you for granted before--like the beauty of a summer morning."

David became convulsed. "A summer morning," he repeated softly. "How little I suspected my soft yet exquisite outlines!"

"*You* don't look like a summer morning, Mr. Simpleton. But you *do* look like--yes, I've decided who it is. It's the statue of the Minute Man beyond the bridge at Concord. Your face has just those contours--only you're a little older, and so much more interesting. And you can look just as carved out of stone as he does. Or you can flame into sunshine, as he can't."

"Flame into sunshine!" David repeated again. "Sue, where do you get these strange impassioned similes? What have you been reading?"

"Oh--just about everything," replied Susan lightly. "All the modern things. But I didn't get these similes out of them; I got them out of my own observation. When you smile you're really charming. And when you're solemn you're--stunning!"

"And is there no middle ground?" he inquired, still intensely amused. This was a new Susan, whom he didn't seem to know. He was sure she had never before in her life regarded him with this appraising eye; she had, as she had said, taken him for granted as a good playmate and had made no mental portrait of him.

"Well, if you actually don't *want* to know how good-looking you are----Oh, there go two people into the Cunningham car! I'm almost certain it's DeLancy and Lucy. Let's get up and walk along to where the road winds this way. I'd like awfully to see them!"

"Sure you can recognize them at this distance! They look like a couple of sand fleas to me."

"Your eyes are getting old, dear. Come on, please. They're stopping to talk to those other people, but when they do get started they'll fly."

She couldn't wait for him, and rushed off, managing with difficulty the treacherous journey over the rocks. He resignedly picked up the lunch basket and books, and followed her at a slower pace. The Cunningham car came slowly out of the hotel grounds, and was only just quickening its speed when Susan by a reckless spurt and a high shriek and wave of the arm succeeded in intercepting it. When David came up reluctantly she was deep in talk with the two occupants of

the shining black motor, who seemed as delighted with the encounter as she herself.

XXX

DAVID *notes that substitutions cannot always be made to substitute. Everybody has to find that out, sooner or later.*

That very nearly was the end of David's day with Susan, so far as having her to himself was concerned. The Cunninghams were pleasant enough young people, sophisticated to the last degree, and out for whatever amusement they could pick up. Susan presented Mr. MacRoss in her best manner, with a little air of pride which he appreciated, considering the fact that he was not at all up to her in the matter of dress--nor to the young Cunninghams, for that matter. They promptly invited Susan and David to join them, and follow in their own car to where it seemed important things were occurring, which nobody ought to miss.

"Do you mind?" Susan inquired of David. Her expression was eager.

"Not at all."

What else could he say? If he had had her by himself he could have remonstrated, put it up to her; but with the Cunninghams looking on he felt like a grandfather being implored by three charming children to take them to a circus. He couldn't refuse without being disagreeable.

So he and Susan set off behind the Cunningham car. At first David lapsed into silence. Susan chattered on about her friends; she seemed to be enormously stimulated by the encounter; the very sky became fairer because they were trailing the Hispano Suiza instead of sitting on the rocks. Well, Susan had changed, that was all; grown up. Or--was it an evidence of growing up to cease to care for the things he in his more advanced maturity still cared for? It had never occurred to him that Susan could in one short year become so different a person that she would no longer enjoy a day with him in the open without being taken to a hotel! But of course he was being absurdly exacting; he realized that. Instead of insisting that the day should be spent in his way, it was for him to show her that he didn't mind spending at least a part of it in hers. Anything so that they should be together. And he couldn't deny that Susan in her Parisian clothes made a delightful picture, and that she was good company, if he didn't expect of her more than was reasonable to expect of twenty years just back from that year of foreign travel. If she was now neither hay nor grass, he said to himself, he had only to give her time. She would undoubtedly become seasoned fast enough.

As the hours went on, however, he became more and more disappointed and exasperated. The yacht races to which the Cunninghams led them were undeniably interesting, but the tea and dancing at another hotel in the late afternoon were less to his taste, though he found Lucy Cunningham a better dancer than Susan, and decidedly enjoyed his few rounds with her. But then came the suggestion of dinner somewhere else, and more dancing. Good Lord! Was this what he had come out for? But he let her have her way. He really didn't much care now to have his own.

Susan finally woke up to understand that she was spoiling things for him. It was after the dinner at a crowded place where she met several more young friends, and after she had been dancing for an hour with one or another of the lively youths who presented themselves with flattering enthusiasm for her favors. David had been absent from the scene for half an hour, strolling up and down the terrace outside, smoking, with his hands in his pockets and his

thoughts no longer upon Susan or her acquired party.

He had been telling himself sternly that it wasn't fair to judge Susan by one day with her, after the interval of a year, just because she had been tempted away from him by her perfectly natural attraction toward unusually agreeable young people of her own age. She had changed, of course, from the child, the growing girl she had been, for whom he had felt so great a fondness. She would continue to change, to develop. Give her three years--five. Yet by that time where would he be? Changed and developed too--gone further on into life. Would the distance between them ever be spanned? Was he too old for her? Would he always be too old for her?

For years, he realized, he had been thinking now and then of Susan as a girl who might grow up into a woman who could fill his life, satisfy him as nearly as he could hope to be satisfied. This conception of her had been vague, it was true; he had never definitely said to himself that some day he would marry Susan. It was the child herself, and the girl who had succeeded the child, who had kept before him this possibility, with her devotion to him and her increasingly daring assertions that he was to marry her when she grew old enough. It had long been a joke between them, to which he had given his amused assent; but the time had passed when it could be considered a joke. To-night he was asking himself seriously whether this day together hadn't answered the question, for good and all. Whether, having lost Ross Collins, he could possibly bring himself to return to his old half-formed intention to keep watch of Susan with the idea that sometime his elder-brotherly love for a darling child might develop into a real passion for a blossomed and radiant woman.

Suddenly, as he marched up and down the terrace, with the beat in his ears of the orchestra music in the big dancing spaces inside, he told himself violently that it was all no use. The matter with him was that he was longing hungrily for Ross--for everything *about* Ross. Having known such hours of companionship as her brilliant maturity of mind and person could give him, how was it possible for even his very dear young Susan to take her place? Susan was like water after wine, indeed; she was like walking after flying; she was--oh, bless her little heart--she was like a rosy baby in its cradle in comparison with womanhood in the very flower of its most adorable qualities. Whatever Susan might become--though it wasn't conceivable that she could become a rival of Ross in any field--he couldn't wait for Susan.... And yet he couldn't have Ross!

But all at once Susan was with him. She had left the others, had definitely said good-night to them and was back with David. She had discovered his long absence, had surprisingly divined the reason--after having been totally blind for hours to his discontent--and had searched him out. Discerning his familiar sturdy form marching slowly up and down the more shadowy edges of the lighted terrace, quite alone, she had turned to DeLancy Cunningham with compunction seizing her.

"Really, you know, Lance, I must go back to David. He brought me out for the day, and I've deserted him shamefully."

"Oh, did he mind?" replied the young Cunningham, in amazement. "He's lots older than you. I thought he brought you out to have a good time, and was ready enough to have you get it any way that turned up. He's certainly not too old though to enjoy the races, and Lucy says he's a marvelous dancer--she was crazy about him."

"I know. He is a gorgeous dancer, and of course he did enjoy the races. Who wouldn't? But--

you see we used to go off the way we started to do this morning, and have lunch on the rocks, and read things, and go in swimming, and explore places, and get all sun-burned--and that's what he likes. I like it too--love it--only----"

"Only you do like to dance and dash about, naturally, more than he does. Well, I'm sorry to have you go, but if you feel a duty about it I wouldn't try to stop you. Mr. MacRoss has been an awfully good sport to let us have you. Next time I'll come for you myself, if I may, and we'll have our kind of thing."

DeLancy was a gentleman, young as he was; she recognized that gratefully. He took her to within a few paces of the strolling figure, and then at her suggestion turned back. He was to carry her messages to Lucy, who was lost in a whirl of popularity, and to leave Susan to make her own peace with her neglected comrade of the day.

XXXI

Susan plays a high card which seems to have been up her sleeve all the time. David is amazed at her, but what can he do? Certainly he can't put her out of the game.

"Davy! I'm truly sorry. I don't know how I came to get so tied up with everybody but you, when I came out to be with you every minute. Let's go, shall we? And I want to go the longest way round, if you don't mind."

After all, she was mighty sweet, was Susan. She stood there with her arm linked in his, looking off at the lights twinkling all along the shores of the sound. He felt the warm repentance in her tone. But he couldn't help being a little stiff about receiving her back.

"You do? Why not stay on here till midnight at least, and then make a quick trip home? I'm game. I want you to get the most out of the day, you know."

"I'll not be getting it, from now on, if we don't carry out your plan for the rest of the time."

"It's just a bit late for that, don't you think?"

"Oh, Davy, I *am* sorry! I don't know what was the matter with me.... I'll tell you--I *do* know. It was having the new car, and being dressed up to match it, as I really was, just as you said. And then meeting the Cunninghams. If we'd gone out, as we used to, with me in my green leather jacket and sport shoes----"

A stabbing memory got him again--Ross, not Susan, in the green leather jacket. But he must listen to Susan, who was doing her best to make amends.

"Davy--please! Don't hold your arm like that, as if it was made of cast-iron! Forgive me, and let's get back in the car. And--will you drive? I'd love to have you!"

That brought him round, irresistibly. It was the supreme sacrifice and he so recognized it--for her to invite him to handle that smooth steering wheel upon which her own accomplished touch was so efficient and which she had yielded to nobody else.

"Thanks, Sue, but I don't care to drive. I'm not sulking, you know. I've had a good enough time, if a slightly different one than I expected."

"But you haven't, and I've been horrid. If you'll take me out again some day next week I'll promise to wear the oldest old clothes I've got, and tramp through the bogs in rubber boots, if you like."

He smiled and shook his head. They came up to the car. She stood still beside it.

"If you won't drive it I'll think you haven't forgiven me."

His mood changed. "Very well, if I'm competent. Being human, I suppose I should rather like to try out this high-mettled steed."

He stowed away the lunch basket and took his place. Susan slid down low in her seat and settled herself comfortably. David looked the equipment over, made sure of his shifts, set his foot on the starter, and the quiet motor slipped into action and silently away, out under the stars.

They took the first few miles in silence, except that Susan purred once or twice with contentment.

"I believe I *am* tired. It's good to give up the responsibility to someone else, especially with so many blinding lights coming round every curve. Couldn't we get away from them?"

"Not by the straight road home."

"Then please take the crooked one. I'm so relaxed and happy to be with just you again."

He didn't wholly believe her, but presently at a crossroads he turned off the main highway to a less frequented route, that for many miles would follow good dirt roads and on which they would meet only now and then a wandering car.

"Oh, this is lovely!" Susan's head was tipped far back, her head resting against the top of the seat. Her eyes were gazing up into the heavens. "And there's the moon just coming up, full and round and goldy, like a great Chinese lantern. How delicious the air is, off here where you don't get everybody's exhaust stifling your lungs!"

"It is rather nice," David admitted.

"Why don't we stop, and watch it come up?"

"Better keep going, hadn't we? Since it's coming up straight ahead of us we can't miss it."

"But please go slowly," she begged. She drew a little closer to David; a minute or two later she snuggled softly against his arm. Many a time in her childhood had she sat thus, when tired and sleepy after a long tramp; she had done it no less than a year ago. But David became almost immediately conscious that it wasn't the Susan of even a year ago who was bringing to bear upon him this sense of approach. Evidently she wanted to be near him for some other reason than because she was either tired or sleepy.

But he made no sign. It wasn't quite as easy to drive as when his right arm was free, but he could manage it well enough; it was no new trick. And it was undeniably pleasant to have her there. She was precisely what she had not long ago declared she would be by the time--the old jest--that David was ready to marry her--"a delicious morsel." If the word "morsel" wasn't quite the one to describe her present full-measured richness of physical attractiveness, it might stand for her lack of stature and her youthfulness. In any case, it was now impossible to be unaware of her, or to continue to think exclusively of other things or people.

"David," she said presently, turning her head against his shoulder and lifting her face, "you think of me as a child still, don't you? You keep saying so. And I suppose to-day I've given you every reason--jumping after my friends and being so taken up with eating and dancing, as if I couldn't be interested in anything more serious. But--if you can believe it--I'm not so much of an infant in arms as you may think."

David glanced down at her. The full rising moon was very bright; he could distinctly see the contours of her face, and could perceive that her eyes were looking straight up at him. The mellow light lent her an unreal sort of delicate loveliness, refining away the childish plumpness of her fair cheeks and throwing mysterious and becoming shadows under her eyes. She didn't look like a child at all just now, more like a really beautiful young woman.

"I don't think you an infant in arms," he answered. "My eyesight tells me you've grown up, quite suddenly, as girls do. And there's no possible reason why I should expect or want you

not to enjoy eating and dancing. I'm no example of austerity in these matters myself. I had a thoroughly good time with your friend Lucy; I hope I shall see her again. Don't have any more regrets."

"Now you're being polite. But I don't want you to be polite, Davy, I want you to be honest. And I particularly want you to be honest in answering a question I'm going to ask you--if I dare ask it.... I think I'd dare ask almost anything, under this glorious moon, and with my head against your comfortable shoulder...."

He waited, somewhat anxiously. What could be coming? He hoped no taut situation with which he might have to deal with more than ordinary wisdom. He didn't feel up to being austerely wise to-night. Unquestionably the May moonlight, after a day of activity mostly in the sun, had rendered him an easy prey to whatever subtleties Susan Sylvester might prove herself capable of after almost a year in France. He realized that if she continued to keep her head where it now engagingly rested, and to speak in that low and mellow voice--quite a different voice from the childishly high-pitched one of past years--he might be betrayed into putting his arm around her in a fashion decidedly different from any such show of affection he had given her in the days gone by. And if he did that there was no knowing how Susan might respond. For Susan was going on again in those low tones which to his ear represented a certain finish of method of which the Susan of a year ago would have been incapable. And what was she saying?

"David"--she had never called him anything except "Davy" before in her life, until a moment ago--"you're still pretty fond of me, aren't you?"

"Very fond, my dear girl. Why not? We've been great friends since you were knee high."

"I'm not--of course I'm not--your intellectual equal"--this phrase from Susan?--"and perhaps I never could be. But I have an idea that you've always liked to have me around, and that you still might feel that way about me if you thought I ... cared to try to make myself more interesting to you. I mean ... this is what I'm trying to say ... if I can...." And here she stopped short, as though she found it hard to go on.

David was growing more and more amazed. What on earth *was* she trying to say, and why was she becoming so breathless about it? Susan had always been the most direct young creature in the world; she had told him everything she knew and asked him about everything she wanted to know and didn't. And he had always given her the best he had in return.

"Say anything you like, Sue," he told her, in as matter-of-fact a tone as he could muster, though he didn't feel matter-of-fact at all. He was really wishing more and more urgently that he could simply stop the car and treat her as a man usually wants to treat a lovely girl who is apparently in some distress.

("Come on, Sukey"--with an arm about her. "Tell the old man what's bothering you." This would have been his way with her only last year. And last year she would have blurted out her difficulties, and he would either have smoothed them away for her or gently jeered her out of imagining they really were difficulties. Then she would have pulled free and run off, entirely satisfied, and no harm done. But now--well, now, what was *this*?)

"David, will you teach me to understand the things you care for? I mean--as you understand them. I have learned a lot of things this year, but I'm just waking up to realize that I'm so far behind you--with just a finishing-school substitute for education--that pretty soon you won't

want to be with me any more. And I couldn't bear that. That's why I'm so--sort of--deadly scared about to-day. I think you--" she was becoming more and more intense in her manner; he could feel her actually trembling a little against his arm--"I think you took me out to see if you could enjoy a day with me in the old way--or rather, perhaps, to see if the new Susan could interest you at all. And I failed you."

"Why no, you didn't, Sue." He must say something, for he feared that the next minute she would cry, and then he would be in trouble indeed. If she cried he would most certainly do something sympathetic and unwise, since she seemed to be becoming rather dangerously emotional. "You were just a perfectly natural girl, moved by perfectly natural impulses. And why should I want you to be anything else?"

"But you did want me to be something else--and I meant to be, when we started. I meant to show you how much maturer the new Susan is than the old. And I suppose with every word I say I'm proving how childish I still am."

She was not doing exactly that. She was being a very appealing young person now, with more penetration than he ever would have imagined her capable of. She had certainly never tried before to read his mind, but she had now succeeded in deciphering at least one page of it. David found himself unexpectedly and strongly drawn toward her in this new rôle of emerging woman.

"Sue," he said, "you're very much of a dear." He didn't quite stop the car, but he brought it down to so slow a pace that he could give her all his attention. "Listen to me now, for a minute: You've been brought up in an unusually protected way. Not only that, but until this last year you yourself preferred to put off growing up as long as you could. In a day when girls of seventeen were crazy about boys for sweethearts you were still making pals of them. Nothing since has happened to you to bring out the qualities I know are in you. But they can be brought out, and life is bound to do it."

"You say nothing has happened to me.... David--something has."

She said it so strangely, faltering it out, that an unaccountable fear seized him. During that year, on those voyages--Alice Sylvester was such an indulgent, irresponsible sort of mother--anything might have happened to little Susan.

"My dear--*what*? Remember I'm like an elder brother to you. Don't be afraid of me. Tell me--*now*. And tell me straight."

The sternness of the command made her gasp a quick denial.

"Oh, Davy! No! Nothing like that. I've played around, like everybody else, but--I've really kept them all at arm's length--or nearly. On my honor I have. Oh, how could you think--*that*!"

Well, she was no child after all, that was clear. She understood perfectly the startling thought that had flashed into his mind in response to the strangeness of her way of speaking. No doubt but he must make amends.

"Forgive me, Sue--if you can." He stopped the car at last, and put his arm about her. She drew away from him, her head lifted, her body stiffened. "You gave me a terrific shock," he explained remorsefully. "I could think of only one thing: some wretched affair you were regretting. It happens every day, you know. These times--the moral let-down--it affects even girls like you,

whom men like me think of as safe and sacred.... Come back, Sue! And tell me, won't you, dear, what's on your mind? And what has happened to you, as you say?"

A silence of several minutes followed his appeal. Finally she said, under her breath: "It's hard to forgive you that."

"I know--I don't blame you. But you've no idea how strangely you said what you did. I've been looking after you, in a way, you know, ever since your father died ten years ago. He asked me to do it. You're pretty dear to me. And Sue, the more a man cares what happens to a charge like you, the more quickly he leaps to arms at a hint of trouble."

She was silent for a little longer, then she said: "I know. I do know. And I *don't* know how we girls keep--what we have. It's all around us--the other thing."

"Yes."

"But I have kept it, Davy."

"Bless you, I know that."

"Do you want to know why? Because of *you*."

"Sue dear!" It touched him enormously. His ideas of her had changed within the last few minutes. This was a Susan not to be amused over or considered unthinking. Evidently she had done a good deal of thinking, and to a purpose.

"You want to know what has happened to me. It's that. Making up my mind not to let anything touch me you wouldn't like, because you--you represent to me my ideal of the man I want to marry. I don't know whether I shall ever find him."

Well, it looked as though it lay before him--the chance to take her into his life and keep her there. He had no doubt at all that she was, out of some sudden impulse, trying to tell him that she was ready for him if he wanted her; that what had always been a jest might now become earnest. Susan was the sort of girl who would--and probably should--marry young. She had no hoped-for "career" ahead of her; she had an ardent nature; marriage was for her frankly what she already wanted.

He didn't know what to say--except that he must remain matter-of-fact until he could think things out for himself.... Ross--Ross--the difference between the way his whole being had leaped toward her, and the way in which only a surface tenderness was stirred in him now! He wanted to keep Susan happy, if he could--happy in her youth; he had wanted to *make* Ross happy in her challenging maturity. There was all the difference in the world. Yet--he couldn't have Ross; he could have Susan, whose photograph he had kept upon his desk for a whole year, because he couldn't get away from the possibility of her being able more and more to fill his life, if she should develop as he hoped.... His thoughts were in a confusion from which he couldn't now set himself free.

But he must answer her somehow.

"Of course, Sue," he began, feeling his way, "that's a wonderful thing to have said to me. It's bound to make me both thankful and ashamed. And it's bound also to make me feel pretty small, knowing what a long way lies between any approach of mine to being 'ideal,' and the actual fact. All your life you've seen only the best side of me; that goes without saying. The other side--but it's no use trying to show you that. The thing that remains is that you can't possibly

know just what you want in the man you marry--yet."

"Why not?"

"Well--here's why not. You didn't know just what you wanted, even to-day. You thought it was a day with me, yet when the other chances came along you wanted to take them. That was all right, and entirely natural, as I told you before. But it shows that being with an old fellow like me, so much slower paced than you, with so much soberer tastes, couldn't after all satisfy you. You wanted--and needed--the younger men to play up to you."

She was silent again. He started the car and drove on, at rapidly increasing speed. He'd better get her home. It was dangerous for them both, as it had never been before, having her there so close beside him. He recognized that she was possessed by the longing of youth for an emotional outlet; she admired and loved him; she would be susceptible to anything he might say or do which would give her the sense of being loved and desired. As for himself, he was conscious of the strong temptation to throw caution overboard and give both Susan and himself something thrilling to remember, whether anything came of it or not.... The trouble was--something *would* come of it; they would be bound together more or less irretrievably by the memory of even one kiss containing the suggestion of that love between man and woman which by his fixed belief should in most cases lead to marriage. And he had given Ross that sort of kiss; he didn't want to be drawn by mere physical propinquity into imitating it--for that was all it actually could be, an imitation--with Susan.

But all his calculations went wrong. When he had brought Susan to her home, and the car had stopped, she said in a smothered voice:

"I've been reading your thoughts every step of the way, Davy. And this is what I read. You'd like to be nice to me, but you're afraid you oughtn't, now I've proved to you I've grown up.... Well, then, I'm going to give you this--and leave you to think about it. Maybe you'll find you aren't so old and staid as you fancy you are!"

And she put both arms tight about his neck, pressed her fresh, eager lips to his in a long contact, and jumped out of the car. The next instant she was up the steps of the great columned front porch, and the heavy door of the house had closed upon her.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" said David to himself, startled, a little thrilled, and very sorry. "*Now* what!"

In order to get home he had to drive her car, for he couldn't conceivably follow her into the house and ask that somebody take him home. He didn't want to see another person in the world to-night.

XXXII

A TRAIN *goes into the country, inexorably this time. The die is cast for the summer. Well, after all, why not cast a die, now and then, and see what comes of it?*

Ross had never felt less as though she were starting upon high adventure than when she took the train, for the third time this year, for Hamerton. Four months stretched ahead of her, during which she was not to see a play, hear a strain of music from the Philharmonic--she was a devotee of the summer Stadium concerts--or watch a courtroom trial. Many other crowding interests were to be denied her. As the train moved out of the station these daily experiences seemed to be looking derisively in at her Pullman window, crying at her: "How do you think you're going to get along without us? We're a part of your life. You'll be thankful to get back to us. You'll want to get back long before you can. You've tied yourself up, tied yourself up, there in the country--the dull, stupid country. Good-bye--say good-bye to us! It's going to seem a lo-o-ng ti-ime!"

She was committed to it, however; she couldn't turn back. What a wild idea it had been, to think she could endure it! Hamerton with David MacRoss in it was one place; Hamerton without him was quite another. She wished she were scribbling the first paragraph of that daily column *What Happens Next?*--

> We were at the Grand Central this morning, watching an author set off for the country. He looked very dismal, and the sight of him stirred our pity. What was he going to do with himself? We had no idea. We didn't think he had, either. He had no golf-bags or tennis racquets along. We asked him, gently, what he was going to do. He replied sadly that he was going to write about the country--if he could. He added that he feared he could have done it better in the city. We feared so, too. But we didn't tell him that. He was sufficiently depressed already.... We expect him back by this time next week, though he had engaged quarters, he told us, almost weeping, for the season.... We went on our way, blithely, for we were not on a train being taken to the country.

Ross's train did take her to the country inexorably. When she reached Hamerton she found that everything had been arranged for her. Even her room at the small but comfortable village inn had been selected with care.

"Miss Hallam wrote," said the clerk, conducting her personally up the iron-shod staircase leading from the small lobby, "you were to have the room she always has when she comes up. She was up quite a few times this spring. You'll like it. There isn't a finer view of the valley anywhere, unless it's from the MacRoss's. I understand you're engaged to run that bookstore Miss Hallam's going to start in the old Grant place."

"I'm going to try to," Ross assented.

"Quite a venture, I call it, for this town. We're pretty up-to-date in every other way, for a small place. It's a good thing, though, if it can be made to go. I like books myself, always keep one 'round. Well, anything you want, you ring, please. I'll see to it myself you get it, if the boy's slow answering. My name's Higgins."

"Thank you, Mr. Higgins."

Well, this was the first of the procession of uninteresting country people with whom she was to be associated for four very long months! She was "engaged to run that bookstore." She was a "clerk," she supposed, in his eyes. Wasn't that what people in the country always called the salespeople in the city shops?

When she surveyed the Country Bookshop, however, letting herself in with the big key with which Mr. Higgins had been entrusted, she felt as real a stirring of interest as that with which Miss Hallam had caught her. It was a captivating place, quite as she had known it must be, since Eleanor Hallam and Patience Grant sponsored it. Nothing was lacking to give the rows of books upon the shelves the setting which should make them seem like jewels in a case. Quite as Miss Hallam had described it, it seemed, like the larger bookshop of her management in the city, the sort of room where one might receive guests and make them comfortable, rather than let them wander into a place of business. And in the very center of the floor stood a big unopened package of books. If Ross was walking into a trap, certainly the trap was baited with the bait which above all others had an irresistible attraction--an unopened package of new books! That was bound to dispel all doubts, if only for an hour.

When, five days later, Miss Hallam came up to stay through the opening of the Country Bookshop, and to start her deputy upon the writing of the column for the village weekly paper, she found Ross anxiously awaiting her.

"I feel like a mouse in a strange attic, but I've explored it as thoroughly as I can."

"You look completely at home. How beautifully you've arranged everything! And how very agreeably businesslike you are in that simple but really perfect gray and white! People will come in just to see you, quite as we expected. And having come to view will remain to buy, we also expect."

"I surely hope so. Of course I feel like a lay figure in a shop window just now, but I'll come to life, if possible, when the crowds begin to arrive--if only there *are* crowds."

"I think there will be, for our opening. Hester MacRoss wrote me she'd put through all kinds of publicity for us before she sailed. Nobody knows how to do that better than she."

"Oh, is Miss MacRoss away?"

"Yes, didn't I tell you? At the last minute she decided to go with her brother, though I believe they're to separate soon. She's going over as she often does, to study detail of foreign architecture. She's never satisfied that her job of consultant to Gorman and Graham can be properly held without constant research. Of course that's why they value her so highly. But I think she'll be back in a few weeks--I hope so, for your sake. I know she'd love putting you in the way of whatever would contribute to your good luck here."

For the moment it was almost a relief to Ross to know that Miss MacRoss was not to appear on this day, as she had expected. Since her abrupt departure from that lady's country home she had often speculated on just what terms they would be likely to meet. She had never quite ceased to be ashamed of that departure, no matter how justifiably dramatic it had seemed at the time.

"Miss MacRoss also wrote," went on Eleanor Hallam, "that Susan Sylvester, her niece, had

stirred up a lot of enthusiasm among the young set. They'll all be here to-morrow, and the tea cups will be busy. After that, having started the blaze, it's to keep it burning. Don't you think it's going to be interesting?"

"It certainly would be if you were to be here too."

"My dear," said Miss Hallam, sitting on the edge of a display table, her eyes very bright, "I would give anything on earth to change places with you, or to be here with you, and spend the entire summer. I love nothing so much as seeing people wake up to opportunity. Having the MacRosses and Sylvesters and Herbert Copelands and their friends patronize us will be a pleasure, of course. But the real fun, to me--and I mean fun in the sense of keen enjoyment and satisfaction--would be to see Charlie Higgins, the manager of the inn, come over and ask advice about buying a book on travel and adventure--and to give it to him, to the very top-notch of my ability. Charlie Higgins has longed all his life for adventure, but he will never have it except vicariously, by way of books. Then, there's Dr. Sam Reade. I wish I could be here when he comes in, to spend half an hour between cases--if he can stifle his conscience that long. Every power I might have to satisfy his hunger for science and poetry--did you know how they sometimes go together?--would be at his disposal. And all up and down the countryside live people who long to be fed, in one way or another, and have only an inkling of how a bookshop can meet such needs. I'd like to show them!"

Miss Hallam went on talking, and suddenly, as she listened, Ross acquired a new view of her job. Was she big enough to fulfill the expectations of her friend? Could she learn how? She *must* learn! There was going to be much more to the task than she had as yet dreamed, that was clear.

They spent the evening in last details of the preparation for the opening day. Before it was over, Ross felt as though wine had been poured into her veins. While Eleanor Hallam was with her, certainly there could be no let-down of interest or energy. Every prospect for the coming summer seemed enticing. No wonder this woman had made such a success of her business in the city. Her confidence was the most contagious thing Ross had ever encountered; it was a tremendous stimulus.

Before ten o'clock the next morning people had begun to appear. They came, a fluctuating current, all day. Motor cars of all descriptions, from the softly gliding monsters bringing the aristocrats of the valley, people of the fine summer places across the river, to the smaller, cheaper cars containing less pretentious members of the community; from time to time they lined the street all up and down. Ross couldn't have believed so many would have cared to come. She and Miss Hallam were hostesses indeed; they might have been giving a party in their own home.

"My dear Miss Hallam, what a *charming* place! Really, you know, it's going to be a perfect *boon* to this region, to have your bookshop here. Of course one can always send to town, but somehow one *doesn't*. And the men of the family *never* can remember to bring out books when they come, no matter how *carefully* one supplies them with lists."

"Oh, Miss Hallam! Actually, we could hardly wait for this day! You know we're quite as excited about it as though the idea had been ours. Everyone is wishing you so gloriously well!"

"And this is really the Ross Collins we read every week with *such* pleasure and amusement? My dear Miss Collins, how perfectly splendid that you're to be here all summer! I assure you I

shall come over often just to talk with you--if I may? Little Susan Sylvester simply raves about you--isn't she a dear child?"

Soft voices, gay voices, cordial voices of well-dressed women trained to show a pleasant enthusiasm over the affairs of those they liked, whether they felt it or not. Apparently most of these felt it. It was going to be convenient, on a rainy day, to be able to send over and ask Miss Collins to recommend for one's bored house guests a half dozen entertaining books just out. And among the other village places of business, in which the "summer people" used to the great marts of the city might search vainly for articles acceptable to their cultivated tastes, the bookshop stood out as a little center of unexpected sophistication. Miss Hallam and Miss Grant had knowingly equipped it with a few of their choicest pieces of antique furniture; its colorful rugs and hangings had been chosen by an artist's hand; the prints upon its walls were rare ones. The visitors from the summer places appreciated this; even those of the villagers who knew little about such matters recognized the presence of beauty and the indications of the bookshop's having been transplanted from another world than theirs, and they looked about them with eager eyes.

In the early evening Dr. Samuel Reade drew up his dusty car outside and came slowly in, pausing to study the windows before he set foot inside. At the moment no other visitor was there. Miss Hallam went to meet him.

"I was hoping the day wouldn't end, Dr. Reade, without your looking in on us to wish us luck," she said as they shook hands. "You're one of the people Patience Grant and I were thinking about when we planned this place. You know Miss Collins--she tells me she met you once when she was here."

"I know Miss Collins," said the country doctor, "as I know the Statue of Liberty--across a great distance." He shook hands with Ross also; she thought he probably shook hands with everybody; she couldn't imagine him, in response to an introduction, bowing formally with his hands at his sides. He looked, as before, like an overworked man but a sane and even humorous one. His rumpled and baggy clothes, smelling slightly of the drugs he used, hung upon him as though he had lost considerable weight since they were new. His face, it now struck her, was that of a strong man, however worn his body might be.

"I remember Dr. Reade," said Ross, smiling, while his observant eyes scanned her, "as carefully evading being pointed out as one of the high lights of the community--a much higher light, I should judge from what his friends said of him, than the Statue of Liberty could hope to be."

"She's static; he's energy personified," agreed Miss Hallam.

"I came in," said the doctor, "not to be made the subject of discussion, but to learn what you have here that's drawn the vehicles of the mighty to block the village streets. You may be sure I went around by another route and waited till the rabble had gone. Your intimation, Miss Hallam, that tea would be served to all comers very nearly kept me from coming at all. I don't have to drink it, do I?" He turned away abruptly toward the bookshelves. "I haven't got ten minutes to stay."

"Not a drop. That's right, look around our shelves and that table of the very latest things, and see what interests you. We won't even talk to you and interrupt."

"Two women, having a party, not talk?" He put on a pair of heavy horn spectacles and fell to

scanning eagerly the books Miss Hallam quickly put in his way.

"Even so, we're that tactful. How about this--and this? Miss Collins, can you put your hand on *Sir Humphrey Goddard*? Yes, thank you," as Ross took a big blue-bound book from a lower corner shelf. "Dr. Reade, just glance at this, and then I'll leave you quite alone."

The doctor, laying down reluctantly a small volume he had just picked up, gazed at the title of the larger one presented to him. His face lighted, he grasped it with a grunt of surprise, opened it, and fell to examining it. In two minutes he was submerged. Miss Hallam withdrew to the door of the shop and stepped outside, with a gesture to Ross, who followed her.

"Caught!" murmured the owner of the place exultingly. "My dear, lay every snare for him you can devise. He needs the diversion, and you need to know him without having to wait to be ill to do it. He's the very gem of the whole collection up here. He's not even what could be called a rough diamond--though he can be rough enough, if he chooses. But the facets are there; they glow in all lovely colors when the right light strikes them."

"I've been told of him," said Ross. "I really want to know him very much."

"You can do it, busy as he is. I never knew a man hungrier for knowledge or for real companionship, though he seldom has a minute to himself. He'll rush out with a guilty look when he discovers how long he's spent in there.... Oh, here come some more people! Of course he'll go now. For once I could wish they'd stay away!"

Ross wished it too. Knowing that the tired doctor was David MacRoss's best friend did indeed make her wish to know him. Seeing him about to flee at the arrival of the incoming group, some of whom were evidently ready to beset him, she slipped out upon the doorstep again. When he came by her, the big blue book under his arm, she spoke to him. Her unusual face, upturned in the ruddy light flooding the street from the setting sun, was full of attraction for him, and in spite of his haste he stopped to look at it.

"Dr. Reade, I'm so very glad you looked in, this first evening. If I thought you'd come often I'd have more courage to carry on here alone, after Miss Hallam goes. She's leaving me quite a job, don't you think?"

"Well, I should say you were equal to it. You were visiting the MacRosses when you were here before. They seemed to think the convolutions of your brain were fairly deep. It's too bad they're away this summer; they'd have been a first aid to you, if our village denseness bothers you too much. Most of us don't know one book from another, you see."

"Don't tell me that, and you carrying off one of the most learned tomes we can boast of."

He glanced at the book under his arm. "So I am, and not paying for it, either. You can't do business that way--but I haven't a cent in my pocket."

"You don't need one; according to Miss Hallam you're to be a privileged customer. As for me, who will be keeping the books--you see the MacRosses mentioned to me the convolutions of *your* brain, too. Such a patron is an asset, not a liability, isn't he?"

"It's a pity they're away," he said again, with a touch of wistfulness, Ross thought. "The town's empty without them. But they promised me plenty of letters. Doubtless you'll be hearing from them too. Suppose we pool our news of them?"

"A magnificent idea, Dr. Reade." Ross had a sudden vision of herself some day frankly telling

this man with the sharp, kind eyes that she could have no letters from David MacRoss to share with him--and why. She'd like beyond all things to find out how he would look at that problem of hers.

"It's a bargain then. I'll drop in now and again, when I oughtn't to spare the time, and see which of us has got the inside track with that pair of self-exiles from their country. Good-night, Miss Collins. I'll try not to spill any iodine on this book while I'm deciding whether to go without bread to pay for it or bring it back."

He was gone, chugging away in his half-crippled car, which was in that state because he couldn't spare the time to have its valves ground. Before she went into the shop again Ross looked after him with a lightening of her spirits. If the MacRosses and Miss Hallam felt as they did about this man, there was reason; and that reason she was already beginning to comprehend for herself. If she could make a friend of him she would undoubtedly be the richer. And perhaps--it was Eleanor Hallam's attitude again, one which hitherto hadn't often attracted Ross, who had been mostly out for herself in a work-a-day world--she could give him something he would care to have, the busy doctor who never bothered to look for consideration at all. Just to do his work and do it well, that was all he lived for. And he wouldn't live a long life; that was written all over him. She must know him while there was time.

When Miss Hallam went away next day she said to Ross: "We've made a brave start, but you'll have to look for plenty of dull days between the profitable ones. But, do you know, even though we may not be able to show much of a profit at the end of the season, it's going to be a satisfaction to us to think we've established ourselves here. The thing will grow, I'll warrant that. If we shouldn't open up again next season we'd have an imploring demand. You can't give a community books and then take them away again. So be sure I'm not going to worry over your balance sheets, no matter how shrewd a business woman I'm supposed to be. The city shop is a place where I must make money; the country one is a play-thing to keep me from growing hard."

That last phrase stayed in Ross's memory. Had she herself been in imminent danger of growing hard, and was her coming up here to be a means of keeping from it? Anyhow, as she saw Miss Hallam disappear with a wave of her hand from the motor bus which was taking her to the train, Ross was somehow strangely reconciled to the thought that she couldn't go herself.

XXXIII

LETTERS ... *Now letters look innocent enough, but there's seldom any knowing what they contain--if addressed to other people. Once in a while somebody reads one aloud, which may or may not help things.*

It was a busy summer; Ross had had no idea how busy one could be in the country. Finding material for her column in the village weekly paper took more time than she would have imagined. To secure it she must neglect no chance to make an acquaintance, hear of an event, or skillfully interview a customer without seeming to do so. Susan Sylvester proved an invaluable aid in this matter, with her frequent driftings into the shop, full of life and gay gossip of what went on up and down the valley.

Susan came in one day with a letter in her hand, one with a British stamp upon it. Searching for a book, she laid down the letter, with a leather purse and a small parcel, upon the desk where Ross sat making out an order.

"Don't mind me," Susan urged. "I just want to poke around a little."

So Ross went on working, with the letter almost under her eyes. Susan's name upon it was unmistakably in David's handwriting; the letter was a fat one. Regarding it, Ross found it impossible to carry on her lists with any degree of concentration. Her startled gaze kept jumping back to that address. Lucky Susan, to have had a letter from David, and such a thick letter. The sight of it made Ross envious, unbelievably envious. She would have given worlds to know its contents. She herself might have been receiving thick letters from David, if she hadn't been actually abroad with him--as she presumably would have been if she had married him. She knew well enough that if they had married at all they would have done it without delay.

Susan stayed a long time, talking, after she had found her book. During all that time the letter lay in Ross's sight. When Susan made ready to go she picked it up and went on talking with it against her cheek, sometimes against her lips, as though she were consciously or unconsciously caressing it, gloating over it. She couldn't possibly know what she was doing to her charming friend--she considered Ross a friend now, and couldn't long keep away from her. But if she had known, and had wished in some delicate way to torture her, she could hardly have devised a more perfect means. Ross was thankful when Susan and her letter from David finally disappeared.

Dr. Sam Reade managed to drop in almost as often as Susan. Never for a long stay, but always as though he couldn't get by the place without at least a hail. Ross found him a delight.

"If you can stand the smell of me--I'm just out of the ether," he greeted her one day.

"I should think a surgeon would feel that way."

"He does. He has to come to, himself; it's a sort of grim intoxication."

He was smoking furiously on an old briarwood pipe; his teeth clamped on its stem between sentences.

"Was it a bad one, this morning?" Ross had learned to enjoy his professional side; she drew out its expression when she could, which was only now and then. He preferred to talk of books,

because, she knew, he was starved for them.

"Stiff case of blood poisoning, developed almost over night from the smallest possible cause, so far as the man himself could understand. Had to get in in a hurry or the patient would have got out quicker yet. May still.... What's this?..." He seized upon a book. "A novel by a doctor, eh? What's *he* doing, writing novels? He's had no mental breakdown, though this looks like it."

Ross laughed. "That will sell by the hundred thousands, you know."

Samuel Reade scowled. "I've always thought having a handsome waiting-room entirely filled up with neurasthenic women--broadcloth-lined cars standing in a row outside--would undermine any man's common sense. I'll bet his book is a plain case of contagious hysteria. He's caught it from the women."

"I should think he would more likely have written a book about hard-boiled men, just as a relief from the soft-brained women."

"Maybe he has. We shouldn't condemn him unheard." He was glancing along the pages. "I don't see any cowboys here. *Lady Angela*, *Maurice Fitz-Maurice*, *Sir Roger Throckmorton*. Not a *Pat* nor a *Mike*."

"Very likely it's satire. It's just come in; I haven't had time to look at it."

He laid down the book. "I happen to know the man. Can't feel he'd be risking his practice satirizing women, under his own name. Let's have a good mystery story; that's the thing to get a hard-worked devil out of the doldrums. You see, this fellow I've knifed this morning mayn't pull through. I may want something to bury myself in to-night--after I've buried him, if I have to."

She understood his gruffness; he was worried as well as weary. She did her best to divert him.

Suddenly he looked up from a big book of adventure in Africa, copiously illustrated with photographs, to say: "Funny thing. I'm hankering for the sight of Dave MacRoss to-day more than anything on earth. If he was here right now I'd pack him into my old car and keep him with me all day. He'd go, too, if he knew I wanted him, no matter how deep he'd been in his own work. I tell you, he's the best stuff in the world. Do you happen to know it?"

His shrewd glance seemed to search hers. She wondered if anything were hidden from him.

"One of those perfect men?" she asked, with as great a degree of skepticism in her tone as she could manage.

"Not *much*. Don't you think it. Who wants a perfect man? David's a man's man, and no man's man's perfect--couldn't be endured. No, Davy has his faults--sins, maybe, like the rest of us. But he's a sort of younger brother to me. The old town's lonesome without him."

"He's a dictator, isn't he?"

"Well--" the doctor considered it--"I guess most men who amount to anything are, aren't they? They've either got to be boss of the works, or take orders. I don't like to see a man taking orders when he ought to be giving 'em, do you?"

"Somebody has to take them."

"Sure enough. But by the time a man's thirty-five, if he isn't giving orders to somebody he's

going to be taking 'em all his life. I don't say he has to be head of a big corporation by that time, but he's got to be head of something, if it's only his own production, like Davy."

"Hasn't Mr. MacRoss gone abroad under somebody's orders? I mean to write something somebody wants to publish?"

"Not much," declared Dr. Reade again, with a glint in his eye. "He's gone to get his own ideas for his own work. Nobody sent him. I doubt if anybody *could* send him."

"You confirm," said Ross, with an odd glance, "my impression of him as a dictator."

"Glad to confirm it. I'm a dictator myself, in my own little field."

"I gather that you think men dictators are all right, but you wouldn't like a woman to be one."

"The only difference I'd speak for between men and women dictators," said Dr. Reade, with now a twinkle in those sharply kind eyes of his, "is that the women should have artfulness enough to cover up their gift for managing things. In other words, let the men wear the big boots and the women the little slippers. If the going's too hard for slippers the women can just spread their wings and fly, and save the wear and tear. They'll get where they want to, just the same, but they'll look pretty while they're sailing through the air, and the men, tramping along in their cowhides, will look up to 'em and admire 'em. But despising a man because he puts on the boots is no good, to my mind. And I have a notion--if you'll excuse the bluntness--that you're afraid of David's boots, Miss Collins. Honestly, now, would you want him to wear slippers?"

She gazed at him, amazed. "Well, Dr. Reade--why should you think----"

"I know. I've no business to say a word. I know that. But I'm just old Sam Reade, who everybody understands is half a fool and half a knave, and they trust him in spite of it. David himself trusts me. I--" he took a letter from his pocket--"I believe I'm going to read you a few words from his last letter, and then I won't say anything more, because I don't know a thing about his affairs or yours--and don't need to. I'll read this and then get out of this place in a hurry, and you needn't speak to me again if you don't want to. But it's sort of borne in on me that you ought to hear this he says."

Ross waited, with a strange mingling of fear and anticipation. She was praying ardently that nobody disturb them until she had heard what was in that letter. It was a rainy afternoon, and there had been no customers for an hour. But it was on rainy afternoons that the people across the valley sent in lists in a hurry for packages of books with which to fill idle hours, and it took time to assemble the orders. She glanced down the road. There was not a soul in sight. Rain, rain, persist--pour down!

"He's in London," explained Dr. Reade. "He's been busy up to his neck. Took a lot of letters of introduction; been invited around quite a good deal. But the evening he writes, he's lonesome, I'd say--just plain lonesome, the way you can get in a strange city, in spite of all the introductions in the world. This is what he says:

> "*Sam, I'd like to be with you to-night. It's chilly in London just now. I'd like to be with you sitting in front of a fire--a real fire, not a pint-pot with a few half-dead coals in it and nobody answering the ring for more till the coals are black. I've a quite new reason for wanting to be with you. I've joined your ranks, Sam. I can't have the thing I want most. And I never wanted it as I do to-night. The reason I can't have it is*

the reason you couldn't have what you wanted--I can't get over being a male. Neither could you. There seems nothing to be done about it. We can't dissemble and pretend to be soft when we're hard. It's probably all right, and there's no temptation to promise what can't be fulfilled without lying. But somehow I'd give all London, if I owned it to-night, to be offering you tobacco out of my pouch, for your old smelly pipe, and hear you say: 'Well, Davy, after all a fellow can live quite a life of his own without marrying--don't you think he can't.' At present, you see, Sam, I'm trying to get used to that idea. Most of the time I can do it. To-night----But what the devil do I care? The thing of it is, Sam, that I do!

"Then," said Dr. Reade, folding up the letter and putting it carefully away in his breast pocket, "he goes on about other things, as if he'd never said a word like this I've read you. In a few minutes he was going to put on a top-hat--that's what he calls it; I'd say a stove-pipe--Davy hates 'em, anyhow--and take an American woman to a play. Maybe she'd get his mind off this other thing. We hope so, eh?"

Without looking at Ross, he put on his own battered felt--he hadn't found time to get himself a straw, though it was June and the warm rain made the air sultry--and went out, abstractedly carrying the book of adventure under his arm. He owed the bookshop, by now, rather a long bill for books conveyed away after this absent-minded fashion, but Ross didn't care if he never remembered to pay it, as very likely, she thought, he wouldn't.

As he went, she watched him. Strangely, she found it impossible to resent anything he did or said. How in the world did he know? Or was it only a shrewd guess? Or did the letter really mean Susan Sylvester, who had that very day brought in a second letter addressed in David's handwriting, and had even quoted a line from it--an amusing line, about the difference he had observed between the clothes of the English and the American girl.

It seems to be the difference between a sweet and a salad [said David]. *I prefer the salad--with a nippy dressing.*

Susan had enjoyed that line. Her own dressing was certainly of the nippy sort. She was, Ross recognized, quite the most engaging youngster in the region, which abounded during the summer with engaging youngsters.

David easily might have meant Susan, in that paragraph to Dr. Reade. Ross knew well enough that he did not. Then he did still care. If he did ...

But only yesterday she had made up her mind that if by any chance he should come back to her, and she should agree to marry him, it could only be on condition that he--well, perhaps not exactly take off his boots, but allow her to keep hers on. Not cowhide, nor buckskin, but beautiful, handmade, fine leather boots, in which she could walk, tramp, march steadily toward the object of her greatest desire--fame.

Two pairs of masterful boots in the family. Could they march side by side, and in step?

XXXIV

Tragedy is always lurking somewhere. As much of it--in proportion--in the country as in the town.

Tom Thayer astonished Ross one day by walking into the bookshop. She might have known he wouldn't let the summer go by without satisfying his curiosity concerning her, but his actual arrival seemed an unexpected event. Nobody was in the shop at the time--early afternoon. He didn't tell her that for an hour he had been keeping watch from the porch of the inn until he had made sure of the moment, at least.

"This a place where one can buy books?" he inquired, walking in.

"Why, Tom!--How do you do! I'm charmed to see you.... And doesn't this look like a place where one can buy books?"

"Quite a bit. But as I found the post office in a grocery store, and the drug store selling hardware, I wasn't sure whether your window mightn't be a mere blind for the village beauty parlor--if the village boasts such a thing."

"Look about you and be convinced."

"I'd rather look at you." He sat down comfortably near her own official chair. "Getting stale on this job, just as I thought, eh? You look ten years older. Too bad, but I warned you you couldn't stick it."

She laughed. "You can't put that across, Tom. I've gained five and a half welcome and needed pounds, and my mirror isn't one of the lying ones. I was thin and tired; now I'm rested."

"You look like a country wench, then, now that I see you more clearly. That's equally undesirable."

"What a flatterer! Now let me try my hand at description. You look as though you'd been drawn through one of those laundry mangles, steam-hot. Why don't you take a vacation?"

"I'm taking one--to-day. Close up shop, will you, and take it with me?"

"I'm sorry--I wish I could. This is Saturday--a day we must be open, if ever."

He glanced out of the door. "Yes, I saw five battered cars and two wheelbarrows, as I came up the street. No doubt you'll have a couple of customers, maybe three, during the afternoon. Can't see how you live in such a rush."

He spent the afternoon lounging about the shop, talking his head off in the intervals between custom, which was now and then undeniably brisk; watching hawk-eyed when Ross was busy. He told her everything he knew which might make her long to be back in town--and some things he didn't know but plausibly invented for her tantalization. She enjoyed it all, and more than once he indubitably scored, though she wouldn't admit it. When he came to go, after a hurried dinner which they shared at the inn, he said after his own captious fashion:

"Ross, my dear, justice, which is my salient characteristic--yes, it is!--forces me to admit that the change is agreeing with you--physically. I'm not so sure your mind isn't deteriorating. That's the truth, girl. You haven't once come back at me with the old rapier-like stab; you've just handed it

back politely, with a smile. Very agreeable, no doubt, this new comparatively reposeful manner of yours. But I miss the quick fire, the flash of lightning, the high note. I never did care for the country drawl! You're acquiring it. And that country drawl's bound to make havoc with your work, you know. The *Lady of Leisure's* going flat--I warn you of that. No snap--no sparkle. It's that five pounds of flesh, which might as well be lead, to weight her down."

"That's really odd, Tom. Mr. Howell wrote me quite otherwise when I sent in the very last installment."

"You've got Howell hypnotized. Don't trust his judgment. I'm your real friend, you know--I tell you the truth. I don't suppose you'll heed it. All I can do is to wait for fall and your coming back to town, where you belong.... You're certainly coming back?" he questioned, with a sudden note of suspicion in his voice. "This fool stunt hasn't got hold of you--don't tell me that!"

"I'm only engaged till the first of October, Tom. Don't let your imagination get the better of you."

"It's your imagination I'm afraid of, you know," he growled as he wrung her hand and nodded at the driver of the station bus he was keeping waiting. He gave her a parting shot before he ran down the steps and swung on board. "If you once get the hayseed in your hair you're done for. Remember that. Brains can't grow under *that* handicap!"

Then one day, not long after Tom's visit, and just as she arrived at the inn for the hearty country supper for which she had acquired in these days a real appetite, she was hurriedly summoned to the telephone.

"New York's calling you, Miss Collins. Good thing you happened to be there. Operator said we must find you, wherever you were."

"Thank you, Mr. Higgins."

She went into the booth off the inn's small lobby and closed the door. Miss Hallam now and again called her up at this hour, but the message was never urgent. A queer apprehension seized her as she waited for the final connection. Then came Tom Thayer's voice; she recognized it far away, before it spoke to her; it was tense, impatient:

"Put the damned thing through, can't you, Central?"

"Just a minute."

Ross's heart began suddenly to pound. What news had he for her, that he was in such a hurry? Was Ethel dangerously ill? Had something happened to Ken Cheney? Was Jimmy French dead? A vivid memory of the time when Tom had called her to tell her of the accident to Nick Gilbert flashed across her mind; she saw again Madge Winthrop's face at the hospital.

"Come on--come *on*!" roared Tom's distant voice.

"Go ahead."

"Miss Collins?"

"Yes, Tom--what is it?" Somehow she knew he had bad news for her, as before. Only this time it was to affect herself--deeply, terribly. Her hand shook as she held the receiver, and she braced herself against the back of the booth. This having to receive a stabbing message standing up in

a closed telephone booth ...

His voice was close in her ear now.

"Ross, do you know where Miss Hester MacRoss can be found?"

"No, Tom. She's still abroad, isn't she?"

"Came back a fortnight ago--has been up in Montreal. Her office wired her hotel there and got word she checked out yesterday. Hamerton says she's not there. Thought you might know."

"No.... What's happened, Tom?"

She closed her eyes and bit her lips as she listened for the answer. It delayed a second or two. He was trying to be merciful--and when Tom Thayer tried to be merciful it meant the worst.

"Well, it's not absolutely final. The A. P. hasn't confirmed it yet. But the report keeps coming in that the *Capadocia* of the Cunard Line hit an iceberg in just about the spot where the *Titanic* was sunk, and went down with all on board. We've had it by wireless over and over. The fact that the *Capadocia* can't be located--hasn't been since midnight last night--makes it pretty sure. I hate to hit you with this, Ross--God knows I do.... I suppose you know who's on board."

She couldn't speak. She stood with her head tipped back against the wall of the booth, trying to get hold of herself.

"Ross! I'll call you again. *Ross!*--are you there?"

"Yes."

"He's nothing to you, Ross. He couldn't have been. You couldn't have hit it off. Don't take it hard--if it's true. I'm afraid it is, or I wouldn't have called you. Dwight of the A. P.'s a special friend of Miss MacRoss--that's why he's trying to get hold of her. I'll call you again, when the news is confirmed. Meanwhile, I thought you might know if she was there."

"I'll find out."

"That's the girl. Hold steady--and don't forget I'm your friend and always will be. I'm going to ring off now. I'll call again."

She was thankful when the rapid, nervous tones stopped coming. She waited several minutes before she came out of the booth. When she did she had to answer Higgins on her way to the outer door.

"Hope it's no bad news, Miss Collins."

"An unconfirmed report from an Associated Press man. Not for publication just now."

Higgins looked after her apprehensively. There had been no color in her face, but the technical reply she had given him stopped him from questioning her further. He didn't even venture to remind her that the dining-room doors had just been opened.

She never knew how far she walked. She had had no supper--couldn't have touched it. She had struck away from the inn by a back path, a cross cut to a side road. She had walked on blindly, fighting to hold on to her self-control.

It was after an hour or more that she was passing a little country church with its door wide open. City churches kept open doors, she knew; she had not, during the summer, seen a

country church inviting passers-by to enter, except on Sundays. There was no one about; no sound of a service within reached her listening ears. A memory flashed across her mind of the famous city church where David had taken her to rest, on that never-to-be-forgotten day when they had walked the four miles in the rain, for long periods unconscious of anything except each other. This little church was not much like that one, but, like that, its door was open.

Almost without her own volition she turned and went up the grassy path to that door, stole through it, looked into the quiet, bare interior. No one was there. She went inside, sat down in one of the straight-backed pews, put her arms down upon the rail in front of her, and her head upon her arms. At least it was a place to rest, even though no peace were to be found there.

If David should be gone out of her life--if she were never to see him again--how was she to bear it? And then, suddenly, she was beseeching Someone. In spite of her lifelong conviction of the futility of it, she was voicing a prayer with that human impulse, which can never be obliterated, to cry out to a Higher Power than the helpless, wretched being who when there is nothing left to do can only fall, even unbelieving, upon his knees.

"O God--O God--don't let it be true! Don't *let* it!"

But it *was* true! She knew it.

Another memory besieged her. In David's book, *Country Neighbors*, *Caleb Cox*, returning with *Hiram*, the farmer, from the burial of a friend, had spoken of these things. *Hiram* had not been able to satisfy *Caleb's* skillful, skeptical questionings, but speaking of the man gone to another world, *Hiram* had said:

> "D'you know, Caleb, that man we buried to-day--he believed in God. Maybe where he is now--wherever that is--he's kind of glad he *did* believe in Him, *before God had to prove it to him*. It must have made it more like gettin' home."

The words, she knew, had expressed David's creed. They would henceforth, in that book he had written, glow for Ross Collins in letters of fire, imperishable.

XXXV

The country doctor speaks his mind, over the long-distance telephone. It's a wonder he isn't heard a hundred miles away without any connection by wire whatever.

When she came out dusk was slowly descending, casting its dimming veil over the landscape and the road. There was nothing for it but to turn back toward the village. She couldn't escape life by tramping a country road. Whatever life held for her had to be faced. Ross was no coward. She would face it. But she had no hope that ever again she would find what she had found in this man whose body must now be lying at the bottom of the sea.

Stumbling with weariness, aware by the distance of the faint glow which showed where the village lay, miles ahead, that it was going to take all she had of physical endurance to reach it, she was grimly forcing herself to a slow, steady pace when a noisy motor car came rattling up behind her and drew to a standstill.

"Like a lift back to town, ma'am?" asked a gruffly kind voice.

She turned, with the sense of having been picked up from an open boat far out from land. She came up to the car.

"Oh, Dr. Reade--if you will."

He took her in. "Miss Collins? What's the matter? Sick? Faint? Here--I'll give you something out of my case."

"No, I'm all right. Just----"

"Put your head back. Rest, if you can. I'll have you at the inn in a jiffy--it's only six miles."

She had never walked six consecutive miles in her life before.

"Dr. Reade, they think--the *Capadocia's* sunk."

"The *Capadocia*?... The ship Davy----No!... My God, no!"

"The report hasn't been confirmed--hadn't, when I left the inn. But Tom Thayer, a newspaper man I know, was sure it was true. He was going to call again.... I ought to be there. I didn't realize how far I'd gone."

If the rattling car had ever covered the miles like a jarring army truck rushed to the front, and acquiring wings from necessity, it did it now. Dr. Reade had said only one thing:

"It mayn't be true."

She knew it must be true. The thing had happened to Madge Winthrop, now it had happened to Ross Collins. It was happening every day to somebody--somebody who hadn't known a last chance when she saw it--hadn't recognized a last farewell when it was spoken.

They reached the inn, bright with lights. Reade and Ross went in together. Higgins came forward, speaking low because there were others in the lobby.

"Miss Collins, New York's been trying to get you again. You're to call"--the man had memorized it in his friendly anxiety, though he had no notion what was wrong--"Murray Hill 7969."

The doctor went with her to the booth. "Let me get it," he offered.

"No. I can do it quicker. I'm more used----"

"You're not more used. Stay around the corner there till I call you. You're all in."

She waited in the unlighted corner till she heard the ring, then she crowded herself into the booth. The two stayed there, jammed in together, until the signal came. Then the doctor gave the receiver into Ross's hand, and put one arm around her. An interminable final delay. Then, in sharp, excited tones:

"Ross! Where the devil have you been? See here, I'm damnably sorry I gave you that shock. We've got word the *Capadocia's* all right. It was an Italian tramp--the *Caprichi*. The code words were mixed. And we had a call from Miss MacRoss--and got her back the good news.... I *am* sorry, Ross! Those mistakes will happen, you know."

Samuel Reade, still with his arm around Ross's shoulders, took the receiver away from her by force. His head close to Ross's, he had heard every word.

"Whoever you are," he roared into the transmitter, "let me tell you one thing. The next time you have bad news for anybody be dead sure it's true. And don't fire it over the telephone at the one it's for. You'll kill somebody some day with that trick. For God's sake call *some other person* to take your message first, do you hear?"

She lay on her bed, for hours afterward, just breathing deeply and staring out of her window at the starlit sky. It was as though she had come out of ether--out of a fearful dream. "It isn't true--oh, it isn't true!" she whispered to herself, every so often. "*It isn't true!*"

XXXVI

DAVID'S *affairs exclusively. He has never heard of the Country Bookshop, therefore he hasn't been bothered with thoughts about it.*

David MacRoss had sailed for England a week after the disturbing little episode in which Susan Sylvester figured with so effective a touch of drama. He had not seen her again before he left. She had gone away to a house party on the day following her surprising act at her own door. Before she returned he was off, two days sooner than he had meant to go, because he learned that she was coming back two days earlier than she had planned. He sent her a parting note.

It was extremely matter-of-fact, that note. It mentioned their having had a jolly day together, and expressed the wish that they might sometime have another even jollier. It told her of the work he intended to do abroad, and the hope that she would write to him now and then, and tell him what she was doing. It made no allusion to that touch of drama, except in certain oracular advice given at the close.

> *Keep your head, Sue* [he cautioned her]. *It's a delightful little head, and it's going to be a wise one. A lot of thinking is going on inside of it. I'm convinced of that. All it needs is to be firmly fastened on the shoulders beneath it, so it won't come loose in a moment of impulse and roll away under the table. If an old fellow like me feels his head wobble now and then, it's a wonder how a girl like you retains any judgment at all. But you will, Sue--and I will. There's nothing like keeping one's judgment, eh? It's so darned useful in a crisis!*

She didn't answer this for a long time. Then finally she sent him a gay letter, in the old tone of natural friendliness to which he was accustomed from her. He replied in the same fashion, and they exchanged occasional letters throughout the summer, as they had done during her year in France.

Then, walking down Piccadilly one day, toward the end of his stay abroad, David opened a letter from Susan. After the first three lines he stepped aside into a narrow street in which he could run it through without jostling elbows with the bank holiday crowd.

> DAVY--*dear!*
>
> *I wonder if you will mind awfully! You went off so soon after that last evening we had together, you can't know all that's been leading up to what's happened now. And these carefully impersonal letters we've both been writing haven't said much really, have they?*
>
> *I haven't come to any real decision. How could I, when--to be as shamelessly outspoken as I was that May evening--I've been just trying to grow up to you. You're still all you've ever been to me, and more--oh, much more. I've merely followed your lead, this summer, and said no more about that, since you seemed so scary! Yes, you did, Davy!*
>
> *You see, DeLancy Cunningham has just been pursuing me. He's a dear, of course, and I like him tremendously. Mother does too. And there's heaps of money, and*

position, and all that. Yet I'm truly not sordid, Davy--those things don't come first. But I just have to confess he's taken me off my feet. Yet, I can't forget you ...

The letter went on, through breathless details of the days Susan and DeLancy had spent together. Mrs. Sylvester, though she wouldn't try to influence her daughter (oh, wouldn't she, though! thought David), did think it an extremely desirable match. And Susan didn't know what to do. Wouldn't David please tell her what he thought about it? And by return mail, please--though a cable would be better. *Would* he--please?

He did. He sent her a cable, going out of his course to reach the telegraph office, though he was already late for an appointment.

Uncle David advises giving youth its way. Love and luck.

Then he went on to the place where he was overdue, and where the prettiest American girl then in London awaited him. He was as grimly unhappy as he had ever been in his life.

Yet, such is man, he was not unaware, after the first fifteen minutes in her society, that she undoubtedly *was* probably the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and one of the most entertaining. Why expect him to be either blind or deaf? He was neither. But his reluctant enjoyment of that particular evening changed nothing of his basic dissatisfaction with one whole side of his existence.

During all that summer abroad it may seem an incredible fact that David had received no word of the opening of the Country Bookshop in his home town of Hamerton. But so it turned out. Dr. Sam Reade hadn't mentioned it for the reason that he had written his friend David but twice during the entire period of his absence, and those brief communications had been upon more important matters. David hadn't in the least expected to hear from him at all. Reade detested writing letters except when he was feeling fresh and rested on a holiday. And he hadn't been on a holiday of even the shortest for at least two years, and had spent that one at the bedside of a perfect stranger whom misfortune had fairly hurled at his head, so to speak. Therefore he had written David but those two times, and at neither of those times had he been thinking of the bookshop or of its manager. He had scrawled a few lines in regard to patients of his in whom he knew David was particularly interested. One had died, the other had recovered against all odds. He felt David should be informed of both these facts. David had continued, however, to send his best friend almost fortnightly accounts of his own travels, purely because he knew how much pleasure they would give the overworked doctor.

As for Susan Sylvester, she had deliberately withheld the news from David, because of a touch of jealousy she had acquired, upon what grounds she didn't exactly know. It was after David had gone abroad that Molly Marvin had given her a bit of information which roused her suspicion that David hadn't been frank with her when Ross Collins's name had been mentioned. Molly Marvin's father had been the MacRoss's farm superintendent; Molly and Susan had played together all through their childhood whenever Susan came to spend any time with Aunt Hester. In these later days they saw little of each other, belonging to worlds as different as the poles; but their friendly relations persisted. Molly, eager to interest Susan after her return from her year in France, recounted all the village news that she could muster, and as one particularly interesting item she described the opening of the Community House in January, and the

appearance of David's guest. Susan had eagerly questioned and had gained the impression that more had been happening to her beloved David than met the eye.

"Why should I write him about her?" she said to herself. "Since he didn't tell me he knew her, why should I take it for granted he'd care to hear about her? If she's so fascinating to me, maybe she is to him. Very likely they're writing to each other. Anyhow, there's no reason why I should paint her portrait in letters for him to gloat over. I'll not do it, Davy." And she didn't.

Miss Hester MacRoss had learned through one letter from Miss Eleanor Hallam of the change in the managership of the projected bookshop, but the information had reached her long after she had separated from David on their arrival at Liverpool. He had stayed in England, where his work was to be done, she had crossed almost immediately to the continent, to pursue her own research. When she heard the surprising news of Ross's settlement in Hamerton for the summer she had debated with herself as to whether to pass on the item to her brother in her next letter. For reasons quite other than Susan's, she decided to leave him in ignorance. He would be returning, she knew, before Ross's term of service should end. If anything were to come of their meeting again, it could happen then. Her brother meant, she knew, to consecrate his time devotedly to his self-set task; it would be better not to divert him from it by news the import of which he might immediately be driven to go about discovering. Miss Hester couldn't help feeling that it was best to let well enough alone, in David's case.

So it came about that David had sailed for home in late August, in complete ignorance of the existence of the bookshop and of Ross's incumbency. The voyage back had been a rough one. Though he himself had kept about the ship, the most interesting of his fellow travelers had been ill nearly all the way across. Upon arriving in New York he had spent several difficult days with an editor, going over a mass of facts and statistics which he had assembled and put in order--material for a series of articles he wanted to do on labor conditions in England, afterward probably to be made into a book. Curtin had refused to see eye to eye with him in regard to the use of certain portions of this material, and their discussions had been more or less irritating to both. How should Curtin, David asked himself, experienced though the editor was, decide more wisely than he what was authentic, what was discreet, and what had better be held back? Hadn't David worked like blazes for three full months to make sure of his ground, and hadn't his English informants and advisers, men of high reputation, approved his intentions, as set frankly before them? Hadn't he, David MacRoss, a reputation for good sense, balance, and even for conservatism in the use of indisputable facts which once disseminated might stir up trouble?

Threshing these things over in his mind all the way up from New York in a stifling hot train, he decided that the matter with both Curtin and himself had been that neither was in the mood to make concessions. Curtin had been deprived of his vacation by various annoying circumstances. He was worn out; his physician had ordered him away for a fortnight's badly needed rest. All through the last week the weather had been insufferable; the two men had sat mopping their brows as they held their discussions. David had finally realized that the thing for him to do was to go along up to Hamerton, take two or three days in which to relax, and then tackle afresh the job of putting his stuff into a carefully revised shape which should convince his seemingly obstinate and unreasonable editor that he was dead wrong in taking the position he had. Curtin himself would presumably be in a more rational frame of mind when he returned; the weather would be cooler. And David could be much more convincing, he knew, upon his typewriter than he could in Curtin's stuffy office. Cold print was a safer medium for expressing

himself logically and persuasively than hot talk, no doubt of it. For hot talk was Curtin's line--he could out-talk any writer alive. Whereas David, exasperated by seeing another man lose his temper, would merely turn cold and hard and uncompromising, and then there was the devil to pay!

He reached Hamerton in the late afternoon, tired, sticky with heat, and decidedly depressed. It was still heavily sultry in Connecticut, but when he arrived at the house he found its interior darkened from the sun, cool and comfortable. The wide, quiet spaces were grateful to his jaded senses. Hester was still away, and there was nobody to expect him to talk, when he didn't want to talk. A luxurious deep bath, a prickingly cold spray, the donning of fresh, light-weight clothing, and David began to feel himself physically a new man. He had a corking good dinner, Helma's best effort for a returned and adored master. Afterward he strolled slowly about the place outside, smoking his pipe; then sat down on the porch in the deepening dusk, to watch the lights spring out in the houses across the valley.

He bethought him suddenly of an important letter he should write, went in and dashed it off, decided that he might as well stretch his legs by taking it to the post office himself. It was exactly nine o'clock when he set off, walking down the still country road toward the little village. How still indeed it was! And how good to be at home! The air had grown appreciably cooler and less humid; a light breeze stirred. Drinking in its refreshment, along with a sense of escape, if only for a time, from the harassing problems of his work, he felt much of his recent tenseness of nerves leaving him. He would stop thinking about those problems entirely. Why mull over difficulties on a night such as this? The stars were out; there was a light fragrance in the air from some unrecognized wildflower. Looking across the valley at the distant lights twinkling in a long row where many fine country residences stood--among them that of the Sylvesters--he wondered what Susan was doing with herself and when he should see her. Since sending her the cable he had been too busy to think much about her. He began to draw deep breaths of relief from that abominable tension which extended periods of work in any city was bound to give him, countryman that he was. Let the other fellows stay keyed up, month in and month out, if they must; he'd rather work more slowly, and, as far as his own efforts were concerned, more surely.

He covered the half mile to the center of the village in a state of constantly increasing satisfaction, and was amused at himself for being such a boy about getting back. He mailed his letter, received several others, shook hands with half a dozen friendly villagers who told him he had been a long time away and they were glad to see him back, and walked on. He would take a slightly different route for his return, for there was an appearance of brightness and color at a curve in the winding village street which was new and caused him, in his mood of enjoyment of the night and the familiar scenes, to want to discover what the change might be.

XXXVII

THE *bookshop does a rushing business, as might be expected on Saturday evening. But not many books are bought.*

It was the little old Grant place which stood in that curve, facing down the street, and it had not for years shown from its front more than a dimly lighted window. But it had more than a dimly lighted window now; it had a row of them. Or rather, it was a wide and deep bow window, as he discovered upon drawing nearer. A shop window it had become, evidently, though cunningly built in, in keeping with the character of the house, and thus retaining an old-time look because of its small panes. Behind it showed a display of books in bright jackets, posters in merry colors hung about. Over the doorway hung a sign: The Country Bookshop.

"Well, well," mused David. "Something's been happening in my absence. A revolution, at the least. And they haven't made it 'Ye Olde Country Bookshoppe.' If they had I shouldn't go in--or not till forced to. As it is, I believe I must take a look."

A woman emerged from the place; another. It must be getting near closing time, up here in quiet Hamerton. The two persons were unknown to him; they didn't look like villagers. Both carried packages, and both seemed to be in a highly contented state of mind.

"The most enchanting place!" floated softly toward his ears as they passed him.

"Yes, and *she*--isn't she the perfect person to keep it? She is so very unusual. I really think she----"

They were out of earshot. His curiosity now considerably piqued, David went up the two iron-railinged steps to the door and looked in. A small girl with a red head had her back toward him; she was putting some books upon the shelves. She was dressed in an extremely smart, plain gray frock with sheer white collar and cuffs, and was wearing probably the prettiest gray stockings and diminutive slippers to be found in the county. She looked, from David's point of view, about sixteen.

The topmost shelf, where she wished to place her last book, was too high for her. Standing upon her tip-toes in her effort to reach the spot, she dropped the book. David, promptly going forward to put his length of arm at her service, caused her to turn at the sound of his step. The two confronted one another, and a strange light leaped into the eyes of both. The dropped book, instantly forgotten, lay neglected upon the floor--which was a shame, because it was one of those books which it costs a considerable sum to buy.

Meanwhile, the two were shaking hands, quite naturally. They gazed at each other in silence for a moment, then Ross broke it with light, cool speech, just as though she weren't hard put to it to keep her poise.

"Yes, isn't it amazing? I can hardly believe it myself. But here I am, keeping a country bookshop for the summer, and adoring the job. I've never had such a good time in my life."

"Here in Hamerton!"

"Certainly, here in Hamerton. That's because Miss Eleanor Hallam sent me here, not because I picked out the location. But it's such a little, *nice* village."

"Is it, really? And you're not suffocating nor stagnating nor strangling in it?"

"Do I look as though I were?"

"Hardly. You look very thoroughly alive, with a perfect respiration. How long have you been here?"

"Nearly as long as you've been away. I began to think you and Miss Hester were never coming back. You see, I'd counted on you as one of my best patrons. Knowing how lavishly you buy books, I hoped you'd give me all your orders. We have astonishingly quick service. I telephone in an order, and it's out either by the next train or--if the customer is very choosey and difficult--somebody runs up by motor and brings it. Miss Hallam likes nothing better than to make a dash up here on such an excuse."

"I see. And I can give you an order on the spot. I meant to pick up the book as I came through New York, but forgot it. I shall need it at once."

"I'm delighted to get it for you. If it's in print we'll have it by noon to-morrow. Will that do?" She produced a tablet and pencil and stood waiting, the picture of efficiency--and of something decidedly more disturbing.

"Excellently." He gave the book's title gravely.

She halted, her pencil poised. "Are you sure that's out?"

"If it's not I shall expect you to get it for me, just the same, and demonstrate that almost miraculously speedy service you boast of."

She glanced at a calendar on her desk and nodded. "Very well. Your word is law." And wrote down the title, adding a memorandum.

He took a turn up and down the shop, glancing or appearing to glance over the well-filled shelves, the pleasantly appealing tables displaying the latest publications, the racks of magazines. Her eyes followed him. He looked the country gentleman, it was true--with urban influence apparent in every line. Had he not just returned from London? David MacRoss--Caleb Cox. Which was he?

He wheeled about and came up to her as she stood beside the desk. He had made up his mind.

"Ross, why did you come up here?"

"To keep the Country Bookshop, because the Mrs. Arthur that Miss Hallam had engaged suddenly got married and defaulted. And to get some new experience."

"Were those the only reasons?"

His eyes searched hers.

"No. I--somehow or other--that first visit in your home must have inoculated me with the germ of country life, though I didn't know it. In spite of myself I kept thinking about ever so many things I'd seen up here. I'm part and parcel of the city, and yet--really--that visit showed me what I didn't know existed outside of Manhattan--and it certainly doesn't exist there. I'd been stupid and ineffective all the spring. For the first time in my life I thought I'd like to see where the lilacs they show in the florists' windows live when they're at home. So when Miss Hallam, whom I like and admire immensely, made me this offer for the summer, I thought I'd be a fool not

to accept."

"These are all good reasons. There wasn't any other?"

She looked him straight in his questioning eyes. "Yes. There was you, if you want to make me own it."

"I do. If you came only partly because Hamerton's my home, I must know it."

"Very well--you now know it. I haven't been able to get away from the thought of you. So--playing with fire--I came."

"It's playing with fire, is it?"

"Don't you think so?"

"I know so," he frankly admitted, "unless some of your ideas have changed."

A late customer came in. Of course he would, thought David, at such a moment. Ross waited on him, while David retreated as far as possible, picking up a magazine of which he never noted the name. It was a young man who had stopped a motor which was the last word in smartness just outside, so silent a motor that neither of those inside had been aware of it. David didn't recognize him though he surmised readily enough that he might be a guest at one of that row of fine country homes across the valley. The young man made considerable low talk with Ross in the course of his selecting a book from the ranks of latest fiction. David could divine, even from the farther end of the shop, that this customer was much more interested in the manager of the place than in the purchase he was making. This fact, naturally, made David none the less determined to stay till the Saturday evening closing time should force him out of the door.

The late visitor finally departed with a hostile glance toward the other man. Evidently, finding him at that hour in possession of the place had been a disappointment. David quite understood.

He came back to Ross. She looked up from her desk, where she had taken her seat to make some entry on a businesslike sheet. "If you're not just leaving, won't you have that chair?" she suggested, pointing to a comfortable spindle-back near by.

"I'm not just leaving," he said. "And I hope that's your last customer for to-night."

"It probably is. Miss Hallam announced that we'd keep open till ten on Saturday nights, but except for people like that young man--and you--there seems not much use in doing it. The village itself--as of course you know--is mostly tucked in and asleep by half-past nine. And the summer people in this region are having parties and cocktails on the porches, not buying books, in the evening. They come in in the mornings, considering, I suppose, being city bred, that that's the only proper time to enter a shop of any sort. Except two particularly pleasant women who are staying at the little inn where I am, and who drop in at all hours. They went out just before you came in."

"I saw them." He took the chair and drew it to face hers closely. "See here, Ross--hadn't we better have it out?"

"Here and now?" She glanced at the grandfather clock which ticked solemnly in a corner. "It's only twenty minutes of closing time."

"You may close at ten, if you like. Perhaps we shall know by then whether I shall help you lock

up and take you for a walk, or whether I shall go rushing off vowing not to come again."

"I wonder," she said, with a little smile which he couldn't quite read, "which it will be--if either."

They were facing each other at last, these two, after so long an interval, and each was intensely aware of the other. David saw the Ross Collins whom he had known before he met, and had come to know only a little better since. He saw the vivid individuality, the unusualness of her, just as he had remembered it. Where had he seen anything like it? He had seen nothing like it. She stood out for him, as she had from the beginning, from the Lucilles, the Ethels, the Susans--yes, even from the Susan he had cherished in his imagination so long.

As for Ross--well, this was David. And he was amazingly good to look at. He was all she had remembered him, and somehow much more. And different, too--absorbingly different. He looked to her no longer like a dictator, as she had called him; he was more like a man who might be a prince among the people, friendly, beloved, wise--and yet with a saving humanness, a twinkle in the eye, a right arm with a hard blow behind it for offenders.... She didn't after all know what he looked like; he was so near her that she couldn't appraise him. She could only want him for hers. But--she wouldn't hurl herself at him. She would hang on, till the last possible moment, to her self-possession.

XXXVIII

THERE'S *nothing like having things out, no matter how the discussion turns. Let's get right down to absolute frankness--it's the only way.*

"You told me," David began, "when you left the house so abruptly one winter night, that you didn't intend to marry anybody, because it would be the end of all you'd hoped for. You may be sure I've remembered the exact words. You'd given me reason to think you--didn't mind being in my arms. That you even wouldn't mind staying there, if it hadn't been for this vow of yours to stick to your work and your ambition and put marriage out of your thoughts. Naturally I, being proud, even in my physical weakness--and still prouder after I got strong again--wouldn't follow you up."

"No. I didn't expect you to."

"So I, imitating your example, also attempted to put marriage out of my thoughts. It had never been there much, except spasmodically for an hour, and always vaguely. Now it *was* there, and not at all vaguely. So then I decided that all I could do was to give you time, and see whether you could hold to your splendid intention to become a gradually withering spinster, instead of fulfilling your birthright."

"You, of course, as a man, believing that a woman has no birthright except marriage and children."

"I believe that in most cases it's her real one, if she's fit for the task. Exceptions to all rules, but you haven't seemed to me one of the exceptions."

"I suppose," Ross said, cupping her round chin in her palms as she leaned both elbows on the desk, thus turning somewhat away from his steady look, "we could discuss that question all night and get nowhere."

"I suspect we could. Do you want to?"

"No. I've discussed it with myself, week in and week out. The result is that I still believe everything I believed before! That a woman has a right to make of herself all she can. That she's capable of achievement to be proud of without the help or influence of any man. That she can accomplish much more if she's not married and tied down. That even if a man promised not to tie her down he would do it just the same, in spite of his intention not to."

"Probably he would to a certain degree, in spite of himself. Because his idea of marriage is that it's a mutual enterprise. He feels it's worth sacrifice on both sides for ends which benefit both parties, but more than themselves the human race. And I know of no greater goal for any man and woman than that. Do you?"

"You mean, I suppose, that you consider producing perfect children with a heritage of intelligence a bigger thing than making books or statues or becoming famous in any way?"

He smiled. "I may seem a tremendous old fogy, but it does seem so to me."

"And you'd let art and science and invention and discovery all go, for the sake of having a child or two?"

"Ross, just what sort of a question is that?"

She flushed. "A mighty foolish one, and I admit it. And I don't want to argue. As I told you, I've argued and argued with myself over the whole ground, until I'm all tied up in a double-bow-knot as to where I am. The only thing I do know is----" She got up abruptly and walked away from him. He rose also and stood waiting, his face seeming to gather some sort of inner light.

"Yes, Ross? What do you know?"

She came back to stand before him, her head up, her eyes meeting his without flinching. "I've been fighting a losing fight against my own convictions. I came up here because--oh, I told you why I came. Because the pull toward you has become so tremendous. And I don't even know that you still feel the pull toward me."

He laughed softly. "You don't know that? You won't be long in ignorance. I feel it so powerfully that I'd snatch you into my arms this minute if it weren't for those confounded lights and windows. But perhaps it's lucky they're there, for we've got to probe a little deeper into this thing."

"Yes. Probe. You must. I've done the probing for myself."

"Ross, I'm wondering if you understand me. If you married me I shouldn't dream of asking you to give up your work. I'm too proud of it. I should try to further it. I'm not a tyrant, though I may sound like one in what I'm going to say now."

"I've no doubt you will. I'm afraid as anything of what you're going to say now."

"I've got to say it--it's the only honest thing. It's that if you should want to try living two separate lives, and still expect us to be one so far as two distinct individualities can--I'd not want to venture it. I love you--with all I am. I agree with you in so far that I think each one of a married pair should have all possible freedom--and I say all *possible* freedom. But I don't believe *all* freedom is possible. I shouldn't want to tie you. But, Ross--I should want you to tie yourself! I can't conceive of a successful marriage where the chance to be free of exactions--and I don't believe in exactions any more than you do--wouldn't result in the forging of voluntary chains. They're the only ones worth while. And I don't believe they can be forged at long range."

Suddenly her smile, long delayed, flashed out. Standing there before him, she became, by reason of that smile, the lifted head, the look from the strangely beautiful eyes, so nearly irresistible that he had to put his hands behind him to keep them off her longer.

"David, do you know you're *not* advanced?"

"I suspect I'm not."

"You're the traditional male."

"I don't doubt it."

"You thought I'd want to live in town while you lived out here, did you?"

"I thought you probably would. Or that you'd ask me to live in town."

"And you wouldn't do that, even for love of me?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't, and keep on earning my living by writing. I tried it, as you know, for two years. Something in me demands staying outside of a great city. I suppose it's my

country bringing up. And I have my living to earn."

"There's no doubt at all in my mind," said Ross slowly, "that I'm a disgrace to the cause of independent womanhood. I'm a self-acknowledged traitor to the theory that woman is altogether self-sufficient. When I'm caught by the more advanced feminists I shall probably be pilloried. But oh"--she twisted her very chilly little hands together while a look of seeing tragedy came into her eyes--"I've been with a girl for weeks who wouldn't marry the man she loved because she wanted to be 'free,' and thought she could get on without him. And suddenly he was killed. She says if she could just have had his name to wear, if she could have had a month--a week--as his wife, she could have gone on somehow. But now--she can't. She'll get over it sometime, I suppose, but the cruel scar will always be there. Maybe it's a sentimental way of looking at it--and of course sentimental ways of looking at anything are out of date. But, David"--she turned--"I don't think I could bear having that happen to me."

"Couldn't you?" said David in a smothered voice, watching her. He wouldn't stop her--he wanted it all.

"You know--maybe you don't--that just after you sailed a report got about that your ship had struck an iceberg and--gone down."

"I heard of it."

"I thought then," said Ross simply, with her eyes held by his searching, kindling gaze, "that if you could be alive again, and I could just have a desk up in a corner of your attic ... I wouldn't care if I never ... went anywhere else or----"

David, with one long reach of his arm, snapped out all the lights. Any passer-by, if passer-by there was at that hour, must have thought Miss Collins was closing her shop. But if he waited to see her come out he waited in vain. In less than three minutes the lights came on again, and activity could be discerned within. Miss Collins was dressing her window for the next day, very busily taking down posters and putting up others, rearranging books, and so on. She had an assistant, who wasn't really of much help, because all he did was to stand looking at her from the background, with a very masculine expression of mingled triumph and affection on his face, and he might not have been discoverable from the street. But it was never known whether there had been any passer-by, though Ross had acted promptly upon the chance of one.

The shop was closed ultimately, however, though the lights had to be kept on until that was done. The closing was delayed until another hour had passed. There was so much to say. And so much can be said while two people sit innocently at a desk, apparently talking over business matters, not even touching hands. As a matter of fact, this method of love making may for the time being have its advantages, on the theory that man longs even more ardently for what is within sight yet not quite within reach than for what he can have and hold. At any rate it was an exquisite hour.

"There's exactly the place for that desk," announced David toward its close, "by the left dormer window of my workshop. It commands a long vista through the trees across the valley."

"But it's your own favorite spot, isn't it?"

"It will still be that--enhanced."

"Nice of you. Suppose I choose to come over and interrupt your work by sitting on your desk

and demanding that you hear mine."

"I shall take you gently but firmly and deposit you in your own place. Afterward, when I'm through, we'll go out and talk over both masterpieces while we drive down to Lornefield and buy a thick beefsteak and real country-raised mushrooms for dinner. While there we may as well telephone into New York for theater tickets."

"You do mean, then, to take me in for plays, now and then?"

"As often as you like."

Ross smiled at him. It was a wonderful smile.

"Better not do that," he warned, "or I shall certainly put out these lights again. And you can't dress the window a second time in one evening."

"We really must go. The inn locks its doors at eleven, and there's no night clerk."

"Shall we go for a walk?"

"By no means. I'm going home and to bed. Nobody wanders round this country on foot at night, as I've discovered."

"I'll get my car."

She shook her head. "I can't bear being with you another minute. I want to lock myself into my room and think you over. Only in cold blood shall I know what a wild thing I've done."

"In cold blood," he repeated, and laughed. "Do you think you can achieve that--to-night? But I'll tell you what you've done, dear. You've definitely left the egocentric life behind for the one of partnership you've entered upon. Whether you realize it or not, you've deserted the thesis that woman has proved herself equal to man, and taken up the one which asserts that however marvelous her powers may be she is merely *different* from man--with a blessed difference. For the life of me I've never been able to see why that isn't a thousand times more desirable in her eyes than being exactly like a creature whom she professes to scorn."

"Perhaps it is," Ross admitted. "And when I first read *Country Neighbors* I knew I couldn't write anything so perfect in its simplicity, and its humanness, and its virility if I tried for the rest of my life. I spend my time trying to personify what I'm not. You spend yours being what you are. To me Caleb Cox is the real you, and I like him--oh, beyond words."

His face was full of astonishment. "How on earth did you find that out?"

"I recognized you! You surely don't mind my knowing--now. I've had Caleb on my desk for weeks--two volumes of him. I think--I really think he's responsible for what's happened to-night. I couldn't get away from him--if I could from David MacRoss. You may not think it, since you know me for the frivolous writer I am, but I do--I do know the real thing when I read it--and see it. And I worship it with all my tiny little soul."

"Your big, beautiful soul!" contradicted David MacRoss extravagantly.

It was then that the lights went out for the second time, and were not put on again. A somewhat breathless pair of people almost at once emerged from the Country Bookshop, locked the door with its enormous key, and crossed the street to the inn, in whose small lobby showed only a dim light suggesting that it would not long hold out. Ross opened the door and motioned

David back. She closed it behind her, leaving him outside.

XXXIX

If the bookshop makes a million in one short season, there's nobody more pleased than Charlie Higgins, who keeps the village inn. He wasn't important enough to go into the list of Characters, but he's been looking on with interest for a good while.

A sleepy clerk looked up from behind the desk.

"Just closed up, Miss Collins?"

"Just closed up, Mr. Higgins. I had to rearrange my window ready for Monday morning."

He glanced at the big round clock above his head. "Trade keep up so late as this?"

"There were several late customers to-night--more than I could have expected. It's a glorious night, Mr. Higgins--have you looked out?"

"Once or twice. Saw your lights out an hour ago--expected you over. Then they went on again. Having trouble with the 'lectricity over there? I came pretty near coming over to see."

"It seemed a little uncertain to-night. Sort of an off-again, on-again effect. May I have my room key, please, Mr. Higgins?"

"You sure may." He reached for it in its box and handed it out with a letter. He was looking at her closely and admiringly. "Country life is agreeing with you, I *will* say, Miss Collins. Better plan to stay on with us. Shouldn't wonder if you could make a go of that place of yours, even in the winter. Folks seem to like it. I'm going to buy a book I noticed in your window to-day. I haven't been much of a book buyer, but, gosh! that window of yours, with all those books set out, and the posters, and the wild-flowers in the middle--they'd tempt a plumber to buy--and I'm no plumber. I was brought up with books. My grandfather was a preacher and he had a lot--couple of hundred, I should say. Well--must you go? All right, then, I'll let you get to your room before I take the brights off the upper hall, and then I'll close up myself."

"Thank you, Mr. Higgins. Good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Collins. Think it over--about staying on up here."

"You almost persuade me to do that, Mr. Higgins," acknowledged his youngest and most prized guest as she went up the stairs, disappearing from his view at the fifth from the lower floor.

"Gee!" murmured Charlie Higgins, with his thumb on the switch which controlled the upper hall lights, "she looked as if she'd just made a million in that little place of hers."

THE END

Other Books by Grace S. Richmond

THE LISTENING POST

AT THE SOUTH GATE

CHERRY SQUARE

FOURSQUARE

LIGHTS UP

RED AND BLACK

RED PEPPER BURNS

[The end of *High Fences* by Grace S. Richmond]