

C O R A

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Cora

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Part I

Chapter I

1

The Schwietert kitchen, a battered little room with uneven floor, and window panes breaking out from the dry, cheap putty, swarmed with children. Their own children, and everybody else's: Ralph and Birdie from across the road; and then all that tribe of dirty-faced, barefooted, tow-headed Rasmussens from that little shack at the edge of the gully, who had been coming over lately, and whom Mrs. Schwietert was too good-hearted to turn away. Whenever she made pies or fried doughnuts, these were all standing in a hungry circle, hoping for scraps of apple or the little brown-gold, crispy balls from the doughnut centers which she fried in the last of the grease. And even now, at breakfast, too early for Ralph and Birdie to appear, hand in hand, announcing—"We come to play over 't your house, Mis' Schwietert";—or too early, even, for any Rasmussens, there seemed to be twice as many children underfoot as were actually there. Mrs. Schwietert did not mind it, but it made Cora angry. She was the only one who really helped much with the breakfast. The others were simply in the way.

She cried in despair, "Mama, I wish you'd make those kids clear out! I can't do a thing, with them around."

"You little ones run out for a while," Mrs. Schwietert ordered mildly. "Go and see how nearly papa's ready. Sophie, you stay, you can help sister a lot if you try."

Sophie looked injured. She was a sweet-tempered, likable little girl, when she didn't get whiny; but Mrs. Schwietert could see that she wasn't the worker that Cora was. She put the cups around (it was a motley array that the Schwieterts had, some handleless, some mapp'd all over with little brown lines;—a huge coffee cup at papa's place that said, in gold letters, "For Remembrance") and every time that she passed Cora, she switched her skirts and pouted her lips.

It was going to be another good hot day. Looking out of the kitchen window, Cora saw the vacant lot beyond the house stretch yellowish, cracked, and hard, the weeds harsh and dry, to the rough bank of the creek, where a little tree was standing, lifeless, against the blue blaze of prairie sky—everything cooked! . . . She thought of the "crick," of running barefooted down the steep, weedy banks, shrieking at the pain of the little stones that

were pointed and sharp, or smooth and burning; the blinding brightness of the sun glittering full on the moving water; and then the sudden, dark, hot bliss of the shady place at the turn, where they could dig down under the surface clay and find mud that was wet, mysterious, cool. . . . Cora and Evelyn weren't too big even yet to take off their shoes and stockings and "play in the crick." There had to be a good fire in the cook-stove to get breakfast for the whole big family. The kitchen smelled of steam, perspiration, coffee. Cora's forehead was damp; a strand of black hair stuck to it. She went outside to get the butter, lifted the square wooden top of the cistern with its rough hot boards, pulled at the rope to bring up the pail that hung almost to the surface of the cold black water—Oh! no butter again! . . .

"Mama! there's no butter."

"There isn't? Are you sure?"

"The pail's empty."

"Well, we'll have to send Sophie or Rosie to get some. . . . Sophie," Mrs. Schwietert said, "you go; it takes Rosie so long."

"I haven't got any money," Sophie said, dismally. She liked well enough to get out of working in the kitchen, but her mother couldn't blame her for looking injured at the thought of the long boardwalk to town, unshaded except for a rough little group of willows at one place, with the cracks and knotholes and splinters.

"Well, you go into mama's bedroom and look in the top dresser drawer and find mama's purse and bring it here."

Cora looked disdainful. When Sophie came back, exhibiting the purse, and proclaiming, "It's just got five cents in it—just a nickel!" her dark brown eyes, which most people called black ("My, what black eyes that girl's got!"), smouldered with a triumphant disgust, that almost concealed the sensitive hurt that lay deep in them, as deep as the one little spark of light always quivering in the black pupil.

Mrs. Schwietert felt of the limp purse—a long, worn pouch hanging from tarnished steel clasps—how well they knew it, mama's purse!—but there was only that one nickel.

"Why doesn't she go and ask papa?" Cora demanded.

Mrs. Schwietert turned away. "Papa hasn't got any," she said, quietly and proudly.

“Well, what am I going to do, mama? If Mr. Lake’s in the store, I’ll say you want to charge it, but I won’t ask Mr. Ray: I don’t like him.” Sophie began to whimper.

“No, I don’t want you to ask any one. We won’t have any butter. We can get along for once.”

Cora’s lips fashioned, disdainfully, “Once!” Mrs. Schwietert paid no attention.

“What are we going to eat, then?” Cora demanded.

“I’m going to make some sugar syrup, and the children like that on their bread.”

Cora glanced with scorn at the weak, pale syrup that began to bubble and crust the sides of the pan with whiteness. Her mother’s profile was calm, lifted a trifle; but a sudden glimpse of her face showed a compression of the lips, and tears in her quiet, gray eyes. Cora’s throat swelled with anger, and then, pain. She wanted to go out that moment and bang something—bang the whole world to pieces. She had been angry at her mother’s patience, but now, ardently, passionately, she took her mother’s side—and, at this moment, hated her father—a small, sprightly figure, coming to the table with little Clarence clinging to his finger, and innocently demanding:

“Vell, mama, how comes de breakfast?”

Cora put the syrup on the table, not even pouring it into a dish, but setting the kettle with its smudged bottom on an old plate. He saw that something was wrong; looked at the kettle; looked at Cora.

“We’ll have to get along with syrup, today,” Mrs. Schwietert said. Her voice was quiet, but there was pained resentment in it somewhere.

“Ja, so?”

No one answered; and there might have been pity at the sight of his small figure at the head of the big table; his blue eyes, troubled now and vague; the significance of his roughened forefinger as he meekly reached out his hand for the syrup. His wife, moving about the table to get the children seated, was tall and matronly and dignified beside him. He looked lost. No one talked much at breakfast. But when it was over, he went to his wife, standing at the stove with her back turned.

“Mama, I see ve get some tings dis noon. I make dose fellows pay me.”

Her eyes moistened again, and the stern compression of her lips melted into a quivering, feminine line. She wanted to tell Chris not to bother, they could get along; but she was a shy woman, it was hard for her to say these things. Besides, they must have things, she must harden herself. He went off to the tailor shop.

Cora began to get the dishes together. Sullenly, she refused any help from Sophie.

“I don’t want her to help, I just want her to keep those kids out of here—and not bring any in from anywhere else, either.”

She had observed that little scene between her parents, and she did not want to let it melt any of her resentment, so hot and fierce and perversely satisfying. She wanted to wash the dishes herself, to go at something *hard*, both to add to her pain and to give an outlet to it. It was better that the old dishpan wobbled on the stove with little hissings, proving what a leaky old thing it was, that there were so many dishes, that one old saucer came apart in her hands, and that the hot steam rose cloudily all about her face and made the kitchen breathless.

She thought feverishly of going to Miss Nellie Edison and saying that she wanted to learn millinery—even of asking Mrs. Watson if she couldn’t work for her, although at the idea of that she could feel a flush of hot blood through her face and neck. What if she did have to stop school and never learn anything? What did she care if they moved away from Warwick; if she never saw any of the girls, not even Evelyn, again? Her mind went back over the dark course of other wanderings, in which everything painful glinted out, sharply now, like the glinting crests of ripples striking stones in the “crick” . . . feeling again a sweltering day on a crowded train, with all their ignominious luggage; her anguish at that first school in Cincinnati, when the strange girls had mocked the German accent she had learned from her father; seeing their little house in Mechanicstown standing dingy and gray with bleary windows, and that gasping pump; the indignity of the tipsy outhouse where she used to have to pilot all the children. Shamed, angry, piteous tears flooded the dark brown iris and black pupils of her eyes and made wet the short black glossy lashes.

Through her preoccupation, she heard her mother saying:

“Cora! Don’t you see Evelyn?”

She looked up, dark-browed, not wanting to see Evelyn or any one else. But there was Evelyn standing in the doorway, breathing quickly and

eagerly, in the little, clean, washed-out pink lawn dress that she was wearing in the mornings, now, because it was getting too short for her, but which was still dainty and ruffly and irreproachable, like everything that Evelyn had.

“How soon will you be through with the dishes?” Evelyn demanded eagerly.

“I don’t know. Not for quite a while,” Cora said forbiddingly.

“Come in, Evelyn,” Mrs. Schwietert urged.

“No, I guess I won’t, if Cora isn’t going to be through.”

She did step into the room, however, and begged animatedly, her dark blue eyes shining. “Can’t Cora come over for just a little bit of a while, Mrs. Schwietert? I’ve got something to show her—honestly. Papa brought me a present from Chicago.” She squeezed Mrs. Schwietert’s hand to let her know that he had brought something for Cora, too. “It won’t take hardly *any* time.”

Mrs. Schwietert smiled, knowing Evelyn’s coaxings, and her “hardly any times” very well.

“Why, I don’t care if Cora goes over for a few minutes when she’s through with the dishes. It’s she who says she can’t.”

“There’s too much to do,” Cora muttered.

Evelyn perched on a chair.

“I don’t see why you can’t, Cora, if your mother says you can.”

“Why don’t you go with Evelyn, Cora?” Mrs. Schwietert asked. “She came away over here to get you. You can help me when you come back. Only don’t stay long—don’t coax her, will you, Evelyn?”

“Oh, no, I won’t coax her!”

Cora hung up her dish towel. She had caught that quick glance, and knew that there was a present for her, too, but she didn’t want it. Mr. Anderson needn’t have brought her anything. Evelyn—delicate, vivid, light and eager, in her pretty pink dress, with her bushy hair standing out brightly all about her little head in the morning sunshine—contrasted too bitterly with those dark remembrances and those feverish plans. Cora wished she had stayed at home this morning.

But Cora went, refusing to put on a hat, and getting once more a perverse pleasure from having the sun blaze down upon her unprotected

head until her black hair was glossy with heat. Her mother called:

“Cora! you mustn’t go like that!”

Cora looked back at her mother standing now upon the rickety front stoop, troubled and distressed; and, out in the fresh open air, the tension of her suffering gave way.

“Guess I will get my hat,” she muttered.

She ran back to the house for the hat of braided red crêpe paper that she had made to go with Evelyn’s, of white (all the girls were making paper hats this summer, and Hattie Purvis had worn hers in the rain and had her face and neck dyed blue). Feeling quite proud of themselves, in spite of their old dresses, the two girls tramped down the long boardwalk together. When they went past Lakes’ and Ray’s, Mr. Lake, who was letting down the awning, called out:

“Here come the twins! Black-Eyes and Blue-Eyes! Black hair and yellow hair! A red hat and a white hat!”

They tossed their heads, glad to be together, as chums, and to have people notice it.

But all the way to the Anderson house,—even when they ran upstairs to Evelyn’s room where the two bottles of perfume were standing on the dresser of birdseye maple (just alike, except that Evelyn’s was White Rose, and Cora’s was Jockey Club), while they chattered and sniffed at each other’s bottles, each dabbing some White Rose on one cheek and some Jockey Club on the other—Cora was aware of that now scarcely defined bitterness and trouble that was like a cold little stream running underground, running underneath all that she said and did.

2

Evelyn always had so many reasons why Cora must stay just five minutes longer.

“You haven’t seen my new dress. Miss Gorenson left it all folded up, and she’ll have a fit connip’ if I take out any of her pins, but I don’t care.”

“I can’t, Evelyn. I’ve got to go back.”

“Oh, just a *min*-ute! Your mother said she didn’t have much to do this morning.”

“She does, though. There’s always plenty to do when you’ve got five kids.”

“I think you have all kinds of fun at your house,” Evelyn said enviously. “I wish we had a big family.”

Cora did not answer. This morning the thought of a big family made her angry. But it was true that they always had more fun at home than here at the Andersons’, in spite of Evelyn’s room and the piano and the lawn swing and the books. The white house with the shades down and the big trees outside seemed cool in the heat. In the hushed air of the immaculate parlor, the piano gleamed darkly and the bowl of sweet peas on the table was rosy and sweet. The blue-painted lawn swing stood just between the birch tree and the syringa bush, in mottled shade, with tiny twigs and fresh-smelling leaves drifted over the slatted seat. The petunias, white and pink and rose, were bright and motionless against the white house wall.

Nevertheless, the girls seldom stayed long at the Anderson house. If they went into the parlor, Mrs. Anderson would soon be there, complaining, “It doesn’t do you any good to play like that, Evelyn. Practice some of your good music if you’re going to play.” And if they wanted to stay on the lawn, she worried about the heat, and came after them with hats, and was never quite cordial to Cora, anyway. No matter if they did come here, they usually drifted back to the Schwieters’.

“I’m going to walk with you,” Evelyn said. “I know mama wants to wash my hair this morning, and I don’t want her to. Mrs. Bessy’s in the kitchen with her right now. She won’t hear us if we sneak out. Sh!”

They crept downstairs, and Evelyn closed the screen door with great precaution after them. She leaped softly off the porch steps onto the soundless grass, and Cora followed her.

“Now she won’t hear us. I just can’t bear to have my hair washed, mama rubs and rubs and rubs, and I just despise that nasty old slithery egg. If mama’d only let me wash it myself!” Evelyn wailed. “She thinks she has to do everything on earth *for* me. I wish she was like your mother.”

“I have to stop to see papa,” Cora said.

They turned off Main Street into the little side street, past the junk shop and the marble works where tombstones stood in the unkempt grass, with the sun striking out sharp sparkles from the rough pink granite, and blindingly hot on polished surfaces. The tailor shop was a small frame building, dark and hot inside, smelling of grease and singed cloth. Mr.

Schwietert was pressing some thick woolen cloth on a heavy old ironing board, with deeply burned, brown, flaky places where the iron had stood.

“Ach, look at mine callers! You ladies come to order some suits?”

Evelyn laughed delightedly, as she always did at Mr. Schwietert’s little jokes, which his quaint broken speech made so much funnier. But Cora had told herself that she was not going to fool with papa this morning. She went up to him and said:

“I want some money, papa.”

“Some money, do you? Vell, den I haf to gif you some. Only, take a liddle home to your mama!”

Cora waited silently while he trotted back into the shop and took down his coat from the wall.

“Coh-ra!” he called.

She went back to him.

“You tell mama I do some mending dis morning for Mr. Vatson, and get dis liddle money. Dis afternoon, I see Black, and I try to make him pay vot he owe me. Dis vill be sometings now.”

Evelyn waited in the front of the shop. It was hot . . . and Evelyn could never stand still very long, anyway. The shop had a side stoop, dating from the time when the old tailor had lived in the back room with his family; and some of the children were out there now—Sophie and Rosie, and Birdie Davis, who played with them. A scraggly box elder tree gave a little shade to the stoop and dropped a fat green worm, with a slap, to the hard ground. Behind the shop was a rank tangle of sunflowers and weeds that used to be the old tailor’s garden. It had a high board fence along the alley. This place was heaven to the children. Mr. Schwietert liked to have them play there, and gave them his tailor’s shears for cutting, and little pieces of ancient bees-wax, and samples of woolen cloth with pinked edges.

“What are you kids doing?” Evelyn asked eagerly.

“Cutting out paper dolls,” Sophie said. “Oh! I tell you, Birdie, we’ll get Evelyn to cut out between the men’s legs! Can you, Evelyn? We can’t cut out their noses good, either, when they’re side views. Birdie spoiled her man’s nose.”

“Oh, well, I play he got it broken,” Birdie said. “He isn’t my best man, anyway. He’s only in a common, everyday suit.”

“Where did you kids get these men paper dolls?” Evelyn asked, enthusiastically.

“Papa gave them to us. This is his old tailor card.”

“Oh, let me cut out this grand one in the dress suit!” Evelyn cried, with relish. She almost wished that she had not stopped playing with paper dolls. It was always *so* hard to get men: the fashion magazines had nothing but women—and there were eight pink-cheeked men on this tailor’s card, of beautiful stiff paper, each one in a different kind of costume.

“Who does this one belong to?” she demanded.

“He’s one of mine,” Birdie said, with jealous quickness.

“Birdie Davis, he is not! I spoke for him.”

“You did not any such a thing, Sophie Schwietert! And, anyway, I’ve got the lady in the low-necked dress. He goes with her, don’t he, Evelyn? I play they’re going to a ball together. None of your ladies have got on ball dresses.”

“I don’t care, I guess we wouldn’t have had this card at all if my father hadn’t given it to us.”

“I won’t play if you’re going to take away my man. I’ll tear him in two before I’ll let you get him!”

“Oh, Birdie!” Evelyn chided.

Sophie began to wail. “I’m going to tell papa. I’m going to tell him you took my man away from me, and he won’t let you have that card!”

She went blubbering into the tailor shop. Birdie was disturbed, but she didn’t intend to show it. She hummed determinedly, and when Evelyn put down the card to go after Sophie, she took the big shears and hacked clumsily at the man’s foot in the shining dress suit. When she cut off his toes, she cried, airily,

“I don’t care if I did do it! He’s just as good.”

They could hear Sophie’s tale of woe: “You gave us the card, it isn’t *her* card it’s *my* card, she wants all the nicest men, my ladies won’t have any men to go to the ball with . . .”

And then she came trotting out, awed and triumphant, with the brand-new stiff card from the window that her father had given her.

“See there, Birdie Davis! And your man’s side view and mine’s front! Your man’s suit’s old-fashioned-er than mi-yine!” She began to sing loudly and triumphantly.

“Ach, ja,” Mr. Schwietert said. “I guess dose paper doll ladies, dey need some husbands. I send and get me anudder card.”

“Oh, I just think your father’s lovely!” Evelyn cried, with enthusiasm, as she and Cora left the shop. “Most men never think about paper dolls. And anyway, he’s so funny. I just love to hear him talk. I think your mother’s lovely, too, Cora. I just don’t know which one I like best.” She gave a little skip.

Yes, Cora thought, but Evelyn had such an easy time. It was all very well to have a father who gave children paper dolls, and told funny stories, and bought sacks of candy hearts with funny mottoes, and could play six musical instruments. But there might not be any home at all, if mama didn’t keep working. Evelyn didn’t know what it was not to be able to buy butter for a meal . . . and much, much worse than that.

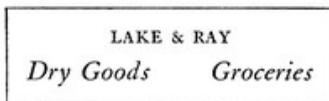
They could have butter this noon, though, and she could ask Evelyn to stay. Cora’s worry and ill humor were dissolving. She and Evelyn could have more fun with each other than with any one else in the world. As they were going into Lake & Ray’s to get the butter, Danny Purvis, who was driving the delivery wagon, shouted to them:

“Hey, paper tops! Want a ride?”

The girls looked at each other. “Shall we?” Their eyes brightened.

“Cora’s got to get some things in the store,” Evelyn said. “Go on and hurry, Cora, Danny’ll wait.”

When Cora came out, Evelyn was already perched on the high wagon seat beside Danny, under the huge cotton umbrella that said on one side, in black letters,



and on the other

“*Gid-dap!*” Danny shouted.

Lake & Ray’s old black horse began to amble slowly down the rutted street.

Evelyn squealed. “Isn’t it fun up here? Don’t go past papa’s office, Danny, he might see us. We want to go to Cora’s.”

“What do you think this is? A hotel bus?”

“Well, you asked us to ride: you ought to take us where we want to go.”

“I’m out on business, I’d like you to know. I’ll take you as far as Dixon’s corner, and then I’ll dump you out.”

“Oh, Danny! How *mean!*”

“Far as Dixon’s corner. *Gid-dap*, Nellie, old shanks!”

Cora sat with dark shining eyes. She usually let Evelyn do the talking for her. Nevertheless, she was pleasingly conscious that Danny liked her as well as Evelyn, because he slapped her wrist with the reins, and crowded against her on the high narrow seat.

“Eddie Vansickle!” he sang out. “Isn’t that so, Cora?”

“Isn’t what so?” Cora demanded scornfully.

“What I said. Isn’t it so, Evelyn?”

Evelyn laughed, and Cora blushed hotly. She pretended to be very scornful and oblivious, but she remembered the notes that Eddie Vansickle had left on her desk last year in school, and down underneath the scorn was a warm glow of happiness.

At Dixon’s corner, the girls hopped off the wagon and scuttled along the dusty road. Evelyn said, “I ought to go home, now”; but what she really wanted was to stay to dinner, as Cora knew. Evelyn liked whatever she got at the Schwieterts’—she who was so finicky at home that her mother was in despair. The long table crowded with children, with the happy-go-lucky feeling, the noise and the jokes, seemed wonderful to her after the quiet meals at home with just papa and mama, and mama always afraid she wasn’t eating enough.

Cora had to work now. Mrs. Schwietert was doing some ironing for the Watsons, some of Idalia's finest summer dresses and underclothes. It would be washing next, Cora thought, with another wave of resentment, and then Mrs. Anderson never *would* let Evelyn come here. Evelyn stayed for a while in the kitchen, saying to Cora,—“Oh, honey, I've got something to tell you about Eddie Vansickle! Remind me!”;—and when it got too dreadfully hot, with the smell of flatirons and starched muslin and soup, she went into the little parlor.

She was used to being alone, and she could amuse herself. She curled one foot under her, cosily, in the rickety old plush rocker, and began to look over the views of Cincinnati, where she knew that Cora had once lived. Particular as she was at home, she always felt happy in this battered little room with the cheap and scanty furniture, almost its only decoration a fishnet on the wall into which were stuck photographs, birthday cards, and Sunday school cards. When she looked at the views, she saw herself going into the buildings, or walking under the trees, and always with a tall, handsome, artistic man *without* a mustache, struck with admiration, in the background.

It was too hot, even in the parlor. The little frame house that the Schwieterts rented stood in a stark, open place, with the sun beating mercilessly upon it. Evelyn went into the raw little yard. Children were playing in the shade of the house wall, making pies and cakes stuck full of stone raisins from the sandy ground.

“Oh, let me make a *nice* cake!” she cried.

She made it, in a tiny pail cover, and then when it came out beautiful and unbroken on the board that the children were using for a table, she frosted it all over with white sand and stuck a yellow mustard flower in the center. The children were delighted.

“Come on with me to town, Rosie,” she said. “I want to go to papa's office.”

Rosie was only too glad to go anywhere, with Evelyn.

She would tell papa that she was going to stay for dinner at Cora's, because if she asked papa when mama wasn't around, he would let her do anything.

“Oh, I guess so,” he always said, easily.

Then when Mrs. Schwietert asked,

“Did you ask your mother if you could stay, Evelyn?” she could answer, innocently,

“Yes’m. Well, I asked papa. He said it was all right.”

3

It had ended with Evelyn spending the whole day at the Schwieterts’, and now nothing would do but that she must stay all night. Cora had ironed, and Evelyn had played with the little ones outside. All day the two girls had saved up the things they simply *had* to tell each other.

“You come home with me to ask mama, Cora,” Evelyn said. And, at home, she begged,

“Yes! Now, you’ve got to let me, mama! You said if I went to the dentist you’d let me do something nice, and this is the something nice.”

“But you stay at Cora’s so often. You’ve been there the whole day. Mama had all the things ready to wash your hair, and then when she looked for you, you were gone. You’ve been with Cora all day, I think you ought to stay at home at night.”

“Yes, but Cora had to iron, and we hadn’t a single chance to be with each other.”

“Not a single chance in a whole day!”

“Well, I don’t care, we haven’t, and pretty soon school’ll begin, and then you won’t let me stay with Cora because you’ll think I’ve got lessons to get.” Evelyn’s voice grew more and more aggrieved.

“Oh, let her go, mama,” Mr. Anderson said. He was sitting at the dining table in his shirt sleeves, reading a paper; and the swarm of little flying things in the warm night outside knocked against the lighted window screens.

“Papa, she’s been away from us all day.”

“Well, I expect these girls have a lot of secrets to tell each other,” he said indulgently. “That so, Cora?”

Cora’s sunburned cheeks flushed richly, and she gave him a shy smile.

“Why can’t Cora stay here, if they must be together?” Mrs. Anderson wanted to know. The real trouble was not so much that she didn’t want Evelyn to spend the night away from home—although there was that, too—as that she could not approve of this friendship. Not but that Cora was a nice

girl, and Mrs. Schwietert a fine woman. They were not Evelyn's kind, was the way she put it. They were poor, they lived in that cheap little house, Mr. Schwietert was a German tailor, Cora did not have Evelyn's advantages. Evelyn could go with any of the children in town. But Mrs. Anderson seldom dared suggest any of this to Evelyn, who wouldn't have the slightest depreciation of any of the Schwieterts.

Evelyn began to look tearful. "We don't want to stay here. If we do, then we'll have to go 'way back and tell Mrs. Schwietert, and anyway they think we're coming back, and Mr. Schwietert was going to let us take his instruments and have a band concert."

"Oh, let her go, mama, don't spoil the fun. There are so many of them. You can't blame the kids for having a better time there."

Mrs. Anderson looked troubled and considering, and the two girls stood, not daring to look at each other while their fate hung in the balance. Evelyn jiggled with impatience.

"Well, I suppose . . . if you'll promise to come right home in the morning."

"Oh, goody, goody, I promise!"

Evelyn flew at her mother and hugged her. Cora's dark eyes glowed. Evelyn ran upstairs to get one of her little ruffled nightgowns out of the drawer, and her comb and brush and toothbrush in its pretty holder. One delight in staying at the Schwieterts' was the children's naïve admiration of all her pretty things. They thought that anything *Evelyn* had—! . . . She hoped to get out of the house before mama discovered that she had taken the new nightgown with the embroidered yoke that grandma had sent her.

"Seems to me you ought to keep an outfit over at Cora's, then you wouldn't even have to make these little trips home between times," her father said teasingly.

"Now, Papa Anderson, you just keep still." She took his head severely between her hands and kissed his bald spot. "If you'd shave off your mustache, you'd get a *real* kiss," she told him reprovingly. "Good-night, mama!" She wriggled out of her mother's clasp, afraid that there would be more instructions and worries.

They had spent so much time teasing that it was almost dark now. Evelyn tucked her hand into Cora's arm, and they scampered along together, feeling elated and adventurous. The box elder trees along the board sidewalk made a dark thick shade in the hot night . . . mosquitoes humming thinly in

the long weeds in the vacant lot; and, when they came to the corner of “town,” a riot of bugs dancing crazily around the big shining arc light over the road. They saw a couple ahead of them.

“Look! It’s Miss Coffin and Mr. Briggs! Let’s follow them.”

Giggling, and snuggling close together, they tiptoed after the sauntering couple, feeling a vicarious delight spiced with mischief. Mr. Briggs was the photographer who had the parlors over the hardware store. He was an Englishman. He waxed his mustache and called Warwick “Warrick.” Miss Coffin clerked in the dry goods store. Every one knew that Mr. Briggs took Miss Coffin home from choir practice, but here they were, going down Lovers’ Lane together! What a joke! Cora mimicked Mr. Briggs’s stiff carriage grandiloquently, and made Evelyn giggle so that she stepped off the high boardwalk down into the swampy weeds. She stood there, begging, “Oh, honey, help me up!”—and then tugged so at Cora’s hand that she brought Cora down with her.

“Heavens, kid, I’m in the ‘crick’ or something! Never mind, mama won’t see my slippers.”

Weak with laughter, they scrambled back to the walk, where Evelyn’s slippers left wet little triangles.

“They saw us! They’re turning around to look.”

“Who cares?” Cora demanded. “They don’t know who we are. I’m going to throw them a kiss.”

Evelyn was wild with joy at Cora’s daring. Mama was always wondering why she liked Cora, and wanted her to play more with Bessie and Hattie and Grace. They were all right, but Evelyn knew that Cora was the only one of the girls who could really compete with *her*, who had—in spite of all the differences between them—the same “go.”

They would not tell the other children why they were giggling. Sophie teased and whined. She was just enough younger to want to do all that they did. Cora treated her with lofty scorn, but Evelyn was more indulgent—both because Evelyn’s eager good spirits shone on every one, and because she liked having Sophie’s adoration.

It was sweltering in the little parlor. Bugs got in through the screen that one of the children had broken, bumped against the lamp and fell with a thud, their thin wings singed. But Mr. Schwieterter got out all his instruments for the children’s band concert, he himself performing—to their delight—on the piccolo. Little Clarence was too small to play anything, but he howled so

that they let him blow at the cornet and think that he was playing. Evelyn, of course, was in charge. She used the washing stick for a baton, and Mrs. Schwiertert laughed at her imitation of Mr. Briggs leading the choir. The din was dreadful in that heat, but Mrs. Schwiertert let it go on until it was bedtime for the little ones. They protested, as usual, but she was firm with them. No, Sophie couldn't sleep with the girls. Two in one bed were enough on such a night. She and Rosie could have a bed on the floor. Sophie was marched off, wailing:

“You can make me go to bed but you can't make me go to sleep, you make us go to bed and you let the girls stay up and have fun, the girls'll talk and I'm going to stay awake and listen. And tell, too.”

“You just do, Miss Sophie——” Cora began hotly.

“Sh-h!” Mrs. Schwiertert gave her a warning look. She said, “Let her go. She'll be asleep by the time you girls go in there. She'll try to stay awake, but she can't. You know Sophie.”

When the two girls tiptoed into the bedroom, after an excursion to the kitchen for doughnuts, the two small figures lay tumbled and relaxed on their dark quilts on the floor, their nightgowns pulled up to their bare knees that were white and damp in the heat. Cora and Evelyn undressed with great precaution and got into the creaking bed.

“Oh, I forgot! Our doughnuts!”

“Where are they?”

“I put them on the dresser. Wait.”

Cora tripped on the bed-clothes, and came down with a crash to the floor. Evelyn sat up in bed, hugging her knees and rocking with smothered laughter, while Cora pointed a finger in tragic warning at the two on the floor. Sophie's eyes were bright and scared in the dimly lighted room, and her fair hair was ruffled in spite of the tight little pigtails. Cora and Evelyn waited, breathless, until she moaned and flopped down again. Cora rescued the doughnuts in one swoop, and crept back into bed. She and Evelyn sat back against the pillows, face to face, their eyes mysteriously bright, whispering and munching.

“Kid, you know I told you I had something to tell you——”

“I've got something, too.”

“Go on and tell it.”

“No, you tell first.”

“Well, listen. Yesterday, I was going to papa’s office, and right in front of the hardware store I met Harold Wing.”

“Kid, listen. Do you like Harold Wing?”

“Oh, I like him,” Evelyn replied airily. “But if he thinks he can go with me all the time and keep me from looking at any one else, he’s certainly mistaken! I can go with a lot of boys, Cora, I know I can, and I’m not going to go with just one all the time unless I feel like it. I’m going to have just as good a time as I can have. . . . But now listen to what he told me. This is about you.”

Cora’s heart gave a delicious throb in the darkness. She cuddled her hand under her hot cheek and waited, turned toward Evelyn. Every word was precious, distinct; she savored, and then treasured, all of them.

“He asked me if you ever went with the boys, and I said I didn’t know, why didn’t the boys ask you and find out. And then he said Eddie Vansickle wanted to go with you next year, and he wanted to know if you liked Eddie. He said Eddie was afraid to ask you, but he told Harold to ask me, and then I was to ask you. If you say you’ll go with him, then he’s going to ask you to a party out in the country. Honey, do, because then I can stay here and mama won’t know what time I get in.”

Cora breathed quickly and warmly. Her eyes, looking into Evelyn’s, were dark and starry. She liked Eddie Vansickle—all last year, she had been guarding her secret jealously, treasuring it deliciously, thrilling when she walked past his desk in school, afraid that the girls were going to ask her about him when they played Truth. She wanted to go with the boys now . . . so did Evelyn; so did all the girls, although some of them still pretended that they didn’t. For the last two years, the boys had been paying attention to Evelyn; but Cora was quieter, she thought of her old clothes and of how things were at home . . . that made her shy and they were afraid of her. But she had known that Eddie Vansickle liked her.

“I heard you!” a voice piped up warningly from the floor.

They held their breath. Cora blushed hotly.

“You go to sleep or I’ll tell mama.”

“Sh-h! Let’s pretend to be asleep for a while.”

They were silent, their hot hands tightly clasped, Evelyn giving Cora’s hand a tight little squeeze now and then, in warning.

“She *is* asleep, now. She won’t hear us, if we just barely whisper. Do you want to go with him, Cora?”

Cora squeezed Evelyn’s hand convulsively. But when Evelyn went on, eagerly whispering, “Kid, do, I’ll go with Harold a while, I can get him any time I want to, we’ll have bushels of fun——” she drew away her hand.

“Don’t you like Eddie, Cora?”

“I sort of like him,” she admitted. “But then, maybe I won’t be here.”

“Why not?” Evelyn flopped over to look at Cora. Now it was her eyes that were wide and dark and starry.

“Don’t tell, but Uncle Theodore wants papa to come to Onawa. He’s got a place in a factory there for him.”

“Oh, but you aren’t going, are you? Move a-*way*?” Evelyn breathed, in horror.

“I don’t know,” Cora answered. She knew, now, that it was of this she had been thinking all day—this was that cold little undercurrent to all her thoughts and feelings. She whispered, “But maybe.”

Evelyn clung to her in dismay. “Oh Cora, I should die if you went away, I’d never have any fun again. Oh, don’t let your folks go!”

Cora did not reply. Tears welled into her eyes and she held herself rigid. She didn’t want to leave Warwick . . . she had never liked any town so well, never had such a friend as Evelyn. Everything came to her in a wildly aching jumble—people calling her and Evelyn “the twins,” their paper hats, Mr. Anderson’s friendly teasing, her class in school and she getting the best marks in mathematics . . . and now this. . . . She knew what it would mean to go with Eddie Vansickle. It made her pride glow. Even more than Evelyn’s friendship, the favor and choice of a boy like Eddie Vansickle would make her place secure. And Cora wanted that, fiercely. There would be hayrick rides in summer, gay wild parties in the winter where they played Skip-to-m’Lou and Jip-along-Josie. When she thought of all the games . . . Clap-in-Clap-out . . . her cheeks grew hot in the darkness.

Because she liked Eddie Vansickle—his turned-up nose that the girls called “cute,” his blue eyes and full boyish lips, his shock of thick brown hair parted in the middle. She liked him better than any boy in town—she would have liked him whether he was in the crowd or not. She felt as if her heart would be actually torn in two if she had to leave all this and go.

“*Don’t* let them decide to go, Cora,” Evelyn was pleading.

But there was so much that Evelyn didn't know. She didn't really understand what it meant to be poor—whenever she wanted anything, all she had to do was to go up to her father's office and tease for a few minutes. "Papa, I've got to have a quarter." "Papa, you've got to take Cora and me to the next show that comes to town, or else I won't say that you're a nice man any more."

And he always did it. Cora remembered how this very morning she had wanted to go to work that minute, for the sake of her overworked mother, and of the family pride, and her own burning unused energy. In Onawa she might do something—here, what was there? Her throat ached to keep back bitter tears. She wanted to stay so terribly, every single minute crammed with living even when the living was painful, and with all the shining new promise of next year. . . . But she would not say that she would try to persuade her parents not to go.

Chapter II

1

They were almost there, Mr. Schwietert told the whining children:—

“Two more towns—den vun more town—den all de peoples piles out!”

What a journey! A day as hot as the very worst in summer, the train packed with sweating immigrants, no water in the cooler, and nothing to be seen, when the children pressed their heated little faces despairingly against the window glass, but flat miles and miles of prairie. “When are we going to get there?” had been their constant piteous demand. Every one of the trekkings of the Schwietert tribe—from Albany, to Cincinnati, to Mechanicstown, to Warwick—had been different from this. The family, always hopeful, and had looked forward to the new place to right, miraculously, their fortunes. First, the job in the tailor shop in Cincinnati; then the “lowndry” in Mechanicstown; then the little tailor shop of his own that was sure to flourish in a booming new town like Warwick. But none of them ever wanted to leave Warwick. Necessity, not expectation, had driven them. In Warwick, they had fitted into the young, fresh, crude, growing life of the polyglot little town on the western border of Iowa. Cora had had Evelyn and her crowd; the younger girls, their playmates; Mrs. Schwietert, with her ability to cook and her capacity for work, had been welcomed among the other matrons at the huge church suppers; and Chris Schwietert had been the leading figure in the Warwick band. If papa could only have made the shop go . . . if he had just stuck *to* it!

“Vun more town—den de next—‘On-ee-va, On-ee-va!’ ” he imitated the brakeman.

The dark had come down over the rich hot endless fields, the acres and acres of ripe corn, the towns, far apart, with small red depots and paths leading through weeds to Main streets. Life began to stir, thickly, in the narrow, stuffy, swaying coach . . . sleeping babies to waken and cry, mothers to hush them and to close their dark waists over full breasts; men to silently gather queer-looking bundles, with occasional sharp orders to whining children; frightened immigrant women to tie dark scarves about their heads and cling, with terrified clutching grasp, to the coats of their men. Lunch boxes were thrown out of windows into the dark, flying expanse of huge landscape.

“Cora, you look after May. Rosie, Sophie will look out for you. Take hold of mama’s skirt when we get off, Sophie, and Rosie, you take hold of Sophie. Papa, you carry Clarence.”

“Ja, I carry de liddle fellow, papa take him,” Mr. Schwietert crooned. He lifted the little boy who whined and let his feet, in buttoned shoes, dangle helplessly.

Cora tied on May’s bonnet. The white ribbon strings were stiff and yellowish—May had chewed them: she insisted that she liked “ribbon juice.” It was May whom Cora must always look after, must adorn and defend against the knowledge that she wasn’t as pretty as the others.

“Carry me,” May pleaded.

“Oh, sister can’t. But she’ll keep hold of your hand.”

She pulled out the ducktails of thin flaxen hair from under the bonnet, washed off May’s sallow little hands with the wet rag that Sophie had brought and washed about the pale soft mouth, tried to brush the wrinkles out of her dress. Poor May always had the worst of it. She would have to go into the city in this old dress. Her banana had made her sick and she had vomited all over her blue dress and over the red plush seat.

Now they were going past strange city lights. Cora stood on the dusty, yielding plush, and got down her hat from the rack. Her paper hat—she was ashamed of it, feared it might not look right in the city. It had only been fun to wear it when Evelyn was wearing hers. She could see that the scarlet crêpe paper was fading and turning brown, as if it had been singed. She did not have time to do more than smooth back her hair and push up the ribbon on the long, shining black braid; and this worried her, because she and Evelyn were both getting to the age when, as Mrs. Anderson complained, they thought of nothing but how they looked. It was humiliating to feel herself a disheveled, too-big-for-her-age girl, in a faded drooping paper hat and a wrinkled summer dress, dragging along a pale, whining, sickly little sister. She was humiliated by the appearance of the whole family, her father small and foreign, with Clarence’s legs dangling over his arm, her mother tall and gaunt and anxious, the two cross little girls stumbling after her, and all their dreadful luggage.

The train stopped, with a final jerk. The Schwieterts were in the aisle, a long string keeping resolutely together—even when that jerk spilled them forward. The windows stared into the frightening, noisy station. Other people crowded into the aisle. A dark, stocky man, with a smell of sweaty

flesh, was jammed up against Cora, doggedly pushing and calling back cross orders in some unknown tongue to his mutely terrified wife. Cora bucked him furiously. Slowly, they were all shoved forward. They reached the platform of the coach, and the fresh night air was suddenly all around them, full of roaring clangor. The brakeman swung down May, then Cora. The family huddled together, looking helplessly at the open iron gates. Where was Uncle Theodore? Where would they go if they didn't find him?

“Well, let's go *on*,” Cora said angrily.

There was nothing to do but yield to the press of moving people. Cora, holding tightly to the whimpering May, pushed angrily after her father, determined not to let the crowd keep her back. They got finally to an open place beyond the tracks, and stood there, helplessly watching the stream of immigrants with bundles and children, that passed, and passed and passed. . . .

“Ach, dere is Teodor!”

2

Mrs. Schwietert and the children waited in the station, while the two men looked after the baggage. There was room only for Mrs. Schwietert to sit down and take Clarence on her lap. The little girls leaned against her. Cora stood beside the bench. She felt dazed, the noise hurt her ears, but she looked about the ugly station. There was a constant passing and re-passing of people that made everything swim before her eyes. People were stretched out in hideously uncomfortable attitudes on the hard benches with dark bundles piled beside them. Men had taken off their shoes. Women were nursing babies. This dingy old station was far too small for the hordes of immigrants to the western farm lands that poured through it every night. It smelled of herded humanity.

“Why don't they come back, mama?” Rosie complained.

“They'll be back soon. Look at all these people. Look at the little baby in the red shawl. What country do you suppose it comes from?”

“I don't want to look at it,” Rosie cried. She hid her face in her mother's skirt.

“All right. You don't need to look. Pretty soon we'll be at Uncle Theodore's, and then you can go to sleep, poor child.”

Cora was determined not to complain like the younger ones. She stood, dizzily and sullenly, on her sturdy legs.

The two men came back, and again there was a little happy burst of relief, as when they had recognized Uncle Theodore shouldering through the crowd.

“So you all got here, then?”

“Oh, yes. But will you have room for all of us, Theodore?”

“I guess we’ll make room. Soph’s got it fixed. Well, shall we go?”

They trailed meekly after Uncle Theodore, Mrs. Schwietert carrying Clarence now, and Mr. Schwietert weighted down grotesquely with heavy valises.

“Don’t let go of me, sister,” May whimpered.

“No, sister’s got hold of you.”

Holding tightly to May’s damp little hand, Cora got out of the station into the dark night air. She plodded wearily along the brick platform after the others . . . and all at once, the noisy, looming station, the streaming people, the tracks and the baggage and the strange lights and sounds, were unreal to her. She thought, with homesick anguish, of Warwick; of the long boardwalk, pale in the moonlight; of the iron bridge over the “crick” that was mysterious and far below them in the night . . . and she wanted the stillness, the beautiful loneliness of the country night, and then the muted sound of the mourning dove in the evergreens that had wakened her and Evelyn every morning at the Andersons’. . . She felt battered, dazed, humiliated, from forcing her way through the packed, sweating, breathing, smelling herd in the station. It had knocked from her her identity. She did not know where she was going, what was to become of all of them. Only her strong hold on May gave her a steadiness of endurance.

They stood waiting for a street car. Cora remembered Cincinnati dimly, but she felt unaccustomed and frightened among the lights and noises. What place could they ever have in this hot, clanging, crowded city with the hard pavements and looming buildings? They belonged in the little frame house near the creek, where now, in the late evening, there would be only the shrill cry of crickets in the weeds. She trembled with weary homesickness.

Uncle Theodore got them on the car somehow or other, luggage and all. Cora held May. Clarence, dazed by the lights and the strange motion, began to whimper. Rosie and Sophie could scarcely stay awake.

But the nightmare feeling lessened when they got off the car at a quiet corner and were led past small houses to a doorway in which Aunt Soph

stood ready to welcome them. Uncle Theodore's welcome had been oblique and bashful, but hers was warm.

"See who's come! Well, Carrie! and how's Cora? This must be Aunt Soph's little Clarence! Come in. Are you all dead, you poor things? My, but I'm glad to see you!"

Aunt Soph made the strange room a haven, a home. She and Uncle Theodore lived in half of a double frame house—the house was only a dark outline, packed in narrowly between two other houses, in the night. But in the dingy front room were things that Cora, at least, could recognize—things that had come from her grandmother's old house in Ohio, and that Aunt Soph had brought with her when the old home was broken up and she came to keep house for Uncle Theodore. Those enlarged photographs of Grandma and Grandpa Schneider, hanging against the cheap brown wall paper—two old German people, he with a long beard and spectacles, and she with spectacles and smooth hair. These other strange things—the plush lounge, the wooden rockers, the painted lamp—must belong to the housekeeping days of Uncle Theodore and Aunt Grace.

"Come in, come in, sit down and make yourselves comfortable," Aunt Soph urged. "These poor children! Well, just as soon as we get them cooled off a little, we'll let them go to bed. Did you nearly die on the train?"

"It was pretty hot. Just packed with foreigners."

"Oh, it's like that all the time. They go through here that way every night. You can see them just that way, any time you go to the station. Is it hot in here?" Aunt Soph asked, anxiously. She tried to raise the window a little more.

"It's all right. Hot everywhere, I guess."

It seemed to the children that no air came through the bulging screen of the narrow window. The wall of the house next door, the pavement outside, kept in the stale heat of the day. Cora felt as if she would stifle with longing for the empty prairie, spreading all about the little house with its darkness and evening dampness. Here, she felt almost panicky.

Aunt Soph broke into the talk of the men about trains and travel.

"Now, I'm going to get you all something to drink, to cool you off, and then we'll get these poor youngsters to bed."

"Oh, Soph!—now, don't bother about us."

“Ach, it’s no bother. You sit still, Carrie. I’m not going to let you folks go to bed without a little taste of something.”

“Well, but, Soph——” Mrs. Schwietert called after her. “Are you sure you’ve got room for all of us?”

“We’ve got that all fixed. You just sit and cool off a few minutes. Quit your worrying, Carrie.”

Aunt Soph disappeared into the kitchen. It was like going to the old house in Ohio, while grandma and grandpa were still alive—having Aunt Soph go down cellar and come back with a plate of cool apples and a bottle of home-made grape wine. Suddenly, everything was homelike; so that when Mrs. Schwietert said, “You go and bring things in for Aunt Soph,” Cora went out, quite happily, into the stuffy little kitchen that smelled of the oil from the kerosene lamp.

“Well, Cora, so now you’re in Onawa,” Aunt Soph said cheerfully.

“I know it.”

Cora’s eyes stung with quick, homesick tears for Warwick: Evelyn’s kitchen, where she had been only last night, getting a drink before she and Evelyn went up to bed; letting the water run and run until it was cold in the thin glasses with their garlands of frosted leaves, like the leaves on window panes in the winter. . . .

“Oh, you’ll get to like it,” Aunt Soph comforted her. “It’ll be better for the whole bunch of you. Just you wait—we’ll have some good times. Won’t we?”

“I suppose so,” Cora gulped.

Aunt Soph patted her shoulder. “You take in this plate of cookies. Do you like beer?”

“No, I hate it.”

“Well, we’ll let the men have their beer, and the rest of us will have a drink of lemonade. Cheer up, Cora. Pretty soon you’ll all be earning money, and getting on a whole lot better than you ever could in that little burg stuck ’way out there. You bet!”

Cora reached into her blouse for her rumpled handkerchief, wiped her eyes, and carried the plate of cookies into the other room. When they saw the glasses and the cool bottle, the men exclaimed, “Ah! That looks something like!” The cross children sat up and began to nibble cookies. For

a time there was hopeful chatter and a feeling of homecoming in the stuffy room. Then the weariness of the travelers asserted itself. Clarence and May were already sound asleep, just where they had dropped, unconscious, and utterly helpless. Rosie began to cry.

“We must put these children to bed!”

“Yes, we can talk over all these things tomorrow,” Aunt Soph agreed, heartily.

“Sure,” Uncle Theodore said.

“Vell, Soph, vot you tink you are going to do mit all dis big crowd of Schwieterts?” Mr. Schwietert demanded.

“I’ve got that all arranged. I got a room for part of you at the house next to here. You can go over any time you like.”

The lights blurred together before Cora’s eyes. She stood, drugged and swaying, while the others planned. . . .

“Well, then, let the men have that room . . . you and I . . . why not the three girls. . . .” She did not even demand May instead of Rosie. And when Aunt Soph cried, gaily, “Come on then, Cora, let’s go over,” dumbly she followed, not knowing whether she had answered her mother’s anxious, “You don’t mind going over there, do you, dear?” When she got out into the fresh dark night with Aunt Soph and the two girls, she revived a little. She was able to notice the narrow stairs of the house they entered, the little room with its meager furnishings and small open window from which Aunt Soph fastened back the curtain. She could open the valise she had brought, get out nightgowns for herself and Rosie and Sophie, even help the two girls to undress. But she could only whisper answers to Aunt Soph’s questions and reassurances.

“You’re all right. Just as if you were in my house. I know these people. Now you don’t have to get up until you’re ready in the morning. Got everything you want? You aren’t afraid to stay, are you? You’re all right. You bet!”

She got into bed beside Rosie and Sophie, so dead tired that she did not, actually, have the energy to push aside Rosie’s sprawling arm and make room for herself. She could only lie huddled up on the edge of the bed, whimpering with feeble exasperation. She tried to realize, with a dazed unbelief, that Warwick was actually left behind. Two nights ago she had still been with Evelyn. She had spent her last three nights in Warwick at the Andersons’. Then she had had Evelyn’s little white bed, the ruffled dimity

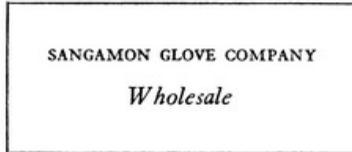
curtains pinned back from the open window through which came night air fresh from the dewy lawn and leafy trees . . . Evelyn cuddled beside her, whispering delicious secrets about the girls and Harold Wing and what they “believed” about religion, with the thought of Eddie Vansickle a warm little treasure hidden in her heart . . . and then in the morning, the pretty breakfast table, with its patterned white cloth and flowered dishes, in the dining room that looked out across the lawn with the birch tree and the evergreens and a big bed of pink asters. . . . She could see again the great buildings looming up with their locked doors and blank windows . . . lived again in the rush and noise and dinginess of the station. The frayed curtain, fastened back from the window, did not stir. Street cars clanged from a nearby street—jerked and clanged.

Part II

Chapter I

1

Cora could look up from the street and see the gold lettering on the wide third-story windows:



Mr. Starr, who kept the drugstore in Warwick, had got her this place. His brother-in-law, Mr. Keppert, was at the head of this branch office of the Sangamon Company.

It had been shameful to have Mrs. Starr recognize her in the ten-cent store: “Why, isn’t this Cora Schwietert? Well, I declare! I never expected to see any one I knew. Are you working here, Cora? You’re all living here in the city, are you? Well, I wish I could see your mother! Where do you live?” She had told Mrs. Starr the address, blushing deeply, and hoping that Evelyn would never know where it was; and Mrs. Keppert, standing back and looking coolly surprised, had put in, a trifle impatiently, “Oh, that’s a long ways out, Nellie . . .” trying, as Cora knew, to interrupt Mrs. Starr’s flow of talk, half cordial and half curious. Cora’s mother had been afraid that Mrs. Starr would really come—they had worked together in the Ladies’ Aid in Warwick: not that she minded having Mrs. Starr know where they lived (as Cora did), but that she was afraid of being out at work, and didn’t want the Starrs to go back, saying that Chris Schwietert hadn’t been able to provide for his family. But she needn’t have worried. Mrs. Starr, in spite of the minute directions she had begged from Cora, never appeared. Cora had been certain that she wouldn’t come, when she had seen the way Mrs. Keppert drew close to her and began to talk to her in a low, significant tone, as they went out of the store. “A dreadful neighborhood—takes half an hour to get out there—who on earth *are* these people?” was what she was probably saying.

But just before they went home, Mr. and Mrs. Starr had appeared together in the store one day, full of apologies and of messages to Mrs.

Schwietert. Mrs. Starr had suggested,

“Don’t you suppose Cora might get a place in Arthur’s office, Charlie?”

“Why, she might! . . . You go around there, Cora, and ask for Mr. Keppert, and say I sent you.”

“Yes, of course, that would be just the thing!” Mrs. Starr had said, enthusiastically. “It’s a nice place, Cora, in the nicest new building. It would be a lovely place for you. . . . Well, good-bye, my dear. Tell your mother I’m *so* sorry, but . . .”

“We’ll tell that bosom friend of yours we saw you,” Mr. Starr had called back good-naturedly.

Cora flushed deeply. She had written Evelyn that she was working in a store, but she had never said that it was the ten-cent store.

She could not be sorry, though, now that her first humiliation was past, that the Starrs had seen her. She was proud to go into the office entrance of the big, new building. The Sangamon Glove Company had two rooms on the third floor. Cora really felt timid, but she scowled resolutely, and opened the door with its black lettering. Only one man was in the room. He was humming abstractedly and wandering about, idly scratching one hand against his coat. He looked at Cora. She would not show him that she was afraid. Uncertainty always made her look sullen and black-browed.

“I was to work here,” she said.

“Oh! That so?” He glanced about the room. “Well, I guess you’ll have to wait for Miss Rorick. She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

The man sat down at his desk and made a great show of getting his day’s work started, and of having been tremendously busy ever since his arrival. He glanced at Cora again.

“Better sit down and wait for Miss Rorick.”

“Will Mr. Keppert be here pretty soon?”

“Nope. Gone out of town,” he said cheerfully.

Cora waited, then she took off her dark blue sailor hat that she had got in the ten-cent store, and hung it on the coat-tree. She sat down near the window. Other employees came in, but they merely glanced at her. Cora sat awkwardly silent. The voices all sounded idle and cheerful—perhaps that was because Mr. Keppert was away. His big desk, with his name in gold on a small black placard, was orderly and closed, the swivel chair pushed up

against it. The two big windows were open. The air came in, springlike, fresh, relaxing. Cora felt, with passionate gratitude, the cleanliness and orderliness of the office. These people were nicer, too. She could not bear most of the girls in the ten-cent store, or in the Red Mill, either . . . Gertie, who had worked with her at the counter, with her big, soft face dirty under the powder, and her great rat's-nest of reddish hair.

“Miss Rorick'll be in pretty soon.”

The other girl in the room looked up. “Is she waiting for Bess?” She gave a little, meaning laugh, although not ill-natured.

“How does she work it?” the man asked, curiously.

The door swung open, and Miss Rorick came in, radiant in a new light spring suit and a hat with violets. The others began, in chorus, half admiring and half mocking:

“Well, see the lady! No wonder she's late. This is Miss Vanderbilt, is it? Chawmed!”

“Oh, am I late?” Miss Rorick trilled. “Heavens!”

She hung up her coat and drew out two silver pins from the fresh stiff violets of her little hat. Her big wavy pompadour was a lustrous auburn and her forehead a smooth pure white. She pulled at her fresh white shirtwaist and settled her leather belt with her fingers pressed flat against its two sides. Cora watched every movement. The suit jacket hung with the lustrous gray satin lining showing, and that, and the hat with the violets just above it, made a focus for the wandering vague sweetness of this feeling of spring.

“This girl's been waiting for you, Bess.”

“Oh, have you?” Miss Rorick cried animatedly. “Are you the girl Mr. Keppert hired last week? Oh, yes. Well, come on, I'll show you what he wants you to do.”

Cora stood beside her, awkward and silent, while she gave her instructions in a carelessly vivacious tone. Although she listened with intent anxiety to get everything just right, Cora was aware of that satin-white hand with the silver ring with a dull purple stone, of the glossy stiffness of Miss Rorick's shirtwaist, the faint delicate scent of powder. Miss Rorick trilled out her orders in an easy lilt.

“Now, you see, what he wants you to do is take Bradstreet and copy down all the names of the dry goods people in Missouri that are rated above U. See?”

“Well . . . then do you want me to bring them to you?”

“Um-hm. You bet,” Miss Rorick said absently.

She sat down at her desk and began to rattle her typewriter.

“Where shall I sit to do it?”

“Oh, golly, I wonder! I’ll tell you, you use part of Mr. Biddle’s desk, he isn’t in here much. Go ahead. See? That desk marked B-I-D-D-L-E. This girl’s going to use your desk, Biddle.”

Mr. Biddle did not answer. He got some papers and escaped to the salesroom.

Cora plodded through the big book all morning with conscientious thoroughness, although she had no idea what the list was for. Once she took it over to Miss Rorick.

“Is this all right?”

Miss Rorick glanced at it hastily, and said, with absent but encouraging cheerfulness:

“You bet!”

Cora was aware of the light jesting, the cheerfully unnecessary passing to and fro in the room. The other girl asked, “Where are you going in your swell duds, Bess?” “Party, when I get through here today.” “Gee, I never see you when you aren’t going to a party!” Cora felt, now resentful sympathy, now scorn, at the way they were all dawdling because the boss was away. They ought to have Schinstrom, the manager at the Red Mill, get after them—they’d move!

Toward noon, the sales manager, a thin, irritable man with light hair and eyeglasses, came in from the front room, and demanded letters from Miss Rorick. The other girl averted her face, and grinned at Miss Rorick’s glib explanation, made with a wide-eyed gaze at the manager, and not the slightest embarrassment.

“Well, why should she work harder than she has to?” Cora thought, resentfully. “I don’t intend to, either.”

But she plodded away. She did not know whether she envied and upheld, or despised Miss Rorick. Half an hour before noon, Miss Rorick and the other girl began to dawdle still more. Miss Rorick sat playing an idle, silent tune on the keys of her typewriter.

Cora followed the two girls into the toilet room. It seemed exquisitely clean and private to her after other places she had known. Oh, she did want to keep her place! She stood back while the others washed their hands and chattered.

“Gee, I hate to work this kind of weather! I’d quit for half a cent this afternoon. Grace, did you notice Biddle? You’d think he’d never seen me before.”

“Are you still going to the dance with him?”

“You bet. He’s sorry, now, he condescended to ask me. Always pretends he gets his girls outside the office. Oh, yes, he’s in so-CI-e-ty! You bet I’m going. I’d do it just to spite him.”

“I hate him. Where are you going for lunch?”

“Lessing’s. I want some of their salad. Want to come?”

“They’re too expensive. I’m hard up.”

“Oh, well, so’m I, for that matter. Who isn’t?”

“I’m going to the Y. W.”

But as they went out, Miss Rorick tucked her hand through the crook of the other girl’s arm, and confided vivaciously; “Oh, Grace, you know that squinty man that goes up in the elevator with us? Well, I got a rise out of him! Come on with me, and I’ll tell you.”

Cora ate her lunch in the midst of strange girls from other offices, in the little rest room down the hall, that had a broken mirror, miscellaneous wooden rockers, and an ancient sofa upholstered in Brussels. She finished quickly and went back to the office.

Only the sales manager was working there. He was so quiet that she almost forgot him. Cora had already learned too much about being an employee to go straight back to the thick Bradstreet. That was closed, with her paper marking the place. She had no idea what she was to do when she had finished that. The room was so clean and still. The windows were very far above the noisy street. The noon air was sweet and warm. . . . She thought of the windows of florists’ shops, of fat pink hyacinths in brownish pots, and yellow jonquils tied with green ribbon . . . then of the hill south of Warwick, where she and Evelyn and all the children had gone for windflowers very early in the spring . . . the damp, black soil, cold on the slope, and the little clumps that showed just a furred point of purple-blue coming through the silvery fur. There was a picture in her mind. It was clear,

and yet it was very small and distant. Evelyn in her red tam and light jacket was running down the hill-slope, bending over a clump of flowers; the sky was a wild, windy blue above her . . . Cora could feel the windflowers in her hands, nestling, furry and warm, and yet with a kind of fluttering . . .

Her brown eyes darkened into somber brooding. But she turned, then, and looked about the office with a hungry questioning. She wanted to stay. She wasn't ashamed to think of Evelyn here. She might write to her again. In the Red Mill, where she had been ordered about by that dreadful Schinstrom, where cheap sporty men in red neckties and bright tan shoes had tried to flirt with her when she waited on them, she could not bear to think of Evelyn. That picture of the hill-slope near Warwick was clear and beautiful—but it was far away . . . a cloudiness from the windy sky seemed to blot it out. The office was bright with reality. She was here. And now she could live again, not just struggle—like the kitten that she and May and Evelyn had brought home from Peterson's farm in a gunny sack, and that had struggled, struggled without a sound, all the way home.

She went back to Bradstreet. The sales manager looked up, and the sharp furrows between his eyes relaxed.

“Well, getting along all right?” he asked, kindly.

She told him, “Yes,” while she felt a deep inner glow of pleasure.

2

When the Vine street car got to F avenue, the men from the iron works began crowding on. Cora was crushed into a hard wicker seat between the window and a mountainous red-faced woman with bundles. The conductor's voice was hard and sharp over the heads of the crowd—“Step along in the car, now—step along!” The men piled on—Cora looked up to see black shirts and blackened faces . . . a swaying, half-angry, half good-natured, packed-in mass. She held her own place belligerently and sturdily against the pushing and the thick breathing of the woman beside her. The car went noisily over the bridge that separated the North End from the rest of Onawa. She began pushing through the mass to get off at her own corner, helped by the angry voice of the conductor:

“Let these people off—step back in the car—let these people through!”

She drew a big breath when she managed to stumble from the car step. These Vine street cars, although they carried trailers, were always the same at this time of day.

She walked soberly down the road to the little straggling street where their house stood. It was like country out here beyond the bridge, except that the frame houses were almost uniform, set closer together than small town houses, and the walls and trees were blackened by smoke from the iron works. On one side of the road, in a weedy hollow, some Italian shanties clustered. In bright daylight they looked dreadful—tipsy things: some painted a dark red like freight cars, and the yards a mess of cans and old shoes with dingy washings hanging on ropes strung insecurely too near the ground . . . dirty little brown-faced children shouting out impudent taunts, that made Cora cringe and then grow furious. But the soft March twilight gave the ramshackle settlement, with its busy scattering of débris, a smallness and a pathos, here on the great rough stretch of earth under the big gentle sadness of the sky . . . the voices of the children, of the squat dark women, the yelping of a dirty white dog, were only little sounds, brief and quickly fading, within the great enveloping softness, dispassionate and sustaining, of the evening air.

The other row of houses, standing high above the road on a shelving rise of ground on which the grass grew long and tough-rooted, was softened too. Cora climbed the wooden steps that led up from the road to their own house. The stained frame house front was silently welcoming. A smell of spring came from the damp ground matted over with short dead grass, as if new grass might be starting. A picture of their first house in Onawa rose from the dark, painful tenacity of Cora's memory. One of those double frame houses, grayish, flimsy—a colored family occupied the other side. Cora could not bear, then, to write to Evelyn, with the humiliating knowledge of the way that they were living. She had felt a morbid pride and fear lest any one in Warwick should find out about it. She had stopped answering Evelyn's letters, and Evelyn thought that she had gone away and forgotten.

There was a sweetness in the air outside—a delicacy and a sadness, and a soothing. Cora went into the house. It felt chilly and disheveled. The parlor floor was scattered with blocks from which the colored paper was peeling. All the rooms had the cold and dismal emptiness of a place that has been closed up and the fire gone out. Things were standing about in the kitchen. Cora went out to the back steps, shivering. Rosie and Clarence were playing out there with an old wheelbarrow.

“Rosie! Isn't anybody at home?”

“Nope!”

“Where's mama?”

“Oh, she got a call to go out somewhere and clean.”

“Has she been away all day?”

“Yes. Oh, well—nearly.”

“Well, who’s been here?”

“I have. I stayed home from school.”

“When’s mama coming back?”

“Oh—I don’t know.”

“For supper?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, it’s almost supper time now. Haven’t you got anything started?”

“No!” Rosie shouted, both aggrieved and belligerent. “I got to look after Clarence. That’s what I stayed home for.”

“Well, did mama say what she *wan*-ted?”

“I don’t know. How do I know?”

Cora went back into the kitchen. Suddenly she was on the very edge of exhaustion from the strain of her first day at the office. She felt furious and despairing. Oh, how she hated this little kitchen, so cheerless and disorderly in the sunless light and chill of late afternoon! The dreadfulness of this way of living was no longer to be borne. Mama having to go out to work for people, and no one left to keep things going but Rosie, the most incompetent one of the whole family! But they would all be coming home before long—Sophie from the dressmaking shop where she was working with Aunt Soph, papa from the factory. Some one would have to get things started. Cora lighted the cook-stove, got some potatoes, and began to peel them in cold water that made her hands itch.

This could never go on. There must be some one at home. It couldn’t be herself or Sophie—it would have to be mama. It was simply of no use, moving on to another place, as papa wanted to do now. It would be the same thing over again. If papa couldn’t make a go of things here, he couldn’t anywhere. No. They were to stay. All of them would have to work and finally build up a home for themselves. Now—here—right on the *spot*. Cora felt that, with a passionate certainty that tightened all her muscles and made her blood hot.

The little tailor shop had quickly given out. Papa hadn't made it pay. He had been forced into the factory. But he was too old to begin that kind of work and he hated it—hated the grind that seemed to him so meaningless (all shust to make somebody else richer!—he said); hated the inhuman work with some one always standing over him. Cora felt cold and pitiless toward him. It did not matter to her that he was too tired for his little jokes and fun in the evening. She thought, with hard resentment, of the difficulty of her mother's life, of the suffering they had all gone through these last years. Uncle Theodore had got papa this place, but that was all he could do. It was of no use depending upon Uncle Theodore—even upon Aunt Soph, with her energy and loyalty—upon *any one*. It was simply up to Cora to do things for herself.

An old pain stirred. She could never enter the house without this inarticulate loneliness for May. She could not bear to look out at the two children playing in the yard—it would make her hate them. She knew that the rest of the family had been secretly glad that it was May who had died, if any of them must. Even Aunt Soph had hinted that. Even *mama* felt it. And they seemed to think—people did—that one of a big family must die. Cora could care for the other children, defend them with fierce protection, do things for them; but the personal devotion that gave her work and care a sweet and painful significance, that softened the cruel harshness, had been for May. She had been half frozen inside ever since May had died. . . . They all respected her . . . May had *loved* her, with little, thin, weak arms raised confidingly. . . .

Images broken and painful, too vivid now, of the day at the office, followed one another relentlessly through her mind. With a contemptuous twist of the lips, she threw away the delightful picture of herself wearing a hat trimmed with violets and an immaculate shirtwaist whose glossy cuffs had a sharp edge above slim white wrists. She thought now with disdain of Miss Rorick, and began hurling angry phrases at her. Yes, it was all right to slide through so easily, but it didn't really get any one anywhere. Cora hated all these girls who pretended to hold down a job and were really looking for a man to take care of them—just doing all their work on the surface, never trying to get hold of anything, sliding through. Young as she was, she saw through them! . . . And when they were married, they found themselves cramped up in some one else's existence and having to order their own lives by what some one else was able to do. That was *mama's* life—wasn't it? Doing double work, and at the same actually dependent upon papa, upon what he, not she, was able to make—having to fit in all her efforts to that.

Cora knelt down to shake the damper, hating the splintery roughness of the kitchen floor.

She would rather work, work, work, she thought fiercely. She was going to do what *she* could do. It was no use to depend upon any one but herself. If people wanted to *get* anywhere, they had to go into work for all it was worth—something papa never could do! She remembered shrewdly how people in Warwick had lived, working, accumulating, sticking to it, gradually building up a slow solid prosperity. She thought now with disdain of sitting at the open window in the office resting in the sense of the ease and cleanliness she had attained there. She couldn't stop to rest. She must get on. The others would work—Rosie and Sophie—but it depended upon her. Cora's whole firm body stiffened proudly to take the weight. She would help them, but she wouldn't let them keep her back. She was going to have something, she was going to be somewhere, some day. Feverish plans began to mingle with the images . . . Uncle Theodore—no use! . . . but Aunt Soph might help her through business school . . . she was ashamed to take more, but if she *must* . . .

The door slammed. The others were coming home. In spite of resolution, Cora's eyes sparkled with angry blame because everything had been left to her—and she was going to tell them! And this thing was going to change!

Chapter II

1

The Andersons were going to Colorado for their summer vacation. Evelyn was the one who had discovered that they could go by way of Onawa. Immediately she had thought of Cora. It was years since the two girls had regularly corresponded, although they still sent small gifts at Christmas. But Evelyn had never forgotten Cora. Now that she was at college, and believed, with ardent sincerity, that she was making the friendships that last through life, she had found other girls. But she was always the leader—too easily the leader—because of her prettiness, her high spirits, her petted position as an only child, her popularity among the boys. Cora had none of these things in the same degree. Nevertheless, there was a sturdiness, a kind of innate strength in Cora, that made her alone Evelyn's equal.

Mr. Anderson came back from the smoker.

"Well, girls, we're approaching the city. Don't forget your parcels."

"I don't know that we ought to have stopped here," Mrs. Anderson demurred. "It was out of our way. We didn't really know the Schwieterts very well."

"I knew them very well," Evelyn interposed warmly. "I couldn't bear to come so near where Cora lives and not see her. Where's my suitcase, mama?"

"Papa, get it for her. Don't try to carry it to the dressing-room, Evelyn—let papa carry it for you."

"I'm not going to have papa parading after me down the aisle with this suitcase!" Evelyn said indignantly. "I want my toilet things."

"But can't you get them out?"

"No, they're all mixed up with everything."

Evelyn marched down the aisle to the dressing-room, resolutely stiffening her shoulders, so that they might not appear to sag under the weight of her overloaded suitcase and justify her mother's worrying. But what really made her indignant was not the worrying, or the usual implication of her fragility, but the tacit inference of her mother's manner in

regard to the Schwieterts. Mama was afraid that it might be lowering the family's dignity to visit them. And then there was always that little teasing assumption in mama's manner that Evelyn was going to be disappointed—that she and Cora would no longer have anything in common. Mama was always talking about her college friends.

Evelyn opened the suitcase and dug about through daintily laundered underwear and sachets and stockings until she had got out the jars of cleansing and vanishing cream that she had tucked into corners. After she had cleaned her face carefully and powdered it, she looked eagerly into the glass, wondering how much she had changed since the Schwieterts had last seen her, and how Cora looked now.

She tried to recapture the vision of herself as she had been at fourteen, and could only see wildrose cheeks and a bush of bright hair tied with blue ribbons, that she thought somewhat wistfully (although with gratification) must have been very attractive! They would think that her cheeks, which Mr. Schwietert had praised in his funny German phrases—"Haiden Röslein," he had called her—were not so bright. She supposed she *was* thin—that made her scowl, remembering her mother's anxious pleas that she should drink special cream (which she *hated*), and the officious fear of the Dean of Women that she was "undertaking too many things." All the same she was pleased with herself, and her dark blue eyes brightened delightfully. Her slender, dazzling vividness was what she wanted to have, and she was half in love with it. She had a moment of wondering whether Cora, who had been living in a city for so many years now, would find her clothes what they should be; and she remembered how all the Schwieterts used to admire everything she had.

The realization that they were coming to a city made both Mrs. Anderson and Evelyn adjust their hats more carefully. They were not entering that old station where the Schwietert family had arrived. This was a large new Union Station, with imposing gates. Clarence Schwietert, coming toward them and grinning boyishly, took on an added value from so evidently knowing his way about through this crowded, echoing place, where a red-cap came on a sliding run to get their bags. Clarence was wearing long trousers, and speaking in newly masculine tones, but it was evident that he was going to be small and slight like his father, instead of tall like his mother. As they followed him through the waiting-room with its onyx pillars and news-stands and bewilderment of labeled windows, Mrs. Anderson no longer felt quite so sure of her own dignity.

“Well, Clarence,” she said affably, when they got outside, “you’ve grown a good deal since we saw you last.”

“We expected you’d forgotten all about us,” Mr. Anderson told him. “But you seemed to realize that this fine-looking group of people must be the Andersons of Warwick.”

“Sure, I knew you,” Clarence answered, grinning and a little bashful.

“And are you going to pilot us home, Clarence?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“You’re the man of leisure in your family, are you?”

“Well—I don’t know. The girls have all got jobs, though. They can’t get off in the daytime.”

“And what do you do?” Mr. Anderson asked genially.

“Why, Clarence is in school, papa,” Evelyn put in impatiently. She gave Clarence a vivid smile that made him flush and look flattered.

“Oh, I work at about what I can get, in the summer. Not at anything steady. I’ve worked in some of the stores, and a lot of places. I could get more jobs if I’d quit school, but Cora won’t let me.”

“Oh, no, don’t want to quit school . . . don’t want to quit school,” Mr. Anderson agreed lazily. “Pretty much like the old man,” was what he thought.

“Do we take the street car, Clarence?” Mrs. Anderson asked graciously.

“Yes’m. We get it on the next corner.”

Clarence piloted them with a mixture of sedateness, boyish delight in showing off his superior acquaintance with the city, and equally boyish embarrassment. He was flattered by the presence of Evelyn. In the street car, she sat beside him and asked eager questions, which he was proud to answer; showering upon him, with only a caressing assumption of his youth, the whole dazzling radiance of her girlhood. He responded with shy laughter and the beginnings of confidences, and forgot how he had been literally forced into meeting that train. Mrs. Anderson leaned forward.

“How are your father and mother getting along now, Clarence?”

The car was passing through good streets, with good houses—frame houses, most of them, and rather elderly, set back in well-kept lawns. Evidently this was at least a “nice” car line.

“Oh, pretty good, I guess,” Clarence answered.

“Your father isn’t tailoring now?” Mr. Anderson asked.

“No, he had to give that up. He got sick, and I guess they thought he couldn’t go back to the factory.”

Inquiries must not be pushed too far along this line, but Mr. Anderson thought he had an understanding of the situation.

“And your mother, I suppose, is as busy as ever?”

“Oh, sure, mama’s always busy, I guess. We got twelve boarders now.”

“Dear me! And does your mother do all the cooking for them?”

“Yes, when Aunt Soph isn’t here. The girls all work down town.”

“Well, your mother’s a very wonderful woman,” Mr. Anderson said seriously.

Mrs. Anderson compressed her lips, but Evelyn cried:

“I absolutely *adore* Mrs. Schwietert!”

“Oh, we get off, do we, Clarence?” Mrs. Anderson said hastily.

“Yes, ma’am.”

He was too bashful to try to walk beside Evelyn. But she hurried on ahead of the others with him, as a matter of course, to his secret elation. Just because she was Cora’s friend, she didn’t seem to think that he was so young he must be left out.

He took them down a street that cut across the car track. It was newer, of course, and farther out, than the streets of pleasant houses that Mrs. Anderson had regarded so complacently from the window. These houses were smaller, and there were lots beyond. But the houses were not bad at all—frame houses, slightly varied in architecture, painted in blues and grays and greens.

“This is where you live, is it, Clarence?”

It was one of the gray houses, quite freshly painted, clean and trim, with a brown mission porch swing.

“Isn’t this *nice!*” Evelyn cried enthusiastically. “Oh, there’s Mrs. Schwietert coming to the door!”

She ran up the steps ahead of the others and laughed joyously, in the embrace of Mrs. Schwietert’s motherly, welcoming arms. Mrs. Anderson

followed, more sedately, but affable still—so affable that at least one of the Schwietert family was sure to confide to another before the day was over, “I think she’s nicer than she used to be.” There was a facetious and friendly interchange of greetings and comments between Mr. Schwietert and Mr. Anderson. Mrs. Schwietert stood smiling and calm, still keeping Evelyn’s hand and giving it a fond pressure; and Clarence grinned proudly, as if the presence of the Andersons were due to him alone.

“And so dis is our liddle girl, our liddle Flying-hair, our liddle Röslein!” Mr. Schwietert exclaimed comically. He took hold of Evelyn’s arms and shook her gently, while she smiled joyously straight into his eyes. “Ja, she get a liddle taller, a liddle slimmer, she shoot up, but still all dot hair it wants to fly around, it don’t want to be put up mit hair pins like de ladies use!”

“No, it doesn’t,” Evelyn answered. “If I could, I’d cut it off and not be bothered by it.” She gave her mother a petulant glance.

“Ja, dot is de stuff! Let it go fly!” He made one of his comical little foreign gestures. They all laughed—even Mrs. Anderson smiled reluctantly, although any such suggestion in regard to Evelyn’s beautiful hair was treason to her.

“Vell, and does she still lead de band and want to play everyting dere is to play?”

“You should hear her play, now,” Mrs. Anderson put in, proudly. “And sing.”

“Sing, is it? Ja, ja!”

“Come, papa,” Mrs. Schwietert interposed. “They want to go upstairs and take off their things. They’ve been traveling all day. Are you just tired to death?”

“Oh, no! Not a bit!” Evelyn trilled happily.

“I’m afraid that she’ll know how tired she is by night,” Mrs. Anderson sighed. “You know, she never wants to stop.”

“Well, she’s got a good long hour to rest before the girls get home,” Mrs. Schwietert said easily, with a smile at Evelyn.

In the upper hallway, she stopped and put her arm around Evelyn’s slim waist.

“I’m so glad to see you! But you look like such a young lady.”

“Do I?” Evelyn asked naïvely.

“The girls were almost afraid of you when they heard how you’d been studying. They were afraid you’d think they hadn’t learned anything.”

“Heavens! I can’t imagine any one being afraid of *me*! I’m the one that’s afraid of Cora. Just think how *won*-derful, to be earning her own living the way she is!”

“I guess it won’t take very long for you and Cora to get acquainted again. . . . Bright hair!” Mrs. Schwietert murmured fondly, when Evelyn took off her hat. She touched the fuzzy auriole gently, with a smile, pushing back fly-away locks, with a motherly touch, from Evelyn’s small face.

She had taken them into the front bedroom.

“Now, I’ll have to explain about the rooms,” she told them. “I thought I’d put you and Mr. Anderson in here, Mrs. Anderson, and let Evelyn have Mr. Robbins’s room. He can’t get his things out until he comes home from work, though, so if she’d just as soon lay off her wraps in here——”

“Oh, I don’t want to take anybody’s room!” Evelyn exclaimed, almost at the same moment that her mother cried:

“Dear me, are we putting you out? Do you need these rooms? We never dreamed——”

“Oh, yes, I keep a few roomers,” Mrs. Schwietert said quickly. “No, no, you’re not putting me out at all. The people who had this room are gone on their vacation—he works at the American Railway office where Sophie does—and Mr. Robbins won’t mind going next door for a few nights. No, no, I wouldn’t have asked you to come if we couldn’t manage it perfectly well. Our house always has room for a few more—Evelyn knows that!”

But when she had gone downstairs, and they were left together, the two visitors could not help talking uneasily.

“I didn’t dream she took roomers *and* boarders. How does that woman manage so much? And the house looks so neat.”

“I hate to drive some man out of his room, mama. I wonder where the girls sleep. I should think they could let me sleep with them. I wouldn’t mind bunking around on the floor or somewhere—it would be fun. Wonder who Mr. Robbins is,” Evelyn added irrelevantly.

“Oh well, now, darling, you can’t lose your sleep all the time you’re here. He probably is acquainted next door, and doesn’t mind going. As long as we’re *here*——”

“Mama, you never think of anything but my losing sleep or something! Anybody would think I was made of glass.”

“Well, if mama didn’t look after you, I don’t know who would,” Mrs. Anderson said tragically. “And after the way you looked when you came home from school! It gave mama such a shock.”

Evelyn, at the mirror, fluffed up her hair impatiently, and ran downstairs to avoid hearing the rest of the speech, which, she told herself angrily, she had been hearing all summer. She had wanted to stay a few minutes, to get her mother to agree with her delighted amazement over the pleasantness of the little house, the nice new furniture in the bedroom, and the spotless dresser scarf and counterpane. . . . How perfectly darling Mr. Schwietert was, and Mrs. Schwietert simply the grandest, best woman. . . . But something always interfered when she wanted to be just easy and confidential with mama. She didn’t mind the large, protecting motherliness of Mrs. Schwietert. She loved it, loved to feel herself small and girlish and pretty and beloved, in the clasp of the older woman’s strong arms. She thought of all the old good times in the Schwietert house; the easy indulgence, mixed with hard necessity for work and endurance; the gentle, sensible advice—comprehending, but not too sympathetic—when she had confided all her passionate grievances. . . . Mama wouldn’t let her do this and mama wouldn’t let her go to that . . . but mama always had to spoil things by being so. . . .

Her grievance was almost gone by the time she reached the foot of the stairs. She heard sounds from the kitchen, and called gaily, “Are you there, Mrs. Schwietert? May I come in?”

But it was Mr. Schwietert who opened the door. He was dressed in a big blue apron that made his eyes bluer than ever, but gave a pathos to his sprightly little figure. Evelyn saw that his thick hair was quite gray.

“No—mama, she is someveres else shust now. De old man is de vun who works now in de kitchen. Come into my house. Dis is now my house.”

She came in, smiling with tentative brightness, looking about eager to praise the tidy kitchen with the glimpse of green garden and little elm tree through the screen door. But he went on, rather sadly now, so that she felt reluctant and sorry and embarrassed.

“Ja, ja, dis is where I do mine tailoring now. I tailor de vegetables for mama—take off dere jeckets, instead of put dem on. I vash de dishes—I look after de garden. Ja, dese American cities, dey are no place for a liddle

tailor shop—hurry, hurry, hurry. Mama and de girls—hurry, hurry, hurry. All so much ve must have. Nowadays people can get vot dey want from de stores, dey don't need de tailor. From de factories—dose factories, dey are de vorst places. Dot factory, dot was what gave me dis bad heart. But de peoples nowadays wants dem. I don't understand dot.”

He added, more brightly:

“You must see mine shickens!”

He took her out to the back step, and she stood, shielding her eyes from the low, bright sun, while she admired the white leghorns.

“De only trouble—on Sundays, den mama tink de boarders, dey must eat shicken. Den one of dese he got to be killed, and I must do it. Mama and de girls, dey are vimmens, I am de man. Dot I do not like to do. I do not like to feed de liddle shickens, give dem dere names, and teach dem to come to me . . . ‘Cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck-cluck!’ whenever dey see me . . . and all de time, dey are for de boarders to eat. Let dem eat udder meat den, dot is what I say.”

“But the other animals have to be killed, too,” Evelyn protested.

“Ja, dot I know, but dose maybe dey are not brought up to know de peoples . . . ja, ja, dot I know,” he murmured, sadly; and shook his head.

Evelyn thought defiantly:

“He *is* sweet. And why should people think animals and everything are just made for them? People are terrible.”

Nevertheless, she knew that Mrs. Schwiertert had a hard time of it, that all the family did. . . . This low sunlight was bright and pleasant over the green grass in the small backyard. She was excited by the strangeness of a new place. And then there was Colorado, with the mountains and everything, still to come! She did not try to answer Mr. Schwiertert, and edged back toward the house.

Mrs. Schwiertert was in the kitchen when she entered.

“Well, Evelyn, tell me what you've been doing.”

“Studying,” Evelyn said. “Having a good time in general.”

“You like it at college?”

“Love it! Oh, I get furious, of course—they give the girls so many rules, and it simply makes me want to do something reckless.”

“But you’re enjoying your music? You think you’re going to take that up? Your mother was just telling me about that.”

“Did she tell you I want to go on the stage?”

“No, do you mean it? Not but what I think you could do it, Evelyn. But would your mother ever consent to that?”

Evelyn hitched one shoulder expressively, and made a little face.

“And where do de fellows come in?” Mr. Schwietert demanded.

“Maybe they don’t *come* in,” Evelyn answered blithely.

He laughed.

“Ja, ja, I hear dot before! Dis pretty girl, dis Curly-locks, and she say, ‘Dey don’t come in!’ You should be like Cora, den, send de fellows walking when dey get in de way.”

“Does Cora do that?” Evelyn asked eagerly.

“Cora’s a funny girl, Evelyn,” Mrs. Schwietert said. “But she’s a mighty fine girl,” she added loyally. “We wouldn’t be where we are, if it wasn’t for Cora, I’ll tell you. The girls are all fine, but Cora is the one we depend on.”

Mr. Schwietert muttered something over his vegetables.

“I’m wild to see Cora,” Evelyn murmured dreamily.

She wandered into the parlor, where her mother was sitting, and played a few impatient bars on the piano, refusing, with a frown, to “play one of her pieces.” She knew her mother hated to hear her “fool with ragtime,” except when it made her the center of a crowd of eager, admiring young people. Mrs. Schwietert was setting the long table in the dining room, and she begged to be allowed to help.

“No, no. You’ve just come. Tomorrow you can help, if you want to. I’ll tell you, Evelyn, it’s just about time for the girls to be getting home. If you walk down to the car line, you might meet them—Cora and Sophie, anyway—they usually come home together.”

“Oh, I will!” Evelyn cried.

She dashed out of the house without a look at her mother, for fear of being urged to rest—or at least not tire herself out. Her father was reading the paper in the porch swing.

“Where are you going, my pretty maid?”

“To meet the girls, nice papa. Somewhat nice papa,” she added, judiciously, stopping to lay her cheek against his head. “No, *very* nice.” She kissed the remnant of his forelock.

“Um-hm! All right, all right,” he answered.

A breeze lifted her bright hair pleasantly. Two women on the porch next door looked curiously at her; and she was most delightfully aware of herself as a visiting girl, a light and attractive figure, certainly *very* interesting, sauntering along so easily in her white blouse and the blue linen skirt that made the blue of her eyes startlingly intense. (“Let them look! You’ll recognize me when you see me again, *mesdames*, I trust!”) She made a tiny, mocking bow.

What she really dreaded, was to meet the girls. What if she and Cora didn’t like each other? Then that warm memory of nights when they had whispered secrets, or run down the old board sidewalks, hoping for something to happen . . . that would be spoiled. The sight of Mr. and Mrs. Schwietert had triumphantly confirmed her old affection. But Cora might be so different. Or, she might think that Evelyn, because she had gone to college, and studied music, was different. . . .

“Well, I’m not. Or, I am—but underneath, I’m not.”

Would the younger girls still admire and adore her as they used to do? . . . or was she really a “ghost,” as mama had declared tragically, when she came home in June? Cora was private secretary for the vice-president of a large rubber concern. Sophie was in the office of the American Railway Company, and Rosie was cashier in a drugstore. Would Cora be very different from the college girls who were her chums now? Evelyn detested herself. It sounded like mama!

When she saw two girls get off the street car, her heart gave a thud, and she felt a little set, frightened smile tighten her lips. It must be the girls. She turned toward them—they came to meet her—one shorter, in a blue dress; one tall and dark, wearing a white pleated skirt and white shoes. They came up to her. All three, for a moment, were uncertain.

“Isn’t this Evelyn?”

“Is it Cora and Sophie?”

Suddenly, with triumphant laughter, they embraced. One of Sophie’s parcels dropped, and they laughed again. They went up the walk, Evelyn between the other two, all eager and able to chatter because there were three of them. The embarrassment of a need for special intimacy was avoided.

The eyes of all three were excited and bright. There was a secret and relieved gratification in the mind of each: in Evelyn's—"I do like her. Cora's absolutely handsome. She sees I'm not a little snip. Oh, I know we can get along! To think Sophie should have grown up as sweet and dear as this!" . . . And the dark glow of Cora's eyes meant her happiness in the freedom and spontaneity of Evelyn's manner—Evelyn was just the same!—and her old proud delight in Evelyn's daintiness and vividness and fly-away hair.

2

Dinner was over. Mrs. Schwietert would not let Evelyn wipe the dishes for Mr. Schwietert, telling her, "No, the girls have just this little time at home, I want them to have all they can of you." Mr. Anderson declared that he was the one to help—only the men of the establishment were equal to such a task. He arrayed himself in the biggest apron that Mrs. Schwietert could find for him, and tied it around his neck with a pert little bow. Evelyn, as she left the kitchen and performed two dance steps in the hall, thought, rapturously, "Papa Joseph D. Anderson is absolutely the nicest man in the world!" And if any boys expected really to cut out Papa Anderson, they had to work!—she thought with glee.

Evelyn had already dropped back into her old lively pleasure in the activity of the Schwietert household. She had shone before the boarders, to all their gratification and delight. Mrs. Schwietert had reported that Mr. Walsh had said, as he went out, "You have a very charming guest, I congratulate you"; and that, from Mr. Walsh, amounted almost to a proposal!

But the girls were shy at first. They remembered that Evelyn had been to college. She had read, and studied French and music, she knew people who traveled. They were aware, now, that it was eight years since they had seen Evelyn, and that all of them had grown up in the meantime. Even Rosie was most amazingly grown-up: blonde, and round-faced, like Sophie, but prettier (prettier, and sillier, both, if the truth were known). Evelyn was gratified to see how attractive all three of the girls were, confuting all of mama's insinuations. But she felt easier with the two younger girls than with Cora. It did not matter if they had changed. She could make friends anew with them. But she could not quite reconcile this Cora—tall, poised and reserved, well-dressed—with the old Cora. Of course, there were the black hair and the dark brown eyes; but years of indoor work under artificial light had made Cora lose that dark glowing color that Evelyn remembered as a part of her. In the old Warwick days, Cora had run wild in the vacant lots about the

creek, never bothering with such things as hats, and hands and neck had been tanned a deep gypsy-brown.

Cora was aware of Evelyn, sitting beside her in the porch swing, as something slim and delicate and petted, vivid and shining, something almost too elusive and radiant to touch. It made herself feel heavy, dark and crude. She was almost ashamed of the things she knew that Evelyn didn't . . . but all the same she was proud of that bitter knowledge that lay deep in her heart, that made her what she was . . . she would not give it up for all Evelyn's untouched radiance.

Evelyn, however, could always manage to chatter. Now she began to ask about and comment upon the boarders; and the delighted laughter of the two younger girls, and of Clarence, who hung about the porch steps worshipping her, gave her back all her usual animation.

"Who was the little man that looked exactly like a baby monkey? Oh, you know which one I mean! Haven't you ever seen a baby monkey? They're so sweet—I mean, such little old round wrinkled-up faces, and then all so pink and sort of new under the hairiness, and part their funny little hair in the middle. You don't know whether to get them a bottle or a pipe and a cane."

"I bet she means Mr. Tobey!" Rosie cried, with a gurgling shriek.

"*Tobey!* A monkey name! Didn't I tell you?"

Clarence guffawed with delighted admiration. He hung upon Evelyn's words, kept contented by the bright, comprehending glances she gave him now and then to include him in the circle.

"He does look that way," Sophie agreed. "I never thought of it before."

"He works in a leather goods store," Rosie added.

"Tell me not! I want to buy him a little red jacket. Wouldn't it be sweet? Wouldn't you love him?"

The girls did not quite know how to answer, in spite of their smiling gratification. They had never perceived before that the boarders were "characters" and funny.

"I guess he's about forty. Old!" Rosie said.

"Oh, no, he's either ninety, or just born! . . . Oh, and where was Mr. Robbins?" Evelyn asked, raising her eyebrows delicately.

The girls looked at each other. Rosie giggled, and Sophie tried to keep a straight face.

“He’s too bashful to appear when there’s a new girl around,” Cora said contemptuously. “He’s probably eaten his dinner down town, and then he’ll arrive, explaining that ‘he was kept by business.’ ”

She mimicked him, and Sophie flushed.

“Well, maybe he was,” Sophie said.

Cora laughed.

“That little firm of his doesn’t do enough business to support an office boy!”

Evelyn looked eagerly from one to the other.

“What’s the matter with Mr. Robbins?” she asked.

“Nothing at all,” Cora replied. “Only that we’re aware of his little ways.”

Sophie said nothing.

The little altercation had put both Cora and Sophie back in their old relationship. Evelyn cried, vivaciously, turning to Cora, “Oh, Cora, did I ever write you that the Briggs-Coffin match has come off at last?”

“No!” Cora laughed, and turned to her eagerly. Evelyn responded happily to that familiar, deep, joyful glow in Cora’s dark eyes.

“Actually! After all these centuries! Those two have gone and got married!”

“Have they been going together ever since we left Warwick?” Cora marveled.

“Oh, yes. Just the same way. He went to see her every Friday night. You could keep track of time in Warwick by Mr. Briggs’s calls on Miss Coffin. And now, all of a sudden, they’ve done the awful deed!”

Joyously, she set the porch swing going with her little slippered foot.

“What made them finally get married?”

“God only knows! . . . Oh, you know, papa called Mr. Briggs into the office, and begged him to consider; told him they were young people, and didn’t know each other very well, and he didn’t like to see them being precipitate without a word of friendly warning.”

“Oh, goodness!” Cora laughed. “What did Briggs say?”

“Oh, he didn’t care. You know, papa can say anything to people,—it never makes them angry. He’s such a dear, and they all know it.”

“Who are Briggs-Coffin?” Rosie demanded jealously.

“Don’t you remember the photographer in Warwick?”

“Oh, Rosie wouldn’t remember. Why, just think how long since you’ve been there! Rosie was a mere infant.”

They turned, hearing a call from the house. . . . “Girls! Don’t you want to come in?” . . . “I’m afraid they’re catching cold out there,” from Mrs. Anderson; and from Mrs. Schwietert, “We’re hoping for a little music before the evening’s over.”

Rosie cried, “Oh, why don’t we all go somewhere! Why do we just sit at home? Let’s take Evelyn to White Gate park.”

“Oh, no, Evelyn’s had a long trip. You young ones can go there some other night.”

That mention of Warwick had brought back, quite suddenly, the old intimacy between Cora and Evelyn. As they went into the house, Evelyn took Cora’s hand and Cora whispered:

“Do you remember the night we followed Mr. Briggs and Miss Coffin down Lovers’ Lane?”

“Yes! And I fell off the walk?”

“Yes! Weren’t we silly?”

They giggled happily; and Rosie turned back from the doorway, demanding with suspicion, “What are you girls laughing about?” . . .

“Cora! Do you remember the note you got from Batty Sanborn, asking you to walk down Lovers’ Lane with him?”

“Heavens! Do you remember that? What’s become of him?”

“Oh, poor Batty—he really *was*, you know! They put him in a kind of asylum. Oh, but do you remember *Petie*?”

“The shrimp?”

“Yes! I see you do! Weren’t we dreadful?” . . .

The others were calling them into the parlor, and, with a delicious feeling of conspiracy, they looked at each other, dropped hands, and left the

hall where they had been whispering. This sense of suspended intimacy, with the old delightful confidences to come, thrilled the whole evening with happy excitement.

“Now, we’re going to have a little music,” Mrs. Schwietert said.

They were all gathered expectantly in the parlor—a very pleasant, trim, nicely furnished room, as even Mrs. Anderson admitted, with a sort of grudging complacency. Many parlors in Warwick were not so tastefully arranged. How had the Schwieterts managed to do it? They were workers—Mrs. Schwietert, at least, and the older girls. They were proud now to entertain the Andersons in their home and to show that they had done well for themselves.

But, in spite of all their work, the Schwietert family had always had an easy faculty for enjoyment; Cora, perhaps, less than the others—although no one was more fun than Cora, Evelyn thought, when you got her started. There was an amplitude about the household that, in spite of hard necessity, admitted leeway for young people. Evelyn was happy here. She played a few gay little trills and fol-de-rols and then began to sing. Of course, they didn’t know very much about music. Her very favorite things they wouldn’t enjoy; and she *would not* sing difficult songs just to show off her voice, as she knew mama wanted her to do. But Evelyn could get delight out of simply amusing and pleasing other people. And they were enjoying it—she could tell that. The same fond praise that they had always given her was ready. It made a warm, large, kindly background against which she could frolic and sparkle and be herself.

She liked the praise—she had a fondness for shining!—but she wanted to include everybody. Evelyn might enjoy being the center, but there was a bright generosity about her. Even Clarence she did not forget. Nor Mr. Schwietert. She asked him, with a pretty archness:

“Now, aren’t you going to get out either your flute or your cornet or your piccolo, and play with me?”

“Ach, you remember dose instruments den?” he asked, gratified.

“Where is your flute, Chris?” Mrs. Schwietert asked.

“Ach, no. Dose I put away. De days for playing dem are gone.”

“Why, no, they aren’t, papa,” Sophie chided him fondly. “I heard you playing your flute only a little while ago.”

“Ja, but it is no goot, she does not go well.”

Before the evening was over, however, he had forgotten his humiliation as only a helper—which he felt, it seemed to Mr. Anderson, in spite of the lack of responsibility for which people blamed him. They had begun to talk about Warwick—Mrs. Schwietert had started it by asking if Minnie Goodhile still played “Narcissus” every Sunday for an offertory at church. Then Mr. Schwietert began to ask about some of his old favorites. Did the old man Muffitt still wear his silk hat and frock coat when he went out paper-hanging? Did that little fellow from the country—“Ja, dot Peter Grub”—still come into Lake & Ray’s every Saturday night and ask for five cents worth of licorice? None of them, not even Mr. Anderson, had such a store of racy memories about people as Chris Schwietert. Soon he was gesticulating, until he forgot himself in the drama and jumped up from his seat to act out the whole story. His mimicry was just deliciously exaggerated enough to give the point. His quaint, broken speech added a comical charm. All of them, even Mrs. Anderson, were helpless with laughter. Mrs. Schwietert leaned back and wiped her streaming eyes. Evelyn gave a little bounce of delight and twirled about on the piano stool.

“Ja, and dis old Muffitt, he was such a shentleman all de time! Ach, such a shentleman! To go and buy something in de stores, dot a shentleman could not do! So his wife, she was not a shentleman, and she could do it! Ja, all dot fellow’s socks, all his oondervear, de wife must go and buy, and den it is not good enough for shentlemans, den he make a big . . . shouting round, ‘Ach, my wife she is so dumn!’ . . . and back she go to change it! . . . Ja, always he wear dot silk hat! I see him up on a step-ladder in de Vatkens house, and he wear dot silk hat. Ja, I hope dey bury him in dot hat—udderwise he could not be a shentleman in his grave!”

“Well, sir, he’s buried now,” Mr. Anderson said. “Silk hat and all, I guess. And do you know, I miss the old codger? I don’t know, we don’t seem to get such characters any more. The town’s settling down. I used to enjoy seeing that silk hat go down the street above those paint-stained pants.”

“Ja, he would radder go into his coffin mitout his pants dan mitout dot hat!”

“Why, Chris, what a thing to say!”

“Ja, mama, dot is de simple fact.”

Thinking of Warwick made him remember other places where he had camped during his wanderings—wanderings, in fact, were what he enjoyed, always with eternal hopefulness that the next place would be the best. He

had never been so happy since the family had settled down to stay in Onawa. He told them about the “lowndry” he had run in that little town in Ohio, when he and Mrs. Schwietert were first married; and its mishaps were so comic in retrospect that even she—poor woman!—who had suffered enough from them at the time, laughed with the others.

“Now, Chris, you’ve told them enough about our foolishness,” she said, good-naturedly. “I think we all want something to cool us off a little after all this music and nonsense. You go down cellar and see what you can find.”

“Ja, dot is a fine idea! Well, mama, you are not all nonsense, anyway!”

“Can you find something, do you think?”

“Ja, you bet I find something!”

“Isn’t this just like the Schwieterts!” Evelyn cried. “When I remember going to your house, I always think of having feasts at night. I never knew Mrs. Schwietert when she didn’t have something good to bring out!”

“Well, we all enjoy a little eating together,” Mrs. Schwietert said comfortably; thinking, “No, I’ve seen times when I didn’t have much on hand.” But they had always managed and they always would. . . .

Mr. Schwietert came proudly back with a tray and jingling glasses and a cold dewy bottle of grape wine. Mrs. Anderson sipped the wine dubiously, a little alarmed by the relish with which her husband and daughter drank it, not quite able to accept Mrs. Schwietert’s assurances that it was home-made and “very mild.” She feared it had alcohol in it; and just before they came away, she had entertained the ladies of the W. C. T. U. There was a blue glimmer in Mr. Schwietert’s eyes.

“I’ve had wine lots of times,” Evelyn said airily. “Don’t look so horrified, mama. Your child is uncorrupted still.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s very nice,” Mrs. Anderson murmured politely. “Of course, I think home-made things are different.”

“I helped gather wild grapes for wine one fall. Do you remember, Mrs. Schwietert? We got Danny Purvis to take us out to the woods, with the store wagon, and he climbed up a tree, and the grapevine broke—oh, and don’t you remember—oh, it was awful!—he caught by his trousers on a branch and tore them, and he wasn’t going to tell us girls, and we couldn’t get him out of the wagon when we got home. Don’t you remember how we begged him to come into the house? Of course, we knew all the time.”

“Bad girls!” Mrs. Schwietert chided. She laughed. “What girls you and Cora were!”

“Are—I should say,” Mr. Anderson put in. “There’s a sparkle in their eyes tonight that says, beware!”

Evelyn made a face at him. She glanced at Cora and they laughed. Mrs. Anderson looked uneasy.

“Dis wine is nice wine. It is goot for peoples, like medicine. De big counts in de old country, dey all when dey get sick drink such wine,” Mr. Schwietert assured Mrs. Anderson. “Dis you would have to drink two or tree gallons to make you drunk. Mama, she is a goot wine maker. In de old country, she could earn her living dot way.”

“Couldn’t you find some cookies to go with this, Chris?”

“No, de drinks I can find, but de vimmens, dey must get de rest. Cookies I cannot find.”

“No, but the mens can eat cookies!” Sophie said tenderly. She pulled a little lock of her father’s hair.

“Ja, shoer, dot is why de vimmens cook, so de mens can eat.”

“Here, Evelyn, you be a good ‘vimmens’ just now and take your father’s glass,” Mr. Anderson said. “Mama, if Mrs. Schwietert still lived in Warwick, and made drinks like that, I’m afraid I’d have to withdraw my contribution to the estimable society to which you belong.”

Mrs. Anderson still looked very uneasy. But Mr. Anderson must have his little fun, even though a period of reassuring her was in store for him when they went upstairs.

Evelyn took her father’s glass and then perched herself on his knees.

“Aren’t you glad you stopped off, Mr. Anderson?” she said. “I knew what good things you’d get to eat and drink.”

“Very glad, as I always am when I follow my daughter’s counsel,” he answered solemnly.

Mrs. Anderson carefully set her glass on the table. Her husband noted, mischievously, that she had sipped a little. . . . “Well, mama, now you’re corrupted with the rest of us,” he was going to tell her; and when she started to kiss him after this, he would exclaim dramatically, “The lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine!” This was worth the trip, if nothing else was. . . .

It was a holiday time, and they were away from home—otherwise Mrs. Anderson would never have countenanced her husband's and daughter's flippancy. Mrs. Schwiertert was an excellent, hardworking woman, even if she did make intoxicating liquors; and she had been a very good church member. Mrs. Anderson couldn't *feel* any effect from the drink. She did feel personally gratified by the rise in position of the Schwiertert family, with whom she had always been more or less forced into intimacy by Evelyn's imperious liking.

"You are so comfortable here!" she said graciously.

Mrs. Schwiertert began to tell how they had got the house.

"We had a pretty hard time of it when we first came here. But the girls all got work, and it looked as if we ought to stay. We wanted a home. We'd never have had it except for the girls. They gave a part of their salary, just as regularly . . . and then roomers and boarders help out."

Evelyn declared, piteously, that she felt dreadful! She had never earned a single cent—except once when she had sung at a funeral in Oberlin—and she had been ashamed of taking that ever since, the rest of the quartet had been so terrible. She was a bad daughter, compared to Cora and Sophie. Her parents ought to disown her. . . .

"Do you wish to disown me, Mr. Anderson?"

"Not yet a while. We'll see later," he answered comfortably.

"Don't say that, Evelyn. I only wish my girls could have had your advantages," Mrs. Schwiertert told her. "Girls need their time off. See how serious Cora is, beside you."

Cora flushed and moved a little.

"I'm not absolutely a grandmother, mama."

"I'm not, either," Rosie put in, in a very small voice that made the others laugh significantly.

"No," her mother said. "I never worry about your taking things too hard! That's what I mean about Cora."

Cora got up:

"Well, *I'm* going to get out. This conversation is getting altogether too personal."

It hurt her to have her mother talk like that. It was as if she were bared before them—why did mothers do such things? She knew very well how mature she felt beside Evelyn’s sparkling gaiety; that it was difficult to relax that hardening of her will that had enabled her to do what she must do if anything was to be accomplished.

“Well, I think we should all be going to bed,” Mrs. Anderson agreed hastily. “This has been so nice. But you know some of us need our sleep.” She glanced significantly toward Evelyn.

Evelyn dropped her a curtsy, then kissed her remorsefully:

“Yes, ma’am, we all have to sleep. But let me tell you ladies one thing—I really cannot take Mr. Robbins’s room. Why, I’ve even driven the poor man away from his meals!”

“Ach,” Mr. Schwietert told her, “don’t you worry about Mr. Robbins! He like nudding better dan to have a pretty lady take his room away from him.”

“Oh, yes, he’ll feel flattered to have you use it,” Mrs. Schwietert assured her. “He’s got everything in apple-pie order, and his best photographs all out in sight.”

“Sophie is de one to do de complaining,” Mr. Schwietert hinted.

“Aha!” Mr. Anderson said. “Is that how the land lies!”

“Yes,” Mrs. Schwietert answered, “Mr. Robbins started with Cora, and she wouldn’t have much to do with him, so he’s going on down the line. After Sophie, I suppose it will be Rosie.”

“Ja, and den he will have to go away. Unless he go after you, den, mama.”

“Oh, but I don’t care whether Mr. Robbins wants me to have his room or not!” Evelyn cried. “Of course, it would be a shame not to look at his photographs. But I could dust his room tomorrow, couldn’t I? I really want to be with the girls. I’d feel lost with a room all to myself.” She would not look at her mother.

The Schwieterts laughed fondly. It was so like the old Evelyn. The four girls joined hands—Evelyn made them—and refused to be separated.

“But the girls just sort of picnic. We’ve given the roomers all our rooms, and the girls bunk together in the attic.”

“Oh, that’s grand! Have a whole floor to ourselves? Glorious!”

Nothing would do but that she must sleep there. She ran up the stairs, pulling Cora after her, and the other girls followed. Now, under the spell of Evelyn's ecstatic approval, sleeping in the attic really did seem like a lark to the girls. Evelyn admired the three cots and the cushions and the enameled furniture.

"Oh, and you've put up banners—everything!"

"That's from the business school where Sophie and I went. Rosie, this young wretch, won't go."

"I'm not going to take all my evenings. I'm going to have a little fun as I go along."

Cora said nothing. But her black eyebrows lifted. . . . "Certainly," she wanted to say, "and it's all right as long as you've got a sister to come to for money and decent clothes!" . . . But Evelyn was here: there mustn't be any trouble.

Rosie knew very well what was in Cora's mind. She gave her head a little toss.

"I don't believe I'll go to work tomorrow," she said. "I can send Todd word I'm sick. Evelyn isn't going to be here very long. Somebody ought to show her a good time. We could go out to the park tomorrow!"

"Oh, but I don't want you to stay away from work for me!" Evelyn said hastily.

"You'll lose your job, Rosie," Sophie told her anxiously. "You can't do things like that right along."

"Well, let me lose it. I want to have some fun with Evelyn."

There were only three cots, but Rosie dragged in another from the little cubby-hole where Clarence slept.

"Oh, he can sleep on the floor!" she said airily.

Evelyn made them put the cot next to Cora's.

"You know, we might want to talk a trifle," she said. Oh, what fun to return to all the old, gay makeshifts in the Schwiertert household!—all the more fun when the mothers called up to them, as if they were still children: "You girls must go right to sleep. . . ."

"Isn't this fun?" Evelyn murmured. She sat down on the floor, propped her elbows on the sill, and stared dreamily out of the little garret window.

“It’s like being up in the tree-tops.”

She turned around and watched the girls. Sophie, with her blonde pigtails, and Cora, with hers that were long and black, looked—in their straight white nightgowns—like the little girls she had known. Rosie might dress like an artful young lady, but she was as silly and funny and likable as ever. Sophie had got over her whining ways, but still she was the smiling and acquiescent follower, not the leader. Cora was the one who had developed most. Evelyn admired Cora, liked to be with her again—but she was uneasily conscious of a gulf between Cora’s experience and her own.

Now, in the excitement and hilarity of their reunion, anything seemed possible. Sophie said that the railroad company gave her passes, and Evelyn begged her to come with them to Colorado. The plan had sprung up in an instant. Sophie would demand her vacation at once. They would climb Pike’s Peak on burros. They would do everything. Evelyn began to tease Cora to come, too, and Sophie joined her.

“You can get your time off, Cody. Mr. Dutton will let you if you ask him. You won’t lose your job.”

“Think of the *fun* we’d have!” Evelyn cried.

Cora was half persuaded. For the time being, it really seemed possible . . . although she knew, underneath, that she would not ask for such a thing. It was true that she had a little money saved. She had not taken a real vacation in years. She let Sophie and Evelyn go on with their plans. But she knew that she was out of it.

3

They quieted down at last. The two younger girls went to sleep first. The darkness outside was soft and warm. Evelyn lay quiet. Then she turned cautiously and looked into Cora’s eyes that were black and shining in the dim light of the room.

“Are you awake, Cora?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sleepy?”

“No. Are you?”

They began to whisper together. Evelyn told Cora about the old crowd in Warwick, and Cora listened eagerly, and yet with a wondering sense of

remoteness, this was all so far away. It was really Evelyn lying beside her. . . .

It was like their old times of intimate confidence. Now, just as then, they held their breath when they heard Sophie stir, and then turned and looked at each other with bright, wicked eyes, smothering their laughter. In this strange night hour, time was set apart, old reserves could drop away. They could barely see each other. All embarrassment was gone. To each, the other was only a warm response, to whom it was deliciously possible to tell anything.

“Cora, do you remember Eddie Vansickle, that you used to like?”

“Yes. What became of him?” She thought of the blue eyes and freckles.

“They moved away, too. I don’t know what became of them. Mr. Vansickle failed in business—and I guess no one knows where they are. . . . Cora, listen, I’ll tell you something awfully funny—awfully queer, I mean. You know, Mrs. Watkins died. Well, Mr. Watkins proposed to me.”

“Why, but isn’t he——”

“Oh, he’s ancient! They were married when I was an infant—or before I was born! And Mrs. Watkins had been dead such a tiny little while. Did he honestly think I would marry him? Maybe, for the sake of that big house! Anyway, I’ve never told papa and mama. I hate to think of having to decide to marry anybody—stick myself off for life—but it certainly won’t be Mr. *Wat-kins!*”

“But you do sort of lead people on, Evelyn,” Cora protested.

“No! How do I?”

“Well, I mean, you’re so nice to all of them and let them keep hanging round, and most of them don’t have the sense to see the difference. Yes, you do, Evelyn. You always did. You needn’t be surprised if some of them take it seriously.”

“Well, I know it. I do do that,” Evelyn admitted candidly. “But I can’t help it.” She sighed. Cora was the only one who had ever been able to tell her such things. She liked it. “Don’t you ever?”

“Well, not exactly in the same way.”

Evelyn gave a little bounce.

“Is there anybody now, Cora?”

“I go around a little with a man from the office where I used to work. I’m going to stop, though.”

“Why? Don’t you like him?”

“Oh . . . pretty well. But I don’t want it to get too serious. I want to head it off in time. I don’t want to marry him,” Cora murmured. She had never really phrased this to herself before. Now, in this interchange of confidences, she seemed to comprehend what she was doing and what she wanted.

“Isn’t he nice?”

“Yes, but you’ve got to think of more than that, Evelyn. You do, when you have to earn your living the way I do. Pretty soon I’ll be making more money than he ever can. It’s all right to say I could go on working. But you can’t get ahead the way you can when you’re alone, and that’s all there is to it. When a girl’s had to work up the way I have, and do it all herself . . . well, she wants to get something out of it.”

“I suppose so,” Evelyn said doubtfully. “But then . . . don’t you ever mean to have anything to do with men, Cora?”

“Oh, I’m going to have a good time. I’m not going to give up having a good time just because I don’t want to get married.”

Evelyn said, with another sigh, “I wish I could make up my mind whether I’m engaged to Harry Phillips or not!”

“Don’t you know?”

“No, honestly, I don’t. Harry says we are, but I haven’t really promised. He is certainly the grandest man in college. I don’t know what more I could ask. But oh, I like so *many* men, Cora! How can I just decide on Harry? And then there’s my music. And Harry has a spasm when I talk about going on the stage! Oh, I want to do so many things, Cora!”

She sighed, and cuddled closer to Cora.

“I don’t believe I could ever get along and not get married, though, Cora. I’m a sort of a fool about men, I know I am. Oh, why do people have to decide things? Why can’t everything just *be*?”

She lay silent, bright-eyed and tense.

But there was so much that could not be told, even to Evelyn. For a moment, while Cora was explaining herself, she had had an excited feeling that everything was clear and straight before her. She had felt her will, hard and firm and tangible as the muscles of her strong arms, and she had exulted

in it. Evelyn hadn't run up against the things that Cora had met. She didn't know how a girl who had battered her way through the difficulties of a strange city could feel that simply to be independent—her own boss—able at last to hold up her head and have things *coming* to her, was worth everything on earth. And she wasn't going to give it up, or even risk it. Evelyn *was* a fool about men, Cora thought, and scorn touched her lips. . . .

But was she quite so sure? Now she had the feeling that she was only tearing her way through an incomprehensible tangle and didn't fully know what she was doing. Queer, almost forgotten desires stirred uneasily somewhere in the depths of her consciousness. Then she thought about Eddie Vansickle, and that summer in Warwick, and the old warm thrill when she had passed his desk in school. Well, she thought grimly, she could manage herself!

None of the other girls felt just this way, it seemed to her. It set her apart, and gave her both strength and desolation. What Sophie really cared for was to find a place to work where the immediate conditions were pleasantest—so that she wouldn't be too late getting home, and so that she could take little trips now and then. Rosie had no plans at all. Cora knew that she couldn't ask for her vacation and go with the girls to Colorado Springs. If you were going to put yourself into your work, you couldn't count things like pleasant vacations.

Evelyn was asleep, one slender arm thrown across her pillow, her bright hair swept back from her face. Cora thought . . . I must go to sleep. She turned over restlessly and put her hot cheek on her hand. No matter how much fun she had tonight, there was the office just the same in the morning. She felt torn between a reckless desire to cut loose and have a glorious time with Evelyn, and worry as to how she was going to get in all her work as usual this week. . . . No, she couldn't let it go any farther with Tommy Redding. It might be dangerous. She might really care for him—she had not admitted that before, and she was darkly resentful at the thought. She might come to count upon his gentle consideration, and she might even come to like too well the touch of his thin hands. Because she knew just how the thing would all turn out. . . .

She was a long time awake. A little damp breeze came up, and the leafy elm tops outside the window stirred and rustled.

Chapter III

1

The Schwietert household had gone through changes since the Andersons had visited there. The house was paid for, the boarders were gone, there were only two roomers now, two men, Mr. Walsh and Mr. Guster, who had the large front bedroom where Mr. and Mrs. Anderson had slept. Clarence was through school and at work, although not with the entire diligence that Cora demanded. Rosie was in Colorado. She had gone out with a girl friend, for the sake of adventure, and on the chance of finding a job, and she was cashier in a cafeteria in a town in the foothills. And Sophie was married.

Married to Mr. Robbins. The affair had been hanging on until it had settled into one of those long-drawn-out, ambiguous relationships like the Briggs-Coffin courtship, Cora had written Evelyn. Mr. Robbins worked in a hardware store. He had only a small salary. Sophie knew that the family needed her for help, and she wasn't willing, like the irresponsible younger ones, to leave the whole burden to Cora. Sophie was almost too soft and affectionate a daughter. So the affair had dragged on, much to the wonderment of the neighbors, and, for a long time, to the apparent contentment of Sophie and Dave themselves—he living at the Schwieterts', in his old room, seemingly one of the family, helping Mr. Schwietert with the dishes, being advisor and confidant to Clarence, taking out the girls to dances or movies, and spending his winter evenings in the parlor with the family and his summer evenings on the porch with Sophie. Whenever the crowd of business girls and men had a picnic in the summer, Sophie and Dave went along together quite naturally like an old married couple.

But even such a meandering affair, scorned deeply by Cora and pertly by Rosie, could at last reach a crisis. A girl had come to visit next door, a thin and black-haired school teacher on a vacation. She was homely as a mud fence, declared Clarence, now becoming a connoisseur in such matters; but she was all animated with the determination to make the most out of her vacation. For the first time in his life, Dave Robbins found himself courted. The black-haired girl flattered him, played the piano for him, and invited him to dinner; and his masculine self-respect, never very sturdy, and long settled into a sort of decline because of his inability actually to capture one of the pretty girls of his own household, grew with a fierce suddenness. In

his gratitude, he almost forgot the protruding teeth and the neck whose cords stood out with a strained vivacity. He took the visitor to the park and the dance hall, and came back to a weeping Sophie. And then he broke loose!

Yes, for once Cora had to admit that Dave Robbins was not so meek as she had always thought him! He ranted. He was tired of being relegated to the background and having the whole family come first. He didn't have to put up with it. Sophie could take him or leave him. Either she agreed to marry him when he said, or he would pack up his things and leave this house tomorrow.

Poor, soft-hearted, conscientious Sophie was torn two ways. She could only weep and decide nothing. She could not give up Dave and she could not desert her family. Finally, Cora had stepped in, as she had to do in any family crisis. Sophie must marry Dave now, if she was ever going to do so. If she didn't, *let* him take the black-haired girl. Cora would not blame him. Sophie had done her share. The younger ones must take her place. Clarence must stick to his job, and Rosie must stop buying clothes and send home more of her salary. The thing must be decided this very instant!

Ja! and so it was!—as Mr. Schwietert told afterwards. Dearly as he loved Sophie, he had viewed the whole long courtship with a sidelong glimmer of his blue eyes; and the final decision took its place with the adventure of the “lowndry” among his drollest stories.

They were married now, and settled in their own flat in another part of the city. In spite of the stern justice that she had decreed for them, Cora was not really much in sympathy. Let them get married, since they must—but, privately, she thought Sophie a goose. She was earning as much as Dave, and she was meekly giving up her job because Dave said he wanted “a real home.” Of course, they found it hard to get along on Dave's salary: and so Dave “had let her,” as Sophie said—Cora regarded, with the utmost scorn, that “let her”—keep on with part-time work. Her old firm was anxious to keep her—Sophie made a very good secretary: loyal, conscientious, sinking her interests in those of her employers; ready to do everything, from going out to buy a collar for her boss, in need, to taking his little daughter shopping; and Cora knew that the real reason why she didn't keep her job was that Dave could not stand having his wife earn as much as he did—and that Sophie couldn't stand it, either!

It made Cora disgusted. Could no woman of her family marry a man who was her equal? Look even at Aunt Soph! She had been established in a good dressmaking business in Ohio, and then Uncle Theodore's wife had

died, and she had gone to look after him . . . and, after his second marriage, Aunt Soph was just getting re-established here in Onawa, when the second wife had left him, and out Aunt Soph had gone to a tiny little town in Montana to look after him again!

Of course, it was their own affair. They preferred to make fools of themselves. Cora shrugged her handsome shoulders. But she accepted Dave Robbins as her brother-in-law and was even on very good terms with him. She frequently brought her current young man to Sophie's flat for dinner, and then the four of them played cards in the evening. Sophie and Dave used her as a kind of practical advisor; and, although Sophie was now so meek that Cora privately declared it turned her stomach to see the couple together, and although she never asserted her business judgment against Dave's, he showed a very wholesome respect for the judgment of the unmarried Cora.

Cora was now "dragging around," as she put it sardonically, one of their two roomers. She was amusing herself with Mr. Guster. He was younger than she—he didn't know how much, although Cora did. She had started out of mischief, because she had seen how impossible it was for this self-conscious young man to forget for a second that he was in the same house with a young woman. He had put himself naïvely in her way. He made much of Clarence, and always managed to bring the conversation around to "your sister."

"I bet your sister's a good dancer, isn't she? Does your sister ever go to movies?"

Clarence reported this to Cora, who laughed. When she stayed downstairs in the evening, Mr. Guster sat carefully in his open doorway, doing some mysterious figuring, so that she could not pass without speaking to him. In elaborate ways, he led up to the question of how she was going to spend her Sundays; and when he knew that she would be at home, he contrived to be there, too—saying, in justification of his presence, when she asked him, in pretended amazement;

"What's become of the park?"——

"Oh, I had some accounts to look over; I told Walsh I couldn't go."

At first, Cora had paid no attention to him, except to tease him by keeping to the kitchen when he had stayed at home in the hope of seeing her. Oh, he couldn't be in the same house with *any* girl without trying to make her *his* girl! It was that, and not her overpowering charms, Cora thought ironically. No need to pity Mr. Guster.

But she was feeling out of sorts. An ill-defined affair with a man whom her family and the neighbors always termed “the dentist,” had come out with a bad surprise. Cora had let herself get as near to caring for him as for any one since Tommy Redding; and then it had made her furious to find that he was married, that he was playing with her even more than she with him, and that she was the one who was becoming entangled! This had left a bad taste in her mouth. She never talked about any of these affairs with her family—they discussed them among themselves and always wondered “how serious” they were—because in her own mind she knew, with a feeling of defiant hardness, that she meant to take these things as she thought a man would do: take them on the side, get what fun out of them she could, and always stop short of danger to herself. But this thing with “the dentist” had gone a little too far. It had unsettled her for the moment. It was harder than she had dreamed to forfeit the cool, firm touch of his hands and the dangerous delight of his kisses. And so it was with some obscure idea of paying back “the dentist” in his own coin, that she permitted Mr. Guster to meet her on the stairs and in the hall, and gently to help him to the point of actually coming out and asking her what she was going to do in the evening. He took her to the movies, and she and her mother asked him to stay to dinner when it was raining. This evening, he was going to Sophie’s with her. It amused, and yet it slightly disgusted her, to see the interest of her family.

Dave and Sophie were living in an old apartment house close to the business section. Cora and her swain climbed the three flights of worn stairs. Dave, in his shirt sleeves, opened the door for them.

“What’s the matter? Street car break down?” he asked facetiously.

“Are we late?” Cora asked lightly. “You’ve met Mr. Guster, haven’t you, Dave? Mr. Robbins: Mr. Guster.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Dave said, shaking hands heartily. “Guess I’ve seen you over at the other house, but I don’t know as we’ve ever met before. Sit down, folks. Make yourselves at home.”

He was always a little nervous with Cora. He could not help remembering that he had tried Cora first, before he had ever thought of Sophie, and that she hadn’t thought him good enough for her—with the uncomfortable realization that perhaps it was true—he wasn’t. A faint resentment lingered, sometimes making him comment sarcastically on “the dentist,” or on the importance of Cora’s pronouncements in the Schwieter household. But this was pretty well smothered under admiration and pride in having such a woman as Cora for a sister-in-law. It pleased him to have Cora

come to the house. He said facetiously, as he took Cora's suit coat, "Where shall I hang this swell garment?" He liked the richness of it on his arm. When he hung it up, he drew his fingers down the satin lining. He resented Cora's appearance a little, because Sophie didn't have such clothes or such an air; but he was impressed by both, and particularly when there were other people present.

Cora went over to the mirror, took off her large fashionable hat and laid it carelessly on the table, and then bent her head a trifle as she felt of her smooth black hair. As she came forward toward the two men, they were both highly aware of her tall handsomeness, the thick dark softness of her suit skirt and the thin fineness of her white blouse, and of the dark remoteness of her eyes. Mr. Guster was as if on wires the instant she came near him. He jumped up nervously from his chair.

"Where's Sophie?" she demanded.

"She's in the kitchen," Dave said.

"Oh, don't call her," Cora said quickly. "Excuse me a few minutes, will you both, and I'll go out there?"

She did not wait for an answer. The two men looked after her. Mr. Guster sat down again, crossed his knees and uncrossed them. They tried to think of something to talk about; and at last settled to, "Well, sir, that was a pretty bad murder the other night." Their talk was perfunctory, with uncomfortable pauses, with a vacant look upon the face of Mr. Guster, because of his being compelled to keep his eyes upon the doorway for any glimpse of Cora.

Sophie was struggling with the dinner. She was really domestic and loved to have guests; but ever since they were children, the two girls had been working down town and their mother had done all the housework. Sophie was slow with her cooking, and it was hard for her to keep two kinds of work on her mind all the time. Cora knew still less about cooking than Sophie, and wanted to know nothing about it; but she could do things in faster order when she must.

"How are you coming? Can I help?"

"Oh, I guess we'll be ready some time. Are you starved?"

"No, don't hurry. Tell me what I can do."

"Well . . . maybe you can put the salad on the plates."

At first, Sophie had been so proud to have any of the family come to her own home for dinner that they had not had the heart to make comments when they sat waiting and starving in the living room. The four small old-fashioned rooms, the cheap furniture, her own dishes, had been heavenly to her. She used to come to the living room door, and say, shyly, but with a proud security, "Dave, will you come out here a minute?" and Dave had bounced out, happily officious. Tonight, though, she looked flushed and worried, and seemed to be disturbed by her slow progress.

"I just can't get this on any faster."

"Well, there's no rush."

"I suppose those men are starved in there."

"Let them starve. It won't hurt them. Why do you ask people when you have so much to do, Soph?"

"I like to have you," Sophie said quickly. "But I hate to make your friend wait like this."

"Don't worry about 'my friend'!" Cora laughed. "Do him good to lose a pound. He's a little too plump and juicy."

"Cora Schwietert, you always say the most dreadful things about the men you go with! Don't you like him?"

"Simply crazy about him." Cora laughed at Sophie's bewilderment. She added, with more affection than she would usually permit herself to show,

"How are you getting along, *schwester*?"

"All right."

There was reserve in Sophie's tone, however. Could it be . . . Cora had a startled moment! *A-noth-er* complication! Sophie was so transparent . . . and yet she did have a kind of soft taciturnity. It was hard to be sure of Sophie. Oh, well, if it *was*, then Cora would learn of it soon enough, and it would mean more help from both herself and her mother! She didn't want to hear any confidences now. She felt brusque and cool and embarrassed. She set the table with a swift deftness, thinking, with a kind of baffled anger, of what fools people were . . . and she took a cold look at Mr. Guster. He was not really good-looking, as she saw—too soft, not well-built, a little smooth and slippery and too dreadfully conciliatory. Then, why on earth did she keep him trailing after her? Because she was a fool, too! Well . . . not the same kind as other people.

The dinner didn't go very well, no one knew just why. Dave was heartily the host, and Mr. Guster was more than ever anxious to be pleased and complimentary. He was highly flattered—much too flattered—at being asked to this family party. He listened with inordinate respect to everything that Cora said; but, fatuously, he began to address her as “Cora.” He was not quite so respectful to Sophie. He complacently despised her for being so much less striking than Cora, and felt himself pleasantly superior to Dave because he had the more desirable of the two sisters. Even Dave, in spite of that lurking resentment, deferred to Cora. She had the advantage that came from being free and unattached, and at the same time femininely justified by the admiration of Mr. Guster.

They had planned that all four should go to the movies in the evening. But when Cora suggested it after dinner, Dave and Sophie looked uncertainly at each other, and Sophie murmured that she “didn't think they'd go.”

Mr. Guster said gallantly to Cora, “Well, shall we two try it by ourselves then?”

Cora consented with no great pleasure. Even in the diminishing sound of Mr. Guster's footsteps, as they went down the echoing stairway, there was a gallant solicitude.

As always after Cora had left, Dave spoke a little spitefully as if to clear himself from his unwilling deference to her.

“Well, she seems to have this one roped all right! I don't believe she came off so well with the dentist.”

“Cora doesn't care anything about him,” Sophie said.

“I'm not so sure about that.”

“I know she doesn't. He wouldn't do for Cora.”

“Well, Cora better not wait *too* long with getting married. She's not a chicken any more.”

“Why should she get married?” Sophie demanded. Her own anxiety, and the feeling of unfairness that lay deep under all her self-effacement, now had a chance to speak under cover of defense of Cora.

“Cora's a whole lot better off than any of the men she could marry. Cora can do as she pleases, and there's something to that.”

She was sorry that she had said this, however, because she knew that it was the very thing that would touch Dave. She knew how his feeling of mental and financial inferiority to Cora rankled. Cora had even had to settle his marriage for him! Sophie was always having to reassure him, in deft, feminine ways. Dropping her job so docilely had been part of this reassurance. She was too loyal to let anything be said in depreciation of Cora, but she must console and sustain Dave. She let him laugh at the discrepancy in age between Cora and Mr. Guster, even let him try to pretend that Cora was reduced to this. She knew why Dave was saying these things, with a little spiteful laugh, but she would not admit to herself that she did. Even to herself, she pretended to side with him. She sat on the arm of his chair and let one hand fall idly over his shoulder. Her soft weight against him was assurance of his strength . . . and even as she leaned, with her cheek against his shoulder, her eyes were remote with the suspicion of a secret that she must keep hidden until it was sure. . . .

“Oh, well . . .” Dave said.

He reached up for her and drew her down into his arms, and snuggled his face a moment into the curve of her soft neck. Then her cheek fell against his and her body settled against his, and they drifted into that wordless unity that drew their life to its center. It was still a miracle to Sophie after her long, slow, soft, unawakened years. She made a little sighing movement. Under everything, fear and pretense and pain, lay the secret treasure of her contentment.

2

Mr. Guster was getting altogether too familiar for Cora’s liking. He took too much for granted, and that was something that Cora could not stand. In her last affair, “the dentist” had got just a little the upper hand of her. She would stop this right here. She took no notice of his fondly helping hand, but strode along toward the theater; and poor Mr. Guster had to stride, too, even to run a little as they crossed the street, to keep up with her. The sight caused her a malicious pleasure.

In the theater, she slipped off her coat quickly, before he could help her, and sat up straight holding her hat in her lap. She looked at the picture, but she neither knew nor cared why the villain in the checked shirt popped up his head from behind a clump of cactus and showed his teeth through his black mustache. The room was dark and overheated, filled with whisperings and rustlings. She had an impatient and uncomfortable awareness of Mr. Guster beside her, and she had to hold herself rigidly straight or his shoulder

was touching hers. She felt his hand feeling stealthily for hers, sliding along the arm of the seat and then clumsily moving on her lap. She did nothing for a moment, and then abruptly jerked her hand away. She heard him make a little fatuous, disconcerted sound, but she glared at the picture. . . .

“This isn’t any good,” she said, after a while.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes.”

When they came out of the theater, Cora lifted her face gratefully to the cold night air. Mr. Guster wanted her to stop in at the drugstore on the corner and have something to eat. She refused brusquely.

“Oh, come on, it isn’t late, you’ll get there in time for work tomorrow. Bet you’ve got a stand-in with your boss, anyway.”

“No, I’d rather not stop.”

“What makes you in such a hurry?”

She scorned to answer, and again he had to hurry to keep up with her as she went to the corner where they took their car.

“What makes you so cold?” he demanded, with a foolish little laugh, trying to take her arm. “Aren’t we pretty good friends?”

Cora drew away her arm deliberately.

“Not particularly,” she answered.

He gave another little laugh, mortified, and not knowing what to reply.

“Oh, come on now, I thought we were. We’ve been together quite a good deal these last few weeks. I thought we were getting to be good friends. I haven’t made you mad, have I? Did Walsh tell you about the little stenographer at the office?”

She disdained to reply to that, except with a short laugh that made Mr. Guster’s ears burn. She had so much the advantage of him that he felt clumsy and foolish beside her. He tried to taunt her.

“If you didn’t like me, you certainly haven’t acted like it! You’ve gone around with me pretty freely these last few weeks. A fellow usually knows what to make of that.” He could not get her to reply, and it nettled him. “I suppose you’ve merely been amusing yourself.”

“Certainly,” Cora told him. She looked coolly at him. “Isn’t that what we’ve both been doing?”

“Well, I like to hear a girl admit something like that once in a while,” he said, with an attempt at heavy sarcasm. “Sure, I’ve just been amusing myself! I suppose you just go with men for the amusement you can get out of them.”

“That’s exactly it. And I don’t consider this kind of thing amusement.”

“Oh, you don’t!” he taunted, weakly.

She made no reply, and he could think of nothing more cutting to say to her. He had been boasting, to both Mr. Walsh and the men in the office, of the hit he had made with his landlady’s good-looking daughter, although he had been uneasily aware all the time that Cora had the upper hand of him. Cora stood a little apart. The cold night wind swept around the corner, wrapping her skirts about her knees and tugging fiercely at her big hat. She held on her hat with both hands and lifted her face exultantly to the wind. She liked the night and the coldness.

Mr. Guster made no attempt to help her on the car. He sat down beside her, after a moment’s hesitation, but held himself stiffly apart. She sat at ease, although with her eyebrows raised a bit satirically, and watched the cold blackness stream past the window. He did not speak until they got off the car. Then, as they walked down the silent street together, he told her, with a sneering little laugh:

“I think you must have eaten the wrong thing at dinner tonight! You certainly weren’t like this the last time I was with you!”

Cora flushed angrily. Her only desire was to get home as fast as she could and get rid of him. She ran up the steps and swung open the front door almost in his face. He gave her a very stiff, offended “Good-night!”; and Mrs. Schwiertert, who had just come into the hall, stared at him in amazement.

“What’s the matter?”

Cora laughed. Her mother looked at her, but asked no more questions. None of them ever thought of interfering with Cora. She kept things to herself and did as she pleased. By the time she had hung her hat and coat in the hall closet, Cora was over her anger, and even a little sorry for her discomfited swain. Oh, well, they could give him a good dinner some time, when this was all over.

“Why are you up, mama?” she asked.

“I remembered that I’d left the bread out of the box and I came down to put it away. How was Sophie?”

“She was all right.”

There was no use worrying mama with suspicions.

“Aren’t you going back to bed, mama?”

“Yes, I’m going back. I don’t know whether I can get to sleep, though
_____”

“Mama, I wish——”

“Oh, it’s just a habit I’ve got into lately. I’ll get out of it,” Mrs. Schwietert said hastily. She began to climb the stairs, a tall, gaunt figure in her straight kimono; then she stopped to call down to Cora, “If you want something before you come upstairs, there are cookies in the kitchen, Cora.”

“I’ll find something. *Do* go to bed, mama.”

Cora went idly into the parlor, thinking that she would get warm before she went upstairs. She smiled, but this time with a half-mocking pity, thinking of the mortified Mr. Guster missing this midnight feast that he always enjoyed so much. Well, she couldn’t help it.

She pulled up a chair to the register, and settled down luxuriously, taking off her shoes and toasting her cold feet. This house was palatial after Sophie’s flat. Then she jumped up, padded out to the kitchen, put three cookies on a plate, and rummaged until she had found the bottle of home-made root beer they had been going to open last night. The air of the house was warm and friendly about her, and she hugged to herself the pleasure of being all alone downstairs for these few minutes. . . .

Why on earth did she run around with such fools? . . . Well, this was the end of Harley Guster! Mr. Walsh never troubled her. He was a funny little swart-faced man, inordinately tidy, and fussing if Mr. Guster so much as dropped a handkerchief in their room. He kept a row of bottles in the bathroom cupboard; and Cora and Sophie had once spent twenty minutes counting those bottles, and going into spasms of laughter as they began to reckon up the variety of diseases from which he must suffer if he used all those! Cora had declared that he was dead and didn’t know it, that he *must* be dead: no man could pull through such a multiplicity of suffering; and whenever she had looked at him for days afterwards she had wanted to snort

with laughter, remembering Sophie's shocked whisper—"No wonder he looks sad, with all that medicine seething around inside of him!" . . .

Why should she ever bother with one of these troublesome messes again? She was happy at this moment all by herself in the warm room. You always got into a mess the minute you took to fooling with a man. . . . Then she flushed, a certain discomfort stirring, as she remembered moments with "the dentist" when she had felt secretly shaken at the light but flattering pressure of his hand on her arm, when he used to give her a little shake and say, "Woman, bend that iron arm!" She had made it as "iron" as she could, while perilously aware of the softness of its flesh; and then she had laughed, lifting her shoulders and compressing her lips satirically. He was the one, in that case, who had been older, cooler, more experienced than she. She had had to fight to hold her own with him. . . . She resented that, resented the hold he had so nearly gained over her, and that she had breathlessly evaded. Tonight she felt free. She did not want to admit any possibility of weakness; bent her black brows and fiercely denied the secret warmth of her rich blood in her strong body . . . Tommy Redding was the nicest man she had ever known. But if she had married him, she would be where Sophie was. She was glad that she had been strong enough and cold enough not to submit to her own liking. He had finally married another girl.

Her feet were warm, but she didn't want to move just yet. She felt a happy, proud intimacy with the quiet room. Year by year, the girls had added to its comforts—a new cushion, candlesticks, a chair, a reading lamp—all their Christmas presents had been "for the house." All of them had helped, but Cora knew very well that it was due to her, to her resolution, and to her repeated refusal to "budge from this place," that they had stopped their aimlessly hopeful wanderings and made themselves a home. Tonight, she could trace it all back, through the tangled maze of human motives and of circumstance. . . .

She could go back to Warwick and see that it was her feeling of disadvantage there, her passionate envy of the security and pleasant living that the other girls had, that had put this resolve, half blind and half conscious, in her mind. Evelyn had liked to come to their house just because it was so easy-going—like a gypsy camp, Cora thought, satirically!—but she herself had craved that firm establishment against which Evelyn childishly rebelled.

She had it. The home was paid for, it was theirs. They had their own place in the world. They could hold up their heads. Cora envied no one. Not even Evelyn. And Evelyn, now as always, had everything: her Harry and her

babies and her music and her home, and her ecstatic and unbounded hopes. It was too much, Cora had a shrewd notion. And what she had, was due to no one but herself.

Tonight, she seemed able to draw breath for the first time and realize that she was getting somewhere. There had been hard times, but the worst was over. Comparing the household as it now was with that dark remembrance of the dingy place across the bridge, she could feel that they had luxury. Already she had made things easier for her mother. Two years ago, when her father had had that illness, when it was evident that he could not stand the confinement and drudgery of the kitchen work any longer, she had decreed that if he was to stop her mother was to stop, also. There would be no more boarders, no more roomers. Her mother had rebelled against such a sweeping decree as that, but now they kept only Mr. Porter and Mr. and Mrs. Pennyback for dinner, and Mr. Walsh and Mr. Guster in the front room upstairs. Compared to what she had always done, Mrs. Schwietert had leisure now. Of course, as Aunt Soph declared, the woman didn't know how to rest. She made cakes for the Woman's Exchange. Oh, she said, she could stick them into the oven when she was baking other things; she would feel better having her own money to buy presents for the girls.

Mr. Schwietert, too, was happier now. That, however, was not due to Cora. She had given him up after he had failed on the kitchen work and when she had seen that he could not contribute even that much to his family! It was Mrs. Schwietert and Sophie (Sophie had always been his favorite and his protector) who had given him a corner of the kitchen and let him establish a little tailor shop, of a sort, there—a thing he really loved. He did repairing and bits of tailoring, and had actually quite a little business in the neighborhood. Cora and Aunt Soph always had suspected, and had intimated to each other, that a “bad heart” was a very useful way of getting out of responsibility. When people came to the house, papa could get out his wine or beer, and tell his funny stories, and he did not seem to remember that his heart was so bad. But Cora let him alone. Yes, he was happy now—no longer feeling himself subservient to the household, thinking proudly that he paid his own expenses with “mine tailoring,” and free to enjoy himself in his own way. People came in and sat and talked with him, and the children in the block came to see him and to hear his stories and play with the tailoring scraps, as they used to do in the old shop in Warwick.

Yes, the household was firmly established, respected, now. And it was she herself, Cora, who was the center, the support of all this.

She stood up and stretched her arms high over her head; and, as she let them down, she felt herself tall and strong and with a warm glow of blood within her. No one could dictate to her—no one on earth. Even her employers would find it hard to get along without her. When they became too much like employers, she simply had to indicate that she might look elsewhere, and it was funny how quickly they came round! She could do anything within reason—now, after all these years of desperate fighting and just as desperate caution. She knew the business down to its details. Because she was a woman, they had never given her position a name, nor given her the salary that she deserved, nor even put her name upon an office door. No one knew just what place she held—but when there was any trouble, the other employees said, “See Miss Schwietert about it.” She would force even a real position out of them some day. They were going to have to admit what she was some time—that resolve lay under all her loyalty to them, and made a glint of hostility shine deep in her black eyes whenever she argued with them. . . . Going into the kitchen with her plate and glass, she hummed a little. She took her shoes in her hand and padded softly up the stairs.

She had for her own, now, the room that Dave used to have. The furniture was still unchanged, but the room had her own atmosphere. It was immaculate, and every single thing was where she wanted it. After all these crowded years, Cora exulted even in its bareness. Still, every night, the feeling of her solitude was beautiful to her. She took off her suit skirt and blouse and hung them up carefully. For years she had bought things at reductions, but now she was beginning to be able to dress as she pleased. Aunt Soph would be horrified at the price of this suit. But she earned her own clothes. Who could say anything? Her shoulders were strong and splendid in the mirror. She let down her black hair. Then she turned out the light quickly, opened the window, fastened back the white curtain, and got into her clean, chilly bed. Gradually the glow of her body warmed the smooth sheets. She turned and looked at the square of window. The night was black and cold outside, and the great sky was starry.

Part III

Chapter I

1

It did really seem, though, that too long a space between crises could not be granted the Schwieterts. Just as soon as they began to think they could really stop and get a good breath, it would be time for the next thing to happen. Aunt Soph took such things philosophically. "Yes, no rest for the wicked," she would say easily—although with a wry twist—when Cora complained. But Cora was not ready for philosophy. And, anyway, the real responsibility always fell upon her.

Now, just after Sophie's baby had begun really to grow and thrive, Mr. Schwietert had become ill. He had been frail, of course, for years, ever since his terrible experience in the factory. They had all known about his weak heart. But now he was actually ill. Cora herself had to admit it. Aunt Soph would have admitted it if she had been there.

Cora's first feeling, again, had been resentment on her mother's account. She could not remember the time when she had not been fiercely on her mother's side. Being the oldest, of course she had begun to notice things about the household and to feel responsibility much earlier than the others. She had never forgotten how her mother had looked after the big family had taken in ironing and all sorts of other work besides, while her father had sewed in a leisurely fashion, humming as he sewed, in his little tailor shop, with plenty of time to tell funny stories to the children and to play his flute in the evenings—thinking . . . well, if things didn't go here, then they could go somewhere else again! The smoldering, painful anger Cora had felt when she had seen her mother work-worn and in her old clothes among "the ladies" in their starched rustling dresses, at the church suppers in Warwick; at having Evelyn's mother, and not hers, asked to the fancy-work parties in the afternoon . . . when she knew, with a sense of fierce partisanship, that her mother was better than any of those women! It was not her father who had been having the hard work. Not he who had slaved, cooked and cleaned and made beds, taken thought for the family, kept the home together for all of them. He had no right to be ill and have mother wait upon him.

Cora was forced to shut her lips against the bitter "Oh, yes, it's quite convenient to be sick and get out of all the work!" that wanted angrily to be spoken. She simply had to admit that this time her father was really ill. Justice made her at least pretend belief and a certain amount of solicitude

when Sophie and Dave came, and when the neighbors inquired for her father. She listened to her mother's anxious confidences and would not let a single word escape her. But always in her mind there was a bitter residue of the old incredulous contempt.

No, she could not deny that he was ill—she could not have hinted that to any one but Aunt Soph, anyway. She even came to believe in his pathetic sorrow at not being able to take the bits of tailor work that people still brought him.

“Ja, dot maybe I can do,” he would say hopefully. But he would have to put the work aside before he had even begun it. “Nein. I cannot do it. Nein. Not now.”

Sophie and Dave brought the baby to see him on Sunday. He had lavished upon the little fellow all the funny songs and the fondness that he had never really had time to give his own children. But today, he took scarcely any notice of David. Cora, standing in the hall talking to Sophie in an undertone, felt a lump rise strangely and achingly in her throat. Sophie's eyes were wet, and she could see her mother's tired face. Even Dave looked strangely sober and subdued. Cora felt lonely and hard. When the others had gone, she sent her mother to lie down, and stayed with her father the rest of the afternoon.

She went up to the bedroom—he had not been able to come downstairs for the last week. Just as she went into the room, she heard him call out, “Mama!” But when she asked him what he wanted, and when he saw that it was Cora, he told her, no, no, he was all right, he wanted nothing. She asked him, struggling with an obscure, shaken sense of remorse, “Did you want something, papa? Are you tired? Would you like to lie down?” He shook his head. Whatever he had wanted, he would not ask for it now.

He was sitting in a big chair with a pillow at his back, and with an old plaid shawl that had belonged to the household ever since Cora could remember and gone upon all their moves with them, over his knees. His hands, thin and quite delicately made, moved on the shawl with trembling uncertainty. He was bent. His heavy shock of gray hair had quite suddenly grown silvery and thin. There was a vague, pitiful look about his blue eyes. He was a little, foreign old man; and Cora did not know him—had never known him.

That same lump ached in her throat. She wanted to do something for him. But she did not even know what to say to him. She realized for the first time that the alien feeling was not all upon her side. He was no more at

home with her than she with him. He would ask her for nothing. Perhaps he had always known that she was his enemy. The old resentment, held sternly for so long, part of the very fabric of her existence, was shaken, uncertain. . . . There was another side.

The twilight settled slowly into the room. Even the furniture had a sad, remote look. It belonged to the personal life of Chris and Carrie Schwietert. In this room, Cora was a stranger. The alien figure of the old man was withdrawn, lonely, apart. The air was painful with constraint. Cora brought him his medicine; and, as she gave it to him, the mystery of his illness, inhuman and remote, made her feel a certain timidity. His pathetic isolation had about it a dignity. She stood awkwardly beside him, as he took the cup with his trembling fingers and slowly drank . . . condemned by her own condemnation. When at last her mother came, and she left the room, she felt an aching, bewildered sense of guilt that sent her to wandering through the cheerless rooms in the dusk, and to stand at the kitchen window looking out at a mournful evening sky of gray.

She was engulfed by a great, strange loneliness. Her father and mother were together; and Cora realized that, in spite of the hardships, they had always been together. Even in her passionate championship of her mother's cause, Cora—and Aunt Soph, too—had never been able to wring from Mrs. Schwietert more than a pained quiver of the lips and gleam of the eyes in admission of her husband's failures. The bedroom, with the old-fashioned pine furniture, the strange and settled order, was a little stronghold from which their children were excluded. Even Cora, who had done everything for her mother. It was she and her sisters who had worked and thought for the household . . . but these two sat intimate and silent in the slowly growing darkness and needed none of their children with them. . . . What was it? And for what could she reach to draw her out of this great pool of solitude? A dim, ghostly remembrance of her little sister May stirred in Cora's heart . . . not so much a remembrance of the child herself as of the old feeling. . . .

She had always set her father aside—useless. But there had been his own life, going on all the time . . . dimly she sensed it, as if it were something too foreign to be understood, as if there were a darkness between that life and her own so that she could only faintly discern that the other was there. He had sat in this corner of the kitchen, beside his scarred old table, doing the odd jobs of tailoring for the neighborhood, humming his little songs and telling stories to the child from across the street who hung shyly but confidently about him divided between hunger for Mrs. Schwietert's cookies and delight in Mr. Schwietert's songs. This little work had been only a

makeshift, to give papa something to do. But to him it had been real. He mourned over it now. It had been real to other people, too. They still came with clothes to be mended . . . on her way to the street car yesterday morning, that woman at the end of the block had come running out with a shawl wrapped hastily about her to ask for Mr. Schwietert and to say how she missed her old talks with him.

“You don’t know how I always enjoyed hearing your father talk. I’d rather talk to him than any one I know of.”

Cora had scorned him for being so contented with a little work here and there as it came, never hurrying, never trying to get ahead, taking it all as he found it. He ought to have been a peddler, she used to think contemptuously: tramping about the country, talking with people and telling stories, taking all day for a job if he liked it and earning just enough for the day’s needs . . . that would have suited him. A man like her father, who didn’t know how to buckle down, should never have married. . . .

But she could still hear the low voices in the bedroom—and she felt shut out and angry and lost, like a child whose parents are talking above its head. She wandered about the house, resentful and lonely and afraid.

The neat little yard that he had built for “mine shickens” was empty. There had been no need of keeping chickens when the boarders were gone. They had taken too much work and too much food; and what had been the use of keeping them, anyway, when her father had acted as if it were a tragedy to have one for dinner? Cora had no use for that kind of sentimentality. They couldn’t afford to have things around that they didn’t need. . . . But what did it matter? Why hadn’t she let him keep the chickens? Why was it that when people died, none of the sensible things seemed to count? . . . That girl who had visited across the street last summer used to go into raptures over their little garden. She used to come over and sit with Mr. Schwietert while he worked, as Evelyn had liked to do. Evelyn had always wanted to stop at the tailor shop, and Cora had never understood what she found to like there. Of course, their back yard was pleasant in the summer time. It had given papa “something to do” to work at it. Even now, in the desolate late fall, it kept its neat German look—the two old chairs painted bright blue, and the little blue table, set under the one tree near the lilac bush; and the rococo birdhouse, blue and white and yellow, with its three porches with neat railings and painted window frames and red chimneys . . . children brought other children to look at that, to stare in awe and shyly murmur, “I wish we had one like it in our yard!” This place had grown to be a haunt for children, like the old place in Warwick. At the back of the yard

was the little trellis and the grapevine, thick and hard and brown, a few big withered leaves clinging to the twisted stalk, others scattered on the neat patch of ground. To sit out here in the late afternoon, drinking root beer or home-made wine, and talking to Mr. Pennyback or some other crony—that was what papa had enjoyed.

Now, across the great abyss of non-comprehension between them, Cora dimly apprehended how he might seem to other people who had never had to depend upon him. To their old boarders, who used to laugh at his funny tales and stay to talk with him. To old Mr. Pennyback who still came from the other side of the city to hear him talk and to drink a little something with him—“the old man Schwietert.” His tailor shop in the kitchen had been a kind of neighborhood institution, and he himself “a character.”

The next day, when Cora came home from work, she noticed a little girl in an old coat and a dark blue tam hanging about the house. It was cold, and Cora was tired and loaded down with packages. She started to go straight into the house—then she turned back.

“Did you want something?” she said.

The little girl came up to the porch. She looked desolate and cold; the fingers poking out of her old brown mittens were blue. She had been sent out to play with her roller skates, and she did not know what to do with herself.

“Is Mr. S’wietert in there?” she asked in a small voice.

“Yes, but he’s sick, you know. I’m afraid he can’t talk to you.”

The little girl waited.

“Did you want him to do some work? I don’t believe he can, now.”

The child shook her head. Her little face, pinched and chilled by the November air, was disconsolate. Her skates slipped and she clutched at the porch railing. Then she started herself with a shove, and clattered off down the walk.

Cora looked after her a moment. She did not even know who the child was. Then she braced some of the packages against the door so that she could open it, and turned the knob. Again, in the warm, familiar hall into which she had come like this for so many, such countless nights, that huge cold loneliness engulfed her. But it was impersonal now, and seemed to be only her little taste of a loneliness that engulfed the world.

At the last, he had suffered dreadfully, unable to get his breath—it seemed so needless, so viciously cruel, to have such torture vented upon the patient, sweet-tempered man, so gentle, so anxious not to give trouble, so hopeful under any little respite from suffering; who, if he had actually accomplished little, had been kindly always, and unwilling to harm another living thing. He had treated dogs, cats, delivery horses, birds, snails, with a gentle, half comical respect for their existence. “Ja, now,” he used to say to the big toad that hopped about the garden, “come out, liddle fellow, get a liddle hopping done before de big dog comes back again.” . . .

But there was no use in thinking about it now. They had done all that they could. Such things were; that was all—that was what Aunt Soph had told the girls. Aunt Soph had come from Montana to be with them, making this journey in place of the vacation with Cora or Rosie that she had been promising herself with her hoardings from the bits of sewing that she did. She had been sympathetic, sustaining, absolutely a rock of dependability at the time. But now she said, comfortingly, and with a quick return of her natural cheerfulness, things like: “After all, it’s better, you wouldn’t want him back.” . . . “Well, you know, you just have to take things as they come. . . .” And, at last, “Now, Carrie, you ought to give yourself a good rest—you’ve earned it.”

Under the tensivity of suffering had been the secret thought, “It can’t last. Then we can stop a while.”

And it was true, now that the sharp, actual suffering from their helpless watching of pain was dulled. That unbearable tension was broken. The house was more quiet than it had ever been. But this quiet was not peace. If they accepted it, it was deadness. It was as if they were waiting all the time . . . Cora did not know for what, but she felt it; and she knew that her mother, wandering restlessly through the rooms, standing a moment by the window in the parlor, felt it too—and Cora was afraid to have her stop feeling it.

They were alone—except for Mr. Walsh, who had stayed on in his room after Mr. Guster had left, and who had become as much of a fixture in the house as Dave Robbins used to be. Aunt Soph had meant to “make a good long stay”; but Uncle Theodore had sent for her. Rosie had gone back to Colorado; and she was going to marry a young farmer named Ed Nagel and to live on a sugar-beet ranch eight miles from town. Aunt Soph had met Rosie’s Ed, and he was a quiet, shy, hardworking young fellow—“worth six

of Dave Robbins,” Aunt Soph had privately declared, with some resentment, because she thought the two older girls had worked harder and deserved better men than Rosie. Clarence had gone to work for Ed on the ranch. Dave and Sophie, who came almost every evening for a while, were busy at home now. Sophie and her mother held long telephone conversations every day; but Sophie was occupied, and not very well, and sometimes as much as a week went by without her coming home. There were no boarders; and Mr. Walsh was so neat that it was like having no one in that room at all. Mother could rest. She needn’t worry about anything. All her life, Cora had thought of “getting to the place” where she could give her mother some rest. And now it seemed that mother simply didn’t know how to take it.

Cora wanted her to do what the other women did—get her housework over in the morning, and then, after a little rest in the afternoon, change her clothes, drop in to talk and sew with one of the ladies in the neighborhood, or go down town to window-shop and buy a few things in the ten-cent store. That old vision of her mother, in a fresh summer dress, sitting on the porch in the pleasant afternoon and doing a little fancy work (like Mrs. Anderson) had never quite stopped haunting Cora. When she came home from work and found her mother hurrying to baste up house dresses—one blue, one yellow—for Sophie and Rosie, Cora was angry. Why couldn’t the girls make their own dresses?

“Well, but they have so much to do,” Mrs. Schwiertert said mildly. “When Rosie gets on that big ranch——”

“Don’t you worry that Rosie Schwiertert is ever going to kill herself anywhere! Her Ed’ll look after her.”

“Yes, I know, she’s going to have a good husband, but you can’t live on a farm and not work.”

“Suppose she does work!” Cora said angrily. “What if they both do? Don’t you and don’t I? You’ve been working all your life.” Her throat was suddenly choked with a desire for tears. “I try to give you a little rest and you won’t take it. Every day when I come home, I find you breaking your neck over something. You’re simply determined to wear yourself out, that’s all!”

She would not listen to her mother’s defense, but stamped upstairs away from the words that followed her. As she pushed up her sleeves and scrubbed her hands in the bathroom, she wished savagely that *she* could stay at home all day instead of having to be in all that turmoil. But what really hurt was the bewildering realization that the longed-for quiet of the house

was not so welcome as she had thought it would be. Again she felt the strange dark sense of shaken convictions. Her mother was lonely and missed the old activity. When Cora begged her to rest, she complained that she felt “so useless.” Unless she could keep busy, she did not know what would become of her, she felt so lonely at home all day. She missed papa so much.

The clean bathroom was silent and fresh, everything in order; no more irritation of hunting for her own special and sacred toothpaste in a clutter of bottles and tubes and jars. No more having to lock the door against one of the urgent boarders—Mrs. Pennyback, for instance, who used to come rushing up just the instant that she started to wash her hands . . . “Oh, my dear . . . do you mind. . . .” Cora went out into the hall that stretched empty and bright. Mr. Walsh’s door was open, and she could see the spare neatness of his dresser, the wrinkleless perfection of the bed-spread. She fought angrily, incredulously, against the treacherous loneliness . . . her father with his jests and his funny little ways; the girls coming home from work; Clarence dashing up to the porch on his second-hand bicycle; the boarders coming, rustling and creaking, up the front steps; children from the neighborhood hanging around the kitchen; queer customers for the tailor shop; that slightly malicious amusement that Mr. Guster had afforded her. . . .

But the evening was quiet and peaceful. Cora read—she was trying to “take up reading,” conscious of gaps in her education, relying upon the advice of the college girl who was doing filing at the office in choosing the best new books. Her mother sewed lace on a piece of pretty underwear. Surely that was frivolous enough? It made Mrs. Schwiertert feel very righteous.

“Is your book good, dear?” she asked.

“It’s hard reading,” Cora answered, briefly. “I suppose that means it’s good! I haven’t got into it yet, I guess.”

Having read a chapter of the book gave her a virtuous feeling. She laid it aside and took up a magazine that Mr. Walsh had brought down—he always did that, very conscientiously, with both papers and magazines. She stole a glance at her mother’s quiet, unconscious profile, and felt a pang of quite inconsistent fear and disgust that they should be here together, two solitary women, alone in the evening. She got up.

“I’m going to bed!”

But of course it had been absurd to rebel against peace and quiet! As Aunt Soph said, “No rest for the wicked!” And soon they were back in the midst of strain and worry again.

“Oh, now I’ll tell you,” Aunt Soph wrote, “I think all that ails your mother is that she’s just tired out.”

But that old pain in her side that she had been fighting off for no one knew how many years, declaring—only too truly—that she had no time to attend to it, kept coming upon her, now that there *was* time, and claiming its due. And still she fought off an admission of it. Cora scolded her and pleaded with her.

“Mother, you’ve got to get that looked after. You haven’t any excuse on earth for not doing it now.”

“Oh, I feel better today, I think it’s going to go away. I want to try this medicine I got at the drugstore a while.”

Mrs. Schwietert had put off her own physical needs for so long that she felt guilty to admit so much as that a tooth ought to be filled.

But the pain grew worse and more constant. There were two or three days out of every week when she was ill. She usually managed to get downstairs to cook dinner for Cora, but she could not conceal her wretchedness. She would not admit that the thing could be important enough to require the advice of the expensive doctors that Cora wanted to see. She temporized desperately—saying first that she wanted to try that chiropractor that Mrs. Pennyback went to; and then that she would not so much mind seeing the woman doctor who was one of Cora’s new acquaintances; then, weakly, that she would try “some other doctor, one near here, not so expensive.”

Cora said:

“Well, let’s go to Dr. Wallace, then. I’ll make an appointment. She’s an obstetrical expert—I told you that—but at least she can make you go to someone else.”

That terrified Mrs. Schwietert. She pictured Dr. Wallace as a dragon. She made excuses—did not feel well enough to have any one ask her questions; she would wait a few days, and then she would be ready. And if Dr. Wallace was a specialist, it would be better, anyway, to “try some regular doctor.”

“All right, then, we’re going to see Dr. Bailey, as we ought to have done in the first place,” Cora said firmly. “I’m going to make an appointment with

him for tomorrow. And, mother, there'll be no getting out of it."

Poor Mrs. Schwiertert was silenced.

"I'll be back for you at two-thirty, mama," Cora said severely, when she left the next morning.

Mrs. Schwiertert asked her meekly, "Can't I meet you somewhere and save you that long trip home?"

But Cora didn't trust her. Cora's footsteps were firm and relentless upon the cement walk.

At half past two precisely, she was back. Her mother was dressed in the one "good suit" that the girls had forced her to buy two years ago and that she kept for expeditions to town.

"Are you ready?" Cora demanded.

"Yes, but Cora, I forgot, I was going to telephone you. This is the day that Sophie was coming over. I was wondering——"

"No, we can't!" Cora forestalled her. "This date is set, and we're *going*."

"Yes, but dear, if Sophie comes and finds us gone——"

"I don't care what happens if Sophie comes. She'll have to go home again. Mother, put on your hat. We're going."

Mrs. Schwiertert went slowly upstairs and came back in her suit-coat and black hat with the ribbons at the side, the nice black oxfords she had got at Weldon's shoe sale, and her gray silk gloves. But she looked, in spite of her appropriate city-made garments, old and withered—a gaunt, tired woman, whose years of hard work had set their indelible marks upon her. It was too late for any leisure to erase them. And she had aged since Mr. Schwiertert's death. Some of the old ease and amplitude and kindness were gone—the old sustaining strength that had always been there to respond to any need. Mother looked weak and hesitant. She could do anything for anybody else; but she was ashamed to have things done for her.

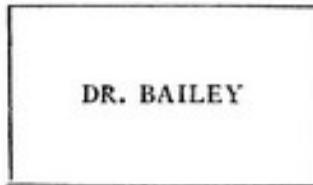
They set off almost in silence. Mrs. Schwiertert made some faint remark about how late the trees were in budding. Cora noticed, in the street car, that her hands fumbled nervously with her purse and that her eyes had a glaze of distress. Mother had been calm, resourceful, unshakable when any of them were ill or in trouble. But now, when it came to herself, she was timid and ashamed. With almost a furtive look she followed Cora through the large arched doorway of the office building and into the elevator. Cora motioned

for her to sit down on the one little chair, and she sat there, ill at ease and apologetic. Two well-dressed, pink-faced, barbered men took off their hats. The elevator shot up almost noiselessly. When they reached the long pale corridor on the sixth floor, Mrs. Schwietert started instinctively in the wrong direction.

“It’s on this side, mother.”

“Oh! I don’t know what made me want to turn down there.”

She looked apprehensively at the closed, impressive doors. A carefully unobtrusive sign said:



Their heels rang on the hard narrow floor of the corridor. In Dr. Bailey’s reception room, a pretty girl with red-gold hair done low on her neck came noiselessly toward them across the velvet carpet of soft old-blue.

“Did you have an appointment?”

“We have an appointment for three-fifteen.”

“Just a moment, please.”

The girl went into the inner office, and then came back smiling at them, with respect, now that the appointment had been confirmed.

“Won’t you be seated? Dr. Bailey will see you in a moment.”

Cora said casually, “Thank you.”

Mrs. Schwietert looked about uncertainly before she sat down in one of the blue-upholstered chairs. One of the wide windows was open, but the noise of traffic was subdued and dreamlike, far below them. There were such discreet sounds here—the opening of an office door, the soft steps of the assistant on the velvet carpet, a murmur of voices in the inner office. Mrs. Schwietert thought, “We oughtn’t to be here—I don’t belong here—it’s too expensive.” Cora’s face was cold and composed. She took up a magazine and glanced at it. Mrs. Schwietert’s heart began to thud heavily. Her hands moved. She was here . . . there was no getting out of it.

“Will you come now?”

The doctor’s office was shiningly immaculate with white, ringed curtains shutting off cubicles. He sat at his desk, turned a trifle to greet them. A slender, very fashionably dressed woman with a thin, dark face went out, saying, with a southern accent, “Good evenin’, doctuh.” The doctor’s clean-shaven, impassive face made Mrs. Schwietert nervous. She fumbled with her hand-bag and let Cora do the talking. She wanted to belittle all her ailments, and then those bright, rather small, unembarrassed, ice-gray eyes looking straight at her made her move with a guilty feeling. He asked very brief, uninflected questions and made little comment.

“I think we had better have an examination,” he said.

Mrs. Schwietert gave a quick, terrified glance at Cora. But she followed the assistant meekly into the little cubicle and permitted the deft, smiling help in undressing. When she stepped out from the curtains, she saw, to her dismay, that Cora was not there. She was in the doctor’s hands.

Cora waited in the reception room. Well, at least she had made her mother come! But she could not help, in spite of her disgust at herself, feeling sore because mother seemed to appreciate so little what Cora was trying to do for her, and clung with such silent and tender loyalty, such an unshakable depth of affection, to the memory of Chris. She didn’t really seem to care, now, what became of the rest of her life.

Dr. Bailey came in to speak to Cora while Mrs. Schwietert was dressing. He said, in a low voice, “Your mother is very tired, isn’t she? I think that there is a condition there—but it’s impossible to say how serious at this time. Now, if you could come in a moment tomorrow. . . .”

Mrs. Schwietert entered, looked at them. The doctor smiled now, touched her arm.

“I’m just telling your daughter that I want to see you again.”

She pulled on her silk gloves over damp and trembling hands. Surely he would “say something”—but he did not, only told her good morning; and she did not want to ask Cora. As they waited for the elevator, she said:

“Well, he wasn’t so bad toward the last.”

“He’s fine. Aren’t you glad, now, to have it over?”

“I wonder what he’s going to charge for this. I know it’ll be enough, from the looks of the office.”

“Never mind. It’s a relief to see someone who knows what he’s doing.”

“Oh, yes, I think he knows what he’s doing, all right.”

Curiously enough, Mrs. Schwietert seemed relieved and almost light-hearted, now that this first dreaded ordeal was past. She wanted to stop in at the little bakery to get some hot-cross buns for breakfast, and she noticed dresses in the shop windows. She had yielded her responsibility to the doctor. It was Cora who had to feel the anxiety now. Were mother’s days of strength past? Cora felt a dreadful pang of fear; but, through that, through a selfish craving and resentment, an old sense of protection struggled up fierce and strong. She didn’t want to have to feel it again, but at need it was there. If it had to be her whole life. . . .

“Look out, mother. I’m used to these streets. Now.”

Chapter II

1

Having Aunt Soph in the house again made Cora feel like slipping out of some of her old responsibilities. It was like old days, when the girls were all at home, and Aunt Soph—on one of her visits—took charge of the work and swept them out “to have a good time while they had the chance.” Dreary and barren as Aunt Soph’s life might seem to other people—and what was it except devotion to the old people (willing or not? Cora didn’t know) and then to her unfortunate brother; with rush visits, whenever called upon, to the Schwieterts; all her little personal plans thrown to the winds—still, she had never lost that old breezy, sturdy quality of hers, and that old delight in making people enjoy themselves. Now she deferred to Cora’s wishes and authority, like the rest of the family. But to Aunt Soph, all her nieces were still “the girls.” The Schwietert household had always been so struggling and busy that only with Aunt Soph had they felt like “the children,” with older women to get the meals and wash the dishes and shoo them out to play. Aunt Soph immediately took all of Cora’s mending and household duties in charge; constituted herself nurse and companion for Mrs. Schwietert; and begged Cora:

“You stay down town this noon with the other girls and have a good time, old lady. There isn’t any need for you to scamper home when I’m here. You just have a little fun for a change. I’m used to all this business.”

Uncle Theodore, of course, hadn’t wanted Aunt Soph to leave; but she had said, with determination, that she guessed Carrie needed her more than he did. To Aunt Soph, the Schwietert household was luxury, and any sort of visit there she entered upon with relish. The two Schneider sisters had always been very close. Soph took it for granted that she must help out Carrie. “The condition,” as the doctor told Cora, was not so alarming in itself. But Mrs. Schwietert, it seemed, had lost her old strength. She stayed weak and unlike herself, content to let Cora and Aunt Soph have the reins of the household in their hands. There was no one who seemed to need her—little David was bouncingly well, and Cora had written to threaten Rosie if she so much as hinted any troubles to her mother, and had written to Ed to make it doubly sure. Aunt Soph refused to be worried.

“Oh, this is good for your mother. What she needed. Just to let things slip a while. You bet.”

Business was heavy now. Cora had to catch up on work she had half neglected for weeks. Sometimes she would find herself tense without knowing why . . . until she thought, "Aunt Soph is there," and relaxed gratefully.

It was the first time for months that she had had even a fleeting sense of freedom. Her mother's illness, and her father's before that, had cost so much of their difficult savings that it didn't seem to matter how much she spent now. It was gone, anyway. Something would happen to take the rest of it. Besides, she knew now that she was secure in her position. She had made her way. She always could.

So now, when she was going out in the evening, and felt like staying down town to dinner, she stayed. She took little trips with some of the other girls on Sundays. Aunt Soph aided and abetted her. "The money goes soon enough, anyway," Aunt Soph told her. "If you don't spend it this way, you'll spend it some other way. Might as well get something out of it while you can." When the old tense strain came over her . . . mother needed this, Sophie needed that, the house ought to have something else. . . . Cora thought, with defiant bitterness, "Well, I make the money. . . ."

She had come to feel, as she confided to Aunt Soph, when they were sitting up and indulging in root beer before they went to bed, according to the ancient custom of the house:

"I'm not going to worry about anybody but myself any more. Nobody knows what anybody else wants, anyway. I believe mother was actually happier and better off when she was working herself to death for the whole family than she is now."

Aunt Soph said comfortingly, taking a bite of fresh cookie and a good draught of root beer, "Well, you see, your mother's done that all her life."

Cora brooded, her eyes somber and black. She looked up, and two sparks of defiance quivered in the pupils. She said, with bitter irony, "I don't know but that papa was right! He seemed to enjoy life more just puttering around than the rest of us did trying to get somewhere."

Aunt Soph took that more seriously than Cora had intended. "Well, I believe there's something in that," she said. "Your father knew how to have a good time, all right . . . but then, somebody had to do the work!"

"That's the devil of it," Cora muttered.

"Oh, you're tired right now. You've had too much to look after. Why, look at you! You're young. You've got more means than any of us ever had.

You've come to the place where you can just begin to have a good time. So you just go ahead and do it, old lady. Hm? Let's have a glass of root beer on the subject!"

And things did seem to be easing up, opening up, for Cora. For a little while, she felt a sense of rising exhilaration. She was going to ask for a raise in salary when this new extension of the business was put through. Her position in the office was as firm as such things ever were. And she had a little position of her own in the city as well. She was no longer just one of the horde of struggling girls who got off the street cars and streamed toward the offices. She had been asked several times to give talks on "Secretarial Work for Women" at meetings of clubs and working girls, and at one of the business schools. Terrified at first, because she knew she couldn't make a speech, she had discovered now that she liked to appear before these people, capable, poised, well-dressed, successful. This spring she had been asked to join a club of business and professional women who met for luncheon in one of the department store tea-rooms every other Tuesday. She was meeting, on a plane of equality, some of the "best women in the city"—women osteopaths and obstetricians, the city librarian, the one woman lawyer, successful women insurance and real estate agents, a director of pageants, the ruddy-faced superintendent of the Maternity Home. They sang and talked and agreed to call each other by their first names. It was exciting to Cora. She could hold her own among them. She was almost "at the top." She had wanted to attain this—life would have been a failure if she hadn't done so. Now she struggled fiercely to enjoy what she had won.

But there was something wrong. Except for occasional outbursts and half-confidences to Aunt Soph, she told no one of how she was feeling. Aunt Soph and her mother thought that she was tired—had gone through too much. Bitterness and a feeling of barrenness settled upon her more and more darkly, until all that spring she was in a mood of black despair.

At the club luncheons, she enjoyed at first the coming together, the big room with windows open and with jonquils on the tables, chatter of women, tinkle of glasses, coming and going, the good clothes, faces fresh and powdered, spring hats and bright silk blouses and faint sweet scents . . . and then, when she was clapping animatedly at one of the speeches and laughing with the rest, she would feel, first that insidious creeping on of bleak disappointment, and then suddenly a feeling that her laughter, all she said and did, was hollow. She went back to the office in the same mood, so that she could scarcely drive herself through her usual work. Even when she was out in the park on Sunday afternoon with some of "the girls" from the club

—when the flower beds were bright scarlet and blue under the blue morning sky, and the rich grass smelled moist and fresh-clipped, and the water sparkled from the marble corollas of the fountain . . . this same blackness came over her. She went out to dinner and to a play with one of the men whom she knew. But there was no pleasure, only dissatisfaction . . . that, and a tingling physical awareness that shamed Cora’s fierce pride. Even when she entered her own familiar house, tired from work just as she used to be, and with the peaceful evening ahead of her, the cushions, the pretty reading lamp that she had bought, her own wicker chair, had no comfort for her. There had to be something else . . . something *inside* of things . . . she did not know how to put it.

Mr. Dutton said to her, rallying, “What’s the matter? Got the spring fever?”

She had been sitting at her desk staring into space, off her guard for once, and so disgruntled that she did not care.

“Oh, I’m disgusted with the world,” she said.

“Cheer up! The world’s not such a bad place. You’d better go to see ‘Pretty Polly’ tonight and get the cobwebs out of your brain. Good show,” he told her lightly.

He went off with his lounging, long-legged gait.

“A lot you know about it!” Cora muttered. Then she was disgusted with herself. Mr. Dutton had done nothing to her. In fact, he had been a great deal more friendly of late than ever before—had made confidences about the cost of keeping up a household like his, and about his children, and what his wife thought of religion. He was about as good a boss as she was likely to have, take it by and large, she supposed. She knew all his foibles with a minute and unillusioned knowledge that even his wife did not possess. But she liked Mr. Dutton. She was merely exasperated with things in general.

It was Saturday. That meant that Mrs. Dutton would drive into town for Mr. Dutton and that he would leave early. Cora pulled herself up from thinking, “Of course, the boss can do that!” A woman who had sense and was out for business had no concern for little jealousies—leave that to the office girls. At a trifle past eleven, Mrs. Dutton swept into the office. Cora had just one resentful glimpse of her—smooth-faced, red-lipped, easily gracious and smiling to the clerks; enough of a glimpse to see how miraculously white and fine-grained her skin looked beneath the shining reddish hair and the orchid-colored hat—her dress gray, and her very elegant

suède pumps . . . what was it that Cora remembered about reddish hair and gray and violet? How silly to feel that twinge of resentment! Good heavens! She knew enough about Mrs. Dutton not to envy her, either complexion or clothes: her high-flown escapades among varieties of religion, and the inside history of the Dutton household. Cora sturdily preferred her own hard experience and dearly bought knowledge. The twinge came from an old, deeply buried memory . . . that girl in the first office where Cora had worked, who used to wear such lovely clothes . . . gray, a gray suit, and a hat with violets. . . .

On his way out, looking half proud and half disgruntled, as always when his wife called for him, Mr. Dutton stopped at Cora's desk.

“Pretty nearly through?”

She looked up, surprised.

“Better get out and have a tramp this afternoon. Get over that grouch. . . .”

He grinned at her, and hurried after his wife. Cora looked after him astonished and somewhat remorseful. She saw him standing outside the open door waiting for the elevator—Mrs. Dutton taking out her vanity case and carefully passing her lipstick over her smooth full lips. There was a bleak look on his thin face with its deep, irritable lines. He stood with one shoulder hunched wearily.

Cora put away her work and left the office a few minutes before one. She felt a faint sense of expectant pleasure as she went out into the street with her whole afternoon ahead of her. She would stay down town and have a good lunch somewhere. She went to the tea-room in the department store where the club held its luncheons; and as she followed the manager in her black silk dress, to a small table beside one of the deep-silled windows, her eyes brightened with a return of her old pleasure in threading her way among the tables where the glasses flashed bright tints upon the smooth stiff cloths, where women in flowered hats and summer silks looked up with quick bright glances, and there was an animated chatter of voices and tinkle of spoons. She sat down at her own table, took off her gloves, set back the slender vase with its summery sprig of wiry-stemmed, rosy-colored sweet peas. The chicken bouillon was fragrant, hot, and delicate. She broke her crisp roll. She could look out across the tops of buildings and across grayish asphalted streets to the light gray sparkle of the river.

But all this seemed to be a little away from her . . . as if she could not quite admit it to enjoyment while there was this dreary, gnawing sense of something wrong.

When she had finished luncheon, she stood irresolutely in the waiting-room, with its tall clock and velvet upholstery, where people pressed against the dark velvet cords swung across the entrance to the crowded tea-room. Should she go home? Shop? Have a facial? Go to a movie? She had lost her enjoyment of the things she used to do all by herself. She went out into the hot summer street. On a sudden impulse, she turned into the National Bank building and took the elevator to the fifth floor to Dr. Amelia Wallace's office. She had been quite friendly of late with Dr. Wallace and her "side partner," as the doctor always said—Miss Ethel Bridge, the librarian. The doctor's small waiting-room was fresh and breezy with open windows and wicker furnishings. The doctor stuck out her head from the inner office.

"Oh, hello there, comrade! Sit down."

Cora sat down near the window and looked at a copy of the National Geographic magazine. Photographs of arched stone doorways in Italy, a stone wall with a gargoyle head sending down two impudent jets of cold water into a worn basin, clear shadows of vine leaves, a black and slender cypress tree . . . they brought her a sensuous aching for the delicious coolness of stone and shadows and sparkling water in a dry burning heat. Oh, she knew what she wanted! To get away, clear away, to lose herself utterly in difference, and to emerge all cleansed and changed. To see new sights and to feel new things. . . .

A heavy, suspicious-looking country woman went through the waiting-room. The doctor came out from the inner office. She said, heartily:

"Come into the sanctum!"

Cora followed her into the tiny cell that sparkled with whiteness.

"I thought perhaps you'd like to go out to the park," she said tentatively, with a restless longing for the green slopes and the blazing colors of the flower beds.

"Love to! But I can't. Have to go out in half an hour."

"Oh, then, I'll——"

"No, no, sit down—sit *down*, I say!"

The doctor's little short, plump, iron-muscled arms forced her into the leather-seated chair.

“Come on and tell me what’s on your soul.”

“Soul? Have I got one?” Cora said, with a short laugh.

But she sat down. She liked the little doctor, short, fat, with a flushed skin and small twinkling brown eyes, hands that were absurdly tiny beneath those stout arms and iron wrists. Dr. Wallace stepped here and there about the minute office, putting things away for the week-end and telling about the woman who had just been in. Cora tried feverishly to be interested. She had some faint notion of confiding her state of mind to Dr. Wallace, but as she listened to the cheerful sensible comments, she knew that it was impossible. The shining white room, the hot sunshine outside, the doctor’s fresh face and matter-of-fact voice made it all morbid to Cora herself. Dr. Wallace seemed independent and contented. She and Miss Bridge were buying an old brick house at the edge of the city and were going to remodel it. Dr. Wallace was full of plans for the garden. . . . “Just bought a lot of new aster plants,” she said. “Now let’s hope the Bunson kid doesn’t take it into its head to make an appearance this afternoon!” Cora laughed. But there was something in her, too, that rebelled against the doctor’s cheerful content. She caught a partial glimpse of herself in the mirror . . . and as she saw the darkness of her eyes, the set of her head on its firm neck, she could feel a warm surge of restless vitality. . . . She crossed her knees, opened her lips to speak, to say, “I wish you’d tell me what on earth is the matter with me.” But the long habit of proud self-reliance kept her silent. Only as they were leaving the office together, she suddenly asked in a flippant voice:

“Did you ever feel disgusted with the world?”

The doctor was pressing the elevator button. She gave Cora a quick, keen look.

“That the way you’re feeling today?”

“More or less.”

Cora tried to turn it off lightly.

“Too much office?” the doctor asked, sagely.

“Too much everything, I guess.”

“Why don’t you take a good vacation? . . . Here it comes. Down!”

The thought of a vacation kept coming back to Cora after that; and the thirst for something new, different, that those photographs of Italy had given her. She gave no hint to Mr. Dutton yet, but the idea became the secret center upon which all her existence turned.

She was so determined upon it that she did not actually realize what was meant by the hints that Mr. Button kept dropping. Of course she knew that an enlargement of the business was under consideration. She had even talked with Mr. Dutton about it. But instead of thinking and planning now, she did not seem to take the idea into the depths of her consciousness—she avoided it; and as soon as she was away from the office, she simply let it slide away from her mind. Instead, she was dwelling on her secret, letting herself sink into a sensuous excitement at the thought of mountain streams and great pine trees and fresh mountain air—further than that, she would not go. Of course she knew—ought to have known, at any rate—that this proposed change in the business would mean something for her.

But she scarcely realized what was happening when Mr. Dutton came to her desk and said in a lightly mysterious tone, clearing his throat in a manner she knew of old:

“Like to see you in the office a moment, Miss Schwiertert.”

She followed him in a kind of dream. He had slumped into a chair in his usual loose-jointed, ungainly fashion.

“Sit down. Like to have a little heart-to-heart conversation with you.”

She sat down, with one arm laid idly along the arm of the mahogany chair, and her eyes fixed with a dark vacancy on her drooping hand. She answered Mr. Dutton, but at first the words slid off her mind . . . “—about this change in the business. I suppose you’ve been thinking about it.” She did not really get, or care to get, his mysterious suggestions. . . . “Of course, you know we want to keep you with us. I just want to have you assure me—just as a matter of form—that we can count on you.” He smiled at that.

And then, all at once, she felt a quick, alert stirring of revolt. She knew that she was unwilling to commit herself. She had never really thought of leaving the firm, except at angry moments . . . but she found herself fencing, putting off direct statement, until she finally blurted out that she “wanted to have a vacation.” She could see that Mr. Dutton was nonplussed at her lack of enthusiasm. He had let her in at last upon his plans, and she was the only one with whom he had done this, except for their treasurer and “silent partner,” Mr. Cross. But of course it was not possible that she was contemplating any refusal—his somewhat mystified face showed this—and he agreed with at least a pretense of heartiness.

“Oh, if that’s all! Sure. Go ahead. Take your vacation. I guess that’s coming to you.”

He was almost childishly disappointed that she showed no appreciation of his generosity at this particular time. She heard herself saying, nervously, that she “had to have a little change first”; and, although he did not like it, he tried to be sympathetic.

“Well, I know you’ve been sticking to it pretty hard. Had a lot to worry you, too. Sure—take your vacation. Get it over—it needn’t interfere. Go through the Yellowstone, why don’t you? Then you’ll come back already primed.”

It shamed Cora to know that the whole interview, on her side, had been only a wary subterranean fight for that vacation.

It was not until she was going home that she actually comprehended what the interview had meant. Then she stood stock-still in the middle of the block and let her street car pass her. He had actually been suggesting that *she act as manager here!* Behind his cautious hints, and his mysteries, that was exactly what he had meant! Cora felt suddenly weak with a kind of horror as she realized the momentousness of that half hour. . . . Mr. Dutton sprawled in his chair, facing her, his thin hair ruffled, a slight flush upon his cadaverous face, a breeze coming through the open window and flapping the papers held down with his familiar paper weight—a little Chinese dog in heavy brass that the clerks facetiously called “Chow Bow Wow.” And there she had sat, not really knowing what the man was about, concerned with secret and shameful speculation as to how she would feel, now, if he tried to get familiar with her as when she had first come to the office. . . . Idiot! And after all these years of subordination, of grudging admission of her abilities, this had been her own moment of recognition and reward! And she hadn’t even known it.

She could not wait for the other car, but instead began to walk restlessly.

Big-sounding phrases came to her wondering mind: “Summit of career . . . goal of endeavors. . . .” Hollow and meaningless. She would not have been without this moment—but what did it mean, now that it had come? Her mind clung, beneath it, to the thought of that vacation with a fierce tenacity. Mr. Dutton had finally admitted her at last, against all his theories, all his stubborn and half-wounded preconceptions of women, forced by his own experience with his wife. There had been a time when, if she had liked, Cora could have stood in a very different relationship to him. She remembered long-ago days when he had made excuses to stand beside her desk, his hand touching hers when he gave her papers—and how she had cautiously,

unrelentingly warded off any admission of his attitude until she had forced him into an unwilling respect. He had had to acknowledge her at last.

And now that she had this acceptance—for which she had been working, struggling, fiercely and bitterly—she revolted. The warm blood thrilled through her body. The crisp, vigorous sound of her footsteps insisted over and over that she was a woman . . . and she was breathlessly, rebelliously aware of a great flood of hidden vitality that had never been tapped, that was beating against the barriers of her definite, limited, hard existence, and that would make its way out.

The two miles home did not seem long—not long enough! She was warm, but the perspiration under her heavy hair only made her more conscious of her vitality. Her feet were tired from the tramp, but she went swiftly up the front steps and banged open the screen door.

2

She was sure she heard voices when she came into the hall. Who could be there? Mrs. Schwietert stepped to the parlor door. “Can you come in, Cora?” Her voice had that mysterious sound that meant unexpected and exciting company.

Cora held out her hands expressively to show how sweaty they were, and ran upstairs to the bathroom. She wondered who on earth it could be—and then when she went down to the parlor, she was amazed to have Mr. Anderson get up from the big chair and come toward her!

“Why, Mr. *An*-derson!”

She spoke at first with joyous excitement . . . then she felt quickly that that was the wrong tone. She was even more amazed to see how changed he was—balding than ever, wearing glasses, his face colorless and old, and his easy, jocular attitude turned into a strained solemnity. Cora could scarcely believe that this *was* Mr. Anderson. Something was wrong. She felt that, with a reluctant thrill of fear, through the secret absorption of her own excitement. Confused and uncertain, she tried to go on speaking as if she noticed nothing.

“Who ever expected to see you! Are you on your way home or going somewhere?”

He cleared his throat; and Cora saw, nervously, how solemn both her mother and Aunt Soph looked.

“Just on my way home, now,” he told her.

Mrs. Schwietert said, "Mr. Anderson has been out west with Mrs. Anderson and Evelyn."

"Evelyn!" Cora cried, startled.

And she sat with thoughts suspended, her fear forcing through the tingling force of her own concentration, while she waited to hear more.

Mr. Anderson said, with difficulty, "Yes, I've been getting Evelyn and her mother settled, out there in Arizona."

He told her, then, that the doctors had advised him to put Evelyn in a sanitarium. "It isn't really—well, it isn't really a disease, you understand . . . but she's worn out—all worn out." He seemed to take comfort in that phrase, and straightened his shoulders.

Cora's eyes were dark with shock. She looked quickly from Mr. Anderson to her mother, counting upon her mother's quiet calm, as always, to ease and explain the difficulty. With shame, as she listened, she tried to push back the thoughts of her own situation that at moments clouded what they were saying. She hadn't dreamed of this. It was so long since she had heard from Evelyn—but . . .

"Yes, Evelyn's been—well, she's been more or less sick for a long time. Her mother's been worried about her. But we didn't think of this."

It was a kind of nervous breakdown, they had thought. Yes, Harry had the children. His sister Mabel was staying with him.

"If she should have to leave, Mr. Anderson," Mrs. Schwietert told him, "you could bring them here to us."

"I should say so!" Aunt Soph put in heartily.

"Well, thank you, thank you . . . but, I guess . . ."

He went on talking in a difficult, jerky way—trying to be matter-of-fact and optimistic, breaking out in a sudden confidence, then silent. . . . After a while, Mrs. Schwietert said, with her old firm cheerfulness, now that she had personal trouble to deal with again:

"Now, Mr. Anderson, you're going to stay to supper with us. Your train doesn't go until half past eight, you said."

Aunt Soph, who had been sitting silent and uncomfortable, because she hadn't known the Andersons so well, chimed in heartily again; and although Mr. Anderson thought he must demur at first, he gratefully consented.

“It won’t make any trouble for us at all. We want you. You know our table could always seat any number. You talk to Cora. Why don’t you take Mr. Anderson out on the porch, Cora, where it’s cooler?”

“Well, it is nice out here!” Mr. Anderson said.

Cora could not get over her shock at the change in his appearance. It was as if the life had gone out of him—he was gray and shrunken, and he had none of his little jokes, and only a forced remainder of the old kindly generosity. He wanted to talk, and it was hard for him to talk . . . he could think about nothing but Evelyn. He tried to take an interest in Cora, in the Schwietert affairs, but then he was back again with Evelyn. He did not want to force his trouble upon other people; but Cora could see that it gave him relief to talk with them, who were old friends, and upon whose love and sympathy for Evelyn he could count. She was ashamed because all this seemed, in a way, so remote to her—deep in her mind, she was concerned with her own affairs.

“The trouble was, she tried to do too much all at once. That was it. Music, and the house, and the children, and all these social affairs people wouldn’t let her out of . . . that was the trouble. That husband of hers ought to have. . . . Well, mother and I ought to have seen it ourselves. I blame myself for ever letting her take up that music.”

Cora protested. How would that have been possible, with a girl like Evelyn?

“Yes, I know it, I know it. She could do so many things. And I guess we were too proud of her. You know, when you’ve got only one, Cora—and a girl like Evelyn—yes, I know, mama and I are to blame, too. . . . You didn’t hear her later, Cora, after her voice was developed. That girl could have gone on the stage and made a big thing of it, if she hadn’t married that. . . . Well, well, we didn’t want her to do that, either. She took part in a musical operetta out there in Evanston—had the leading rôle. I tell you, you don’t see many on the stage as good as she was. And she’s got two of the finest little kids—boy and girl: I’d like to have those kids with me—only that mama, of course, has to stay out there with Evelyn. Harry has his business, you know . . . and—not that I wouldn’t foot all this, myself, if ’twould help Evelyn any. . . .”

He roused himself to interest in the Schwieterts’ lawn and garden. Cora took him out to see the backyard, where the little blue chairs and table, rather weather-beaten now, stood beside the lilac bush.

“Well, Cora, your father was a great one, wasn’t he? I can just see him in all this. I’ll tell you, I miss him around here, Cora . . . yes——”

His voice sank into sadness again; and Cora, with a false, restless animation, pointed out the flowers that Aunt Soph had planted, and tried to get away from the thought of her father and of death. The late afternoon sunshine was bright upon the fresh little garden, upon the gaily blooming flowers and the weather-stained chairs. Impossible here—wrong! it made Cora angry—to feel such an ending to Evelyn’s bright eager trust and certainty. Again Cora felt herself tingle with the realization of what she had heard today. The thought of her success eased one part of her being, even while the other part rushed away, restless, seeking, hungry. . . . She was on an up-grade of living, and she could not—for all the aching depth of her old affection—turn aside to think of even her beloved Evelyn in darkness and failure.

Aunt Soph was calling them into the house. Good summer odors of steaming sweet corn and roast done to a turn were strong from the open back door. “Well!” Mr. Anderson said, with a little smile. He turned toward the house. Cora leaned for a moment against the birch tree. She wanted to be here all alone in the bright sunshine. She felt the rush of her own warm vitality, demanding its life, in ruthless hot defiance of all that was binding and sad in all the world. She must have things. She couldn’t help it.

Chapter III

1

Cora was up in her room packing. The bed was piled with clean underwear, dresses and blouses were laid carefully over the backs of chairs. She had worked all morning in the office, and she had only this one afternoon to prepare for the trip. She had just washed her hair and it was hanging down her back drying. As she worked, she stopped sometimes to give it a toss and a shake, so that little drops flicked off the crisp dark ends. Aunt Soph hovered in the doorway, asking every so often:

“Can I do anything to help?”

“No, I’m almost ready.”

“Anything more you want pressed?”

“I don’t think so. Oh, maybe if you’d just take down that pongee and give it a few licks, Aunt Soph.”

“Sure. I guess I’ll take your pleated skirt along, too. Then there won’t be so much to do when you take it out of the suitcase.”

The big suitcase lay open in the middle of the floor. It was brand-new. The smooth brown leather and the stiff plaid lining were still impressive with the feeling of the big fifth floor in the department store where Cora had gone one noon to buy it—walking past the outing department, where at last she could have some share in the holiday eagerness of people who were looking at shining canoes with stiff varnished paddles, and on to the big space piled with trunks and bags and suitcases with their pleasant, expensive smell of new leather. “I want to see some suitcases—something quite large, that I can take on a three weeks’ trip without any other luggage.” When Cora had anything to buy, she usually did it as quickly as possible, with no words about it. But the excitement of her trip had made her expansive. When the clerk had suggested, “You must be going on a vacation,” she had answered, with a shy, sudden smile, “Yes, I’m going to drive through Yellowstone Park.” And she had stood talking for ten or fifteen minutes while he told her about his brother’s trip through the Park.

Everything that she put into the suitcase had this same magic: the crisply folded, beautifully laundered chemises and nightgowns, the new tubes of face cream and tooth paste, the little round box of powder. She folded over

the stiffish, shining tops of the high shoes she had bought to wear in the Park, then took her outing dress from the bed, already folded, and laid that in carefully. Already it seemed to her that these things breathed a scent of pine needles.

She was actually *going*. These last weeks had been so crammed that she hadn't stopped to realize . . . even now she couldn't stop for what lay beyond the act of leaving, in the very secret center of her mind. Everything had turned up at the last moment to keep her. She had simply had to concentrate on the bald determination that she *would* get off. Now, for a breathless second, the shiny little pictures on the railroad folder were almost actual . . . she could feel herself, in the new outing clothes, standing in the entrance of one of the gay little striped tents and looking at a snow-topped mountain—with people, of course, in the background. . . . She was going to *see* the mountains, a geyser, a canyon—catch an actual breath of sharp bright mountain air.

She would leave her suitcase open for her brush and comb. Everything else was new—powder, toothbrush, talcum. Day by day she had been adding to the precious row of things for the trip, rushing about at noons to do a little more shopping. She wanted that feeling of starting in new. It meant more than she acknowledged even to herself.

She stood up and glanced around the room. It looked bare. She pushed back the chairs, set a few things in order in the closet. She wasn't going to hate to leave it, wasn't going to think of nights either beautiful or unbeautiful in their clear solitude. Aunt Soph would want to take off the dresser scarf and bed-spread, anyway, and get the things laundered while she was gone. Only her empty manicure tray and a half-used bottle of toilet water were left on the dresser.

She was going to take the evening train. But she might as well dress now for the journey. She took off her clothes hastily, stuffed her underwear and stockings into the laundry bag. Her hair was not quite dry, but it would not hurt to pin it up. She wound the long front strands on brown kid curlers and fastened the big knot with three bone hairpins. It felt soft and thick and damp. She put on her old crêpe kimono—she was going to leave that at home, she had a splendid one of red silk—and scuttled out into the hall.

“Aunt Soph!” she called down over the banisters. “Any hot water?”

“Yep. You just get undressed. I'll bring it up.”

She waited at the head of the stairs, curling her bare toes childishly, and looking down at the green glimmer of summer street through the screened door. Aunt Soph came laboring up the stairs with a big pailful of hot soft water.

“Oh, you’re all ready, are you?”

“Um-hm. Thanks.”

“You bet. Don’t mention it.”

Aunt Soph rested the heavy pail on the edge of the tub while she put in the stopper. Then she splashed the water into the tub.

“Hurry while it’s hot, Cora. You can put a lot of cold with that. I’ll bring it.”

The amber-tinted soft water (Aunt Soph had brought it over from next door, where they had a cistern) steamed up deliciously from the white tub. Cora felt as if she were scrubbing off the whole memory of the office. She trembled a little with excitement as she stood up and wiped strenuously with a big Turkish towel. The window was open and the fresh warm air, tinged just the faintest bit with the dry scent of autumn, gave her a feeling of strange new freedom. She powdered with what was left in her old can of talcum, and then her eyes brightened with a mad desire to pitch the can straight out of the window. But she set it back on the white shelf; and all at once she had to laugh to see Mr. Walsh’s line-up of bottles . . . but with a queer homesickness for the old familiar life in the house, brought up by those ridiculous things. As she pulled the soft old kimono about her and turned to leave the bathroom, she caught a glimpse of herself with a shine of dark eyes and a deep glow of color in her cheeks. Her heart felt warm.

She put on the fresh new underwear that she had bought for the trip. It was still sanctified by the thought of the best department store with the soft noiseless carpets and the mahogany counters. It didn’t matter how much she spent getting ready, because afterwards . . . but she wouldn’t think beyond that. She let down the soft twists from the curlers and brushed out her long, straight black hair. It was so clean that it swished crisply between her palms when she felt of it. Always, just after it had been washed, there was a shimmer of brown over the black that gave it a richness and a texture. Its fresh scent was good. She put on the white silk blouse and skirt of tan rajah silk that she had bought for the journey. She laid out the suit jacket, her new brown hat and tan silk gloves on the bed, closed her suitcase, and hunted out an old torn handkerchief that she could use until she left.

Then she went downstairs.

“Well, see the lady!” Aunt Soph exclaimed.

Her mother, who was working in the kitchen, gave her a quick, fond smile.

“It looks fine!” She pulled out the blouse a little and felt of the skirt. “It’s just the thing.”

Cora felt a weakness in the touch of her large thin hands that gave a sudden sinking of remorse and fear. She fought that down as she stood a moment in the kitchen being admired by the two older women. She was just a little shy in her new clothes, and with the thought of the momentous event ahead of her; and she tried to make the whole thing commonplace by helping with the supper.

“No, no, you’re all ready, we don’t want you spoiling your glad rags,” Aunt Soph told her bluffly.

“Why don’t you rest a little, dear, while you have the chance?” her mother asked. “You’ve been working so hard this last week.”

“Oh, I don’t want to rest!”

“Are your things all packed?”

“Everything. Suitcase closed.”

“Well, Dave can bring it down for you when he comes. We won’t eat until he and Sophie get here.”

Cora wandered into the parlor and then out to the porch. She sat in the swing for a few moments, but she was too restless to stay anywhere. She went out into the backyard. Bathing, and changing into her new traveling clothes, had seemed to detach her from the place. Her desk in the office was closed, she was forbidden the kitchen. She wandered about like a stranger, yet marvelling all the while at her own sense of detachment. It was August—the summer nearly over! Under a high hot sun, the blue sky seemed to shimmer a little with a haze that was faintly autumnal. And there was an autumn touch of dryness about the garden with its deep colors of summer. She felt it with mounting excitement—the turn of the season.

“Well, all ready to go?” Mrs. Rawlins called to her.

“All ready,” she sang out cheerfully.

“I sure do hope you have a nice trip! How long do you expect to stay?”

“About two weeks,” Cora answered.

But as she said it, she knew that never once had she allowed herself to think further than this trip. She had never admitted to her own self what the trip had come to mean to her. She could not imagine herself coming back. It was a break. Already she looked about the little garden, with the lilac bush and the table and the birdhouse, and felt that she had left it. There was no sadness—only a blankness. Her life here had come to a mysterious halt. She stooped and pulled a withered petal from one of the zinnias. They were August flowers, hot, thick-colored. Their scent, bitter, harsh, and strong, came up to her. She had never felt so much apart from all the world. She was only herself. She bent down and touched the stiff blossoms with pleasure.

Then she saw Sophie and Dave coming up the walk, hurrying, and forcing little David to hurry between them. That solitary moment was gone and she was back in the old life. They must go into supper, and then she would have to put on her jacket and hat and start for the train.

Part IV

Chapter I

1

Keen piney air sifted through the screen in the Pullman window. Cora, wide awake all of a sudden, pushed up the stiff curtain. She saw slim-stemmed trees flying past. Her eyes shone and deepened, and she leaned on her elbow, looking out of the window, feeling and yet scarcely believing in the wild exhilaration of the air.

The dressing-room was filled with excited women, all unsteady on their feet as the car jerked and swayed. Some of them Cora recognized. She had seen them in Salt Lake City. Going about through the grounds of the Mormon Temple, with a guide, they had acted like strangers; but already, as they dripped Pullman towels into jiggling water and begged pardon for the powder they sprinkled, they were chattering together. Two ladies from Indiana, sisters, spinster and widow, came with a discreet rush into the dressing-room, in blue flannel wrappers and crocheted boudoir caps. Cora remembered them going through the Temple grounds. "Well, this is a wonderful building, but it's terrible when you think of the worship that's built it up!" And, "Do you suppose these Mormon wives are really happy?" Cora kept away from them. These six days were hers. She couldn't get stuck with frumps. She felt a joyous ruthlessness harden triumphantly within her.

Cora was tall and well-built in her olive-drab khaki. She felt with secret joy as she looked into the mirror that fresh air and sunburn had given her skin a flushed, fresh, glistening look that made the face in the mirror that young-girl face that used to look back at her with a dark glow of eagerness from the little speckled mirror in the bedroom in Warwick. It was that Cora who was alive in her now. Only not shy now! She felt almost angrily bold among all these chattering, womany women.

Berths were being made up. A well-dressed couple whom she had noticed the night before made room for Cora in their section. The worldliness of their piled bags pleased her. They were talking about the other places where they had traveled. They took it for granted that Cora had traveled, too. She felt light, almost dizzy. Her past was gone.

The trees kept flying, flying past. There was shining water. Cora realized with eager joy the motley, gregarious nature of a vacation crowd. A fat gruff Scotchman in an Alpine hat with a feather added a touch of European

distinction. Those two old sisters came out of the dressing-room self-conscious and primly apologetic in their compromise outing clothes. A small elderly man was making the rounds of the coach eagerly collecting the names of the states from which his fellow-travelers had come. He stopped at Cora's section.

"Well now, folks, I'd like to know what state you hail from. Pennsylvania! Well, they's some other folks in the train from Pennsylvania. You ought to get together! Those folks right back there at the end of the car."

He sat down in a friendly manner beside Cora and said with pride:

"They's eleven different states and two foreign countries represented right here in this car. That old gentlemen's from Scotland. Making a tour of this country. That's quite a rig-out he's got on! Well sir, it's a great study to see from how many different parts of the country folks can get together in a place like this. Yes, sir. It's a great study!"

He had bright, ingenuous eyes, so that Cora felt a reluctant pity when the man in her section made arrogant sport of him.

"Why, Dudley, I think he was sweet!" the wife protested.

All the same, Cora felt a fierce sympathy with that arrogance. She knew, in her secret mind, that his big, well-dressed, well-tended male insolence pleased her, and that she was letting him feel that she recognized the approval in his manner. It made her glance away from the pale gray sweetness of his wife's eyes. But she wasn't going to renounce that approval. It confirmed that feeling of triumph among the other women in the dressing-room in the midst of that display of wrinkled necks and flabby shoulders. There was a little core to her mind, secret, dark and tense. She held to it. But all her surface senses were joyously free to see and hear and delight in everything.

Then she was absorbed into the excitement of arrival.

The raw wooden buildings of the little town of Yellowstone stood against a background of endlessly reaching pines that grew black under the sunshine. The people poured out onto the platform. They began to separate into those going by way of the hotels and those by way of the camps. Cora saw the old Scotchman climb puffing and glum into a small carriage. "My, doesn't this look Western!" Those two old sisters were near her again. Cora evaded them. She felt dissatisfied and at a loss. In the midst of the crowd, she noticed a very good-looking man's face, dark, under a light tweed cap

that gave him a traveler's distinction. A warm flush of secret pleasure went over her, and all at once she felt gay and joyous and ready for the excursion.

In trying to keep away from the two old sisters, she had got separated from her Pennsylvania people. She was squeezed into a coach between another woman and a mute solitary man in leather leggings. The driver was lank and tanned, in a linen duster and a Stetson. "A regular Westerner!" the woman beside Cora whispered complacently. He grinned. He came from New Jersey. The two big coaches reminded Cora of the old carry-all that used to take people out to the Fair Grounds in Warwick; and she felt just as then, sitting very still to contain her happy eagerness. It was still and hot. They smelled the dust and the pine trees. The driver cracked his long rawhide. The horses pulled and started.

"Are we in the Park?"

"Yes, ma'am, you're in Yellowstone Park."

The coach went bumping and swaying down a long road between great fir trees. Fallen timber shone silvery among them, and the blue sky was cut by their pointed tops. In an entrancement of happiness, Cora heard all the shouts and laughter and eager comments. The air was simply bliss. The bodies of the man and the woman pressed against her on each side. A quick little interest stirred in her mind when she thought of that handsome man's face. The whole drive seemed romantic, warmly real, and yet thrillingly unreal.

Then the trees dwindled. The coach swayed around a sharp curve and pulled up before a wooden platform. In the sudden stillness, they saw the glitter of sun on a space of sparse shiny grass and on the circle of tents striped white and blue . . . on the rough, piney logs of the wooden buildings . . . saw the lodge-pole pines on the hill stand up stiff and dark against the blue. . . .

They got out on the long platform. The office building was very clean, with a rustic cleanliness that smelled deliciously of new wood, and from the open door at the back came the rushing sound of the mountain river. The tourists signed their names and walked about, exclaiming at the freshness of the air, or looked at the souvenir spoons and photographs in the counter. Cora was relieved to be lost to the two Indiana ladies. They had at once seized the camp matron and asked discreet questions. But she felt a little uneasy without the support of any companionship. Shouts of facetious approval greeted the loud clangor of the breakfast bell. Cora saw her Pennsylvania people on the platform. She was too proud and shy to force

herself upon them, but she was glad—a little ashamed—when the wife turned, with smiling, sweet gray eyes, and waited for her; and they all three walked across the circle of grass that glittered in the intense light.

In the big log dining hall, while she talked to her two people, and before she looked at anything else, Cora's eyes were seeking out that face. There it was—at a distance, among other faces. Well, there was time. The face was here, giving a romantic interest to the big rustic hall where the college girls who waited on the tables came running with hot biscuits and platters of ham and eggs. The white oil cloth was chilly, but the coffee steamed in the thick cups. It was fun to recognize people who had been in the train, or out at the Great Salt Lake, looking so different in their outing regalia. The two old sisters had rented from the matron the most awful hats with Mexican crowns and trailing veils. It was a gay crowd, because the morning was bright, the start auspicious. The pine scent of the clean air put an entrancement over everything.

The Pennsylvania couple—the Collinwoods—kept Cora close to them. They were making up the coaches at the platform. Mr. Collinwood said to Cora, in a low, confidential tone, "You're with us!" He was curt with his wife. No, they weren't going to get into that coach, he wasn't going to have to listen to that old buffer all around the Park. Somehow, Cora scarcely knew how, although she recognized that such people always got their way in these arrangements, a picked crowd had formed. There was a fat couple both in leather jackets, and desirable because of their evident prosperity; and in a mysterious way they had annexed a slender, pretty little woman with an eleven-year-old son in solemn spectacles. All were unscrupulously determined to have a four-horse coach and a real driver.

"Here we are! Here, our party!" the man in the leather jacket shouted, rounding them up importantly.

"Don't get lost!" Mr. Collinwood murmured significantly; and his wife smiled, in almost too sweet acquiescence.

Cora felt restless and reluctant. She was not quite able to admit to herself why she was unwilling to cast in her lot with the Collinwoods' party. But they had already claimed her. She couldn't think of any excuse; and for the moment, she couldn't see that good-looking face anywhere. The driver said, "I expect this young lady better sit in front," to the disappointment of the little boy in spectacles; and there seemed nothing to do but climb up into the high seat beside him.

"Ready to go, driver?"

“All ready!”

Theirs was the most spectacular outfit of the lot. The driver was handsome in a bold, coarse, theatrical way, with his ten-gallon hat and his studded wristlets, and the red silk handkerchief knotted about the neck of his green flannel shirt. It was a feminine triumph to be sitting up loftily conspicuous beside him; and Cora felt a sense of wicked victory over Mr. Collinwood’s disappointment. Cora tucked in her hand-bag beside her and looked down at the shining grass. She could hear the sound of the river. They were starting . . . she had just an exciting glimpse of the good-looking man getting into the coach behind her own—and the whole thought of the journey was submerged in happy gaiety again.

The long rawhide circled and cracked. The horses plunged forward. In a cloud of golden dust the big coach swung around the curve, past the log buildings, past the green river, away from the shouting on the platform; and they entered the green dimness of the timber.

2

The coaches drew slowly out of the golden-green light of the timber and came to an open space under a huge sky piled with white clouds. The big hotel building stood all alone in the world, motionless in the sun. There was a queer, steamy odor of geysers.

“Aren’t you going to get out today?” Mr. Collinwood was shouting at Cora; and all the others were out of the coach, looking up at her and laughing. The strong arms of the driver swung her down, and she stood for a moment, scarcely knowing where she was, lost in a dream of shimmering aspens and the muffled thud of the horses’ hoofs on the long road.

Mr. Collinwood jealously took her arm. “We almost lost sight of you away up there on that perch of yours.”

Cora laughed. The implied flattery of his manner did not displease her. She had taken satisfaction in the masterful way in which he had got the best places for his party at lunch. But she could see that he was a grumbler. Mrs. Collinwood either agreed sweetly with him, or looked away and pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling.

“There’s Brent!” Mrs. Collinwood said. She laughed. “He’s taking pictures again.”

“Who’s Brent?” Cora demanded. “Oh, that little boy! Oh, yes, I know.”

“You’d better come down from that perch and get acquainted with your fellow passengers,” Mr. Collinwood told her.

Already the party in the coach had become an intimate society. They were united in preferring their driver to any other. When they stopped, they looked about to locate all the others. The elderly couple, the Gleasons, were just ahead of the Collinwoods. “Those leather jackets are beginning to make them sweat,” Mr. Collinwood muttered with sardonic pleasure. His wife looked distressed. She was so eager to take all the kindness and friendliness at face value, and to have Dudley approve and enjoy. She seemed to feel no jealousy at his manner with Cora. Instead, she put her hand on Cora’s arm, as if she liked to keep Cora there with them to promote her lord’s courtesy and complacency. They could see Mrs. Huntington’s slight figure as she wandered about with Brent. Mr. Gleason turned to say:

“We have the driver! The coach that followed us isn’t here yet.”

But the other coaches were drawing up now; and soon a miscellaneous crowd of tourists wandered in a desultory, promiscuous way about the geyser basin, forming and breaking little groups, listening to the guide, stopping to gaze at marvels, and exclaiming.

Cora felt a stir of excitement when Mr. Gleason mentioned the other coach. At first, she couldn’t think why . . . then, as she hurried off toward a hot pool with the Collinwoods, she remembered. In a queer little flush of shyness, she would not look around; and she pretended to herself to be absorbed in the wonders of the geyser basin.

“The Paint Pots!” she heard someone say. She cried, “Oh, I want to see them!”—and partly out of mischief, partly out of restlessness, she broke away from the Collinwoods and followed a straggle of people to the queer bubbling mass of whitish pink. He was not among these people. A fat man, and the little man who collected states, were making facetious remarks. “Well, sir, I’d want that paint to cool off a little before I used it.” “Take a pretty big brush, all right.” But over everything, there was an ecstatic, dreamy hush, and the little piping voices were tiny and faint within it.

Now Cora was moving with a group of people toward the Excelsior Geyser. An unacknowledged instinct made her evade her own party. Not but that she liked them. About all of them, even the Gleasons, who were the kind of self-important people she detested in the stores and tea-rooms at home, there was a magic friendliness and intimacy. Mr. Collinwood’s jealous admiration, even while she was angry at him for his rudeness to his wife, gratified her and confirmed that sense of feminine triumph that had

begun with the sight of her glowing face among those other faces in the dressing-room of the train. She could take pleasure in the bold attentions of Chip, the driver. But a feeling of expectancy kept her apart.

She stood looking with exultant fascination into the great, seething, colored mass of steaming water. A woman cried, "Oh, I'm not going to look at it any longer!" She started away at a run, her husband following her, laughing and teasing. Cora gave her one dark glance of scorn.

"I wish it would start again!" Cora cried with exultant boldness.

She stood erect and her eyes shone. Her lips curled a little in scorn of that precipitous feminine scampering. She loved this! It was what she wanted. *She* was not afraid of the colored dash and roar of water.

She heard a little laughter of admiration among the group. And then all at once she caught sight of the gray cap. The others moved on, but Cora lingered. She would not hear the Collinwoods calling her. Voices drifted back, detached and strange.

"That's a monstrous thing!" He was actually speaking, and more or less to her. "Would have been interesting to be around here when it was going through its paces. Wonder if it really is extinct."

"I think it's glorious!" Cora declared.

"Did you see that woman run?" he asked confidentially; and they both laughed together.

They were the only sight-seers left at the crater. They looked down together at the brilliant shift of colors under the heat of the vapor; and then they wandered off, together still in an unadmitted way, stopping to read the wooden signs put up beside the bubbling pools. There was a magic unreality about the place, where even the earth was not solid and certain, with that queer steamy odor that was somehow like the beginning of the world, and over all, the majestic piles of white clouds in the great blue sky.

"Come on!" people were shouting.

They were getting into the coaches again.

"I'll see you at the next stop?" the man said to Cora. He lifted his cap.

With a joyous feeling of exuberance, Cora let herself be swung up to her high seat. "I've been saving your place!" Chip told her gaily. His bold eyes shone into hers. "Oh, that's grand!" Cora cried. She sat, flushed and happy,

ignoring the distinct disapproval of Mrs. Gleason and the renewed discomfiture of Mr. Collinwood.

The coaches were leaving again. Already that flourish of rawhides and plunge of hoofs were excitingly familiar. The little scissors-bill carriage with the two Indiana ladies and a college boy driver was last in the procession. Heavens! Cora had forgotten all about those two old ladies until she saw them climbing into their meek little equipage with scramblings and gesticulations.

“Gee,” she heard Brent complain, “I was just going to get a swell picture of the Paint Pots when those two old girls came along and got right in my way.”

“Brent! What a way to speak! I’m ashamed of you.”

“Well, gee, mother,” he wailed, aggrieved, “they get those two old veils into every picture I’m taking. I don’t want those old veils in everything.”

Cora clung easily to the seat as their own lordly carriage went swinging out to the long road. Soon they would enter the timber again. Timber and silence, shifting sunlight, rush and shine of water. The stop at the Fountain Basin was a little epoch in the journey. It was over now. There was left of it the feel of the big blue sky and the white clouds, the steamy smell of the air . . . and a clear little static picture of herself and the man in the gray cap standing together, his profile dark against the sun, looking down into the lifting, jeweled plunge of the water in the crater of Excelsior.

“I tell you what I want to see,” she heard Brent say. “There’s two things. I want to see the Roaring Mountain and the Mud Geyser. Those, and a buffalo.”

Chapter II

1

On through the green-gold timber, up and down mountain roads. Now the jog-jog, the rattle of the coach, and Chip's expert handling of the long reins, were soothingly familiar. The intimacy in the coach had deepened. Brent had gone to sleep with his ridiculously overgrown boy's body flopped and braced against his mother's frail shoulders. They all talked to the driver. Mrs. Gleason asked affable questions. Had he ever been a cowboy? What did he do in the winter time? Oh, Chip said, he'd been a cowboy, off and on. Been on the stage. Did a clog act. "Really! How lovely!" Cora, glancing at Chip's bold profile, saw that it was preternaturally cool and unconcerned.

Mrs. Gleason was determined to be amused and delighted with everything. It was so much more delightful to have a "character" like Chip for a driver than one of the college boys! So much more Western. She approved of her party, too. But she did not quite admit Cora to the plane with Mrs. Huntington and Mrs. Collinwood, to whom she was sweetly maternal. Perhaps it was because Cora was traveling alone. Or because she was silent when the others chattered about Maine, Florida, California. She could not join the complacent fraternity of those who had gone where prosperous people were expected to go. Mrs. Gleason, when the Collinwoods spoke of Europe, said that she didn't know why she and Mr. Gleason had put it off so long, they were certainly going next summer. "It's ridiculous, isn't it, Charlie?" But she kept praising Florida, which the Collinwoods had never seen. "Oh, my dear, Florida is wonderful! You must go there, mustn't they, Charlie? You would love Palm Beach. Mr. Gleason and I have spent several winters there." Mrs. Gleason looked sometimes at Cora with a cool, appraising eye that said, "I wonder who Miss Schwietert *is?*"

This coolness was accentuated by the driver's evident preference for Cora. Chip answered all Mrs. Gleason's questions with suspicious readiness. She was interested in Birds and Nature. But she observed him pointing things out to Cora of his own accord. She leaned forward determinedly and cried, "What's that, driver? What are you showing Miss Schwietert?" She sat suspiciously still and alert while he proposed to take Cora on a side trip to the Electric Mountain. "Where is that, driver? What did you say? Oh yes, indeed, well why shouldn't all of us go?" The driver was an important

personage in the coach; and his favor gave Cora a certain eminence which Mrs. Gleason yielded unwillingly. Cora was the only unattached woman, and the handsomest. She was willing to flirt with the driver, too!—Mrs. Gleason thought with dignity. In this small, short-lived society of the coach, no matter who or what she might be, the driver's favor proclaimed her queen.

Cora flirted with reckless enjoyment. Chip was a nomad, a liar and a four-flusher, a gambler and a sport. But the bold light glance of his eyes amused her. She liked the careless ease with which he handled the long reins. It was not unflattering to feel the disapproval of Mrs. Gleason and the disgruntlement of Mr. Collinwood. Chip's attentions gave a zest to the long, pine-scented ride. This was her holiday. She would do as she pleased for these six days. She didn't care what had gone before or what came after. But the secrecy of her mind was happily occupied with the expectation of the next stop. There was always the exciting chance that the coach behind would catch up with them at the turns. Her secret preoccupation with that gray cap, made her able to enjoy Chip's bold attentions with a gay and easy lightness.

But she grew tired of watching the road. Her eyes smarted. She sat back, happy and relaxed, giving herself up to the jolting of the coach. She could scarcely imagine an existence now outside this fresh wilderness of the Park. And it was all to come, all the best of it—the Geysers, the Canyon, the Lake . . . they were getting near the Geysers now.

“Oh, gee,” Brent cried, “I wish the Giant would play. Just think, mother, that goes up two hundred and fifty feet in the air!”

“I'll feed the old boy a cake of soap,” Chip promised.

“Will you? Will that make it shoot?”

“Sure will, and we'll all shoot with it. Blow up the place.”

“Oh, glory!” Brent gloated.

Mrs. Gleason chided him, “Why you don't want us all to be blown up, do you? Soap's against the law, isn't it, driver? I thought so,” she said complacently.

But how amazing, how incredible *was* the place!—with a jet of bright water steaming up from the very brink of the river, and with the holiday crowd in wild varieties of outing costume, drivers in high-crowned hats and colored shirts, a voluble little Frenchman with pointed black mustaches and amazing stockings. The air was sharp, tanging with the scent of the pine

trees that stretched dark and tall, a somber natural background to the whole theatrical scene.

Cora got down aching from the long drive.

“I feel as if we’d reached a metropolis,” Mrs. Huntington was saying. “My dear, I was wondering—if we can’t each have a tent to ourselves, couldn’t you and I share one? Instead of strangers, you know.” She was delicately timid, as she smiled at Cora. “Brent’s such a big boy. He thinks it’s a disgrace if he must be put with his mother. And it seems there’s a man he talked with on the train . . .”

“I think it would be awfully nice,” Cora assured Mrs. Huntington happily, with a return of her own shyness, a remembrance—because of Mrs. Huntington’s refinement—of the dark places and the shoddy poverties of her own career.

Now that they had stepped out of the coach, another brief epoch had closed and a new one begun. This camp was a strange country. Already they were aware of its atmosphere, its interests and set of customs, with its big dining hall and offices, its double row of tent-houses, it really was metropolitan after the rustic haphazardness of the lunch camp. Hurry up, come, people were shouting, the Daisy was going to play! Cora rushed off with the others, her head up and her eyes screwed against the sun, to watch the brief silvery up-rush of steaming water. Every so often, a warning rumble and a loud growling sent all the people streaming out of the tents and offices.

When they returned, the coaches were gone. A pretty camp boy with pink cheeks picked up their bags and trotted off ahead of them. Mrs. Huntington was giving anxious directions to Brent who was trying to find the man he had met on the train.

“And then, when you’re washed, come right back to mother. . . . Oh, how cosy!”

The gaily striped tent-house was shining with rustic cleanliness. It smelled of pine boards and pine needles. It was to be theirs for two whole days and nights. With a feeling of tired, happy ownership, they set out their cold cream and powder. Cora took her rajah silk out of the bag, eager to feel washed and brushed and civilized after the long dusty day. Mrs. Huntington had to keep Brent out of the place by main force while they dressed. “Well, gee, it takes women so long! We’ll miss everything.” Cora splashed the cool soft mountain water deliciously over her bare strong arms and shoulders.

Her white enameled pitcher and bowl seemed so clean and cool; and already she was fond of her little rustic wash stand on which she had set out her new tooth paste and her new cold cream. Her skin felt soft from the mountain water. It was flushed with sun and air. Her black hair shimmered with brown, and went up easily.

“Oh, how nice you look!” Mrs. Huntington exclaimed.

Cora turned away to give her nails a last polishing. She felt as if she was ready now—for something. . . . The attentions of the men in the coach, the fond admiration of Mrs. Huntington, her own glimpses of her glowing eyes in the little mirror, gave her a petted, happy feeling and seemed to dissolve all the old stringencies. When she stepped out of the shaded tent-house into the brightness of the camp, it seemed to her a stage all set in the wilderness for something strange and wonderful.

“There he is!” Brent cried. “Mr. Matthews! Mr. Matthews!”

It was the man in the cap—like a secret answer to a secret expectation. Cora had the happy feeling that all things were conspiring together for her good.

The dinner bell rang, and they flocked to the big dining hall. Some of the coaches had just reached camp. The people came scurrying with hands and faces red from hasty scrubbing. Other acquaintanceships had been formed today. The fat man whom Cora had seen at the Paint Pots, and the little bright-eyed man, met with loud acclaim. “Ha! Thought I’d find you where the food was. Sister—” to the flushed, pretty waitress—“don’t you give that felluh all he asks for unless you want a death on your hands.” The Indiana ladies came scurrying with their brown veils. They talked about their nice driver. He was working his way through college—the nicest boy, so obliging, and so well informed. They were so happily unaware that he was referring lugubriously to his passengers as “Mama and Auntie.” All the people seemed to know each other now; and Cora threw off impatiently all remembrance of her other world, mother and Aunt Soph who had never seen such wonders, the people in the office to whom she was another person than this glowing heroine of the coach, and the worry of the Andersons and Evelyn.

Brent had brought in Mr. Matthews. The good hearty food, steaming upon the chilly oil cloth, immediately became still better.

“Miss Schwiertert—” with Mrs. Huntington’s little flutter of sweet apology—“may I present Mr. Matthews?”

He was even better-looking than Cora had thought. There was already, from that little encounter at Excelsior, a feeling of intimacy between them. Cora became impatient of the jealous claims of Mr. Collinwood, who had drawn her down to a seat beside him on the bench. She was not going to let herself be appropriated by the Collinwoods tonight. Brent and Mrs. Huntington were between her and Mr. Matthews. She could only catch glimpses of his good-looking profile. But the knowledge that he was there made her animated and gave a dramatic feeling to the dinner.

After dinner, the whole group—Cora, the Huntingtons, the Collinwoods, Mr. Matthews—stood talking for a few moments, and then, separating naturally into couples, walked out to the edge of the white “formation” around the geyser pools. Cora was impatient and restless to find herself with Mr. Collinwood. Mrs. Collinwood was walking with Mrs. Huntington, Brent and Mr. Matthews were still together. While Mr. Collinwood talked to her, in a masterful, personal, but still slightly disgruntled way, her eyes kept looking away from him and following the others, and she kept jealously aloof from agreement to any plans. Suddenly the group had re-gathered and they were all talking together again. There was going to be dancing in the pavilion. Mr. Collinwood, still keeping his hold upon Cora, was ready at once; but she felt suddenly gay and at ease when she saw that Mr. Matthews, in spite of Brent’s loud disappointment—Brent didn’t want to leave the geysers—was enthusiastically agreeing. Mrs. Huntington thought vaguely that she “wouldn’t”; but he would not permit her to back out; he went gaily off toward the pavilion with Mrs. Huntington on one arm and Mrs. Collinwood on the other.

There was no getting away from Mr. Collinwood. Cora had to dance with him first. She felt angry now at his masterfulness, the low, bold, insistent tone of his voice, the tight significant clasp of her hand. She would not acknowledge his insinuation that there was something between them.

“Are we partners tonight?” he murmured.

“Oh, for the moment,” she said.

“Just for the moment? . . . Oh, I see, the handsome driver might come around! Well, the women all fall for a uniform!”

Cora laughed. But she was glad he did not know where her thoughts really were. She felt wild at Mr. Collinwood’s lordly ownership—detested, for the moment, his big chest and handsome, surly lips, and wave of hair—and when the dance was over, her face took on a vague expression and she tried to stay apart from him. But she had to dance with him again. She knew

no one else, and he wouldn't let her go; and Mr. Matthews, politely, was dancing now with Mrs. Collinwood. Cora raged inwardly. Was this whole, beautiful evening going to be spoiled? She was wild to get away from Mr. Collinwood. And there, on the edge of the gathering crowd, she saw Chip's bold eyes under the ten-gallon hat perched jauntily askew on his big fair head.

The music stopped again—a college boy in a bright green shirt was lustily pounding the piano—but Mr. Collinwood kept his hold on Cora's arm. "I see who's standing over there," he told her. "I see what's the matter. You want to dance with the driver, don't you?" "Do I?" Well, she preferred him to Mr. Collinwood, anyway. She deliberately looked back at him and gave him a brilliant smile. Then her heart began to beat warmly and quickly. Mr. Matthews was coming straight toward them with Mrs. Collinwood. He bowed with mock elaborateness to Mr. Collinwood.

"Your wife," he said. "After a most delightful dance." And he bowed to Cora. "Shall we?"

Cora let him draw her out onto the floor at once, and they joined the animated shuffle of steps. All her restlessness was gone now, and she felt excited, gay and at ease. She felt the light clasp of his hand, caught the lively gray glance of his eyes. She could enjoy the whole scene now: the big pavilion surrounded by pine trees, with the fresh-smelling boards of the smooth floor; the gay bang of the piano in the outdoor air; the drivers lounging restlessly, old Westerners with whom the girls wouldn't dance lurking surlily in the background, and college boys in gay-colored neckerchieves taking possession; the Gleasons, in their leather jackets, looking on and smiling in complacent proprietorship. She was exultantly aware that they were the best dancers on the floor. He was the best with whom she had ever danced—except, perhaps, for "the dentist"; and she liked better than that imperious hold, this light, easy, caressing touch.

The music stopped again. He clapped enthusiastically.

"Oh, we must have some more together!" he said. He held up his fingers. "How many will you give me? Two, three—four?"

She laughed, and lightly flicked two of his fingers, holding her own finger poised a moment, equivocally, over the third. Other partners came up to claim her now—Chip, one or two of the college boys, and—astoundingly!—that mute little man in leather leggings (still in leather leggings, and still mute) with whom she had driven into the Park in the almost prehistoric time of this very morning. She was able blithely to ignore Mr. Collinwood.

Through all the light pleasure of the other dances, there was waiting the sweet, strange ease and thrilling perfection of her dancing with Mr. Matthews.

“We hit it off well, don’t we?” he said.

“We seem to.”

He told her softly, “I never enjoyed a dance as much as this.”

Cora smiled out at the dark pine trees. She had danced innumerable times, with innumerable partners—she liked it, she was a good dancer, and it had always enabled her to keep men at a personal distance—but it was as if something stiff and unyielding in her whole body had melted and let her be given up to this glowing melody of ease. They seemed to move in the very heart of the music, playing now a slower, soft, sentimental tune to which the cool night air, and the moonlight, gave an effect of beauty. The electric lights made the pavilion a small, unreal, theatrical circle of brightness among the pine trees.

The music stopped again. Smiling at each other, not speaking, they walked over to the bench where Mrs. Huntington and Brent were sitting. The four met like old friends.

“Aren’t you dancing, Mrs. Huntington?”

“Oh, you oughtn’t to miss it!” Cora cried. “The floor’s wonderful.”

Brent at once laid claim to Mr. Matthews.

“This boy has been teasing me to go over and see Old Faithful play,” Mrs. Huntington said, with her helpless little note of apology. “It seems in a few minutes——”

“Six minutes,” Brent said firmly.

“Oh, dear, he has the time of every geyser!”

“You want to see it, don’t you, Mr. Matthews? Now! I *told* mother you did.”

He tried, triumphantly, to pull Mr. Matthews away with him.

“Wait—wait a minute!” Mr. Matthews was laughing. “Come! Why shouldn’t we all go? See the sights. You’d like to go, Miss Schwieter?”

With gay expansiveness, he asked the Collinwoods, too. They had been sitting near Mrs. Huntington, Mr. Collinwood looking cross and Mrs. Collinwood hurt.

“Shall we, Dudley? But aren’t you tired?” Mrs. Collinwood asked anxiously.

Dudley had been complaining. He didn’t like these rustic floors, it seemed that his knee hurt again . . . and anyway, he said, there was no one to dance with him when Miss Schwietert deserted him.

“You forget about your wife,” Mrs. Collinwood told him, with a brave attempt at playfulness.

“Oh, well, I can always dance with my wife,” he answered rudely. He seized Cora’s arm. “Come along, young lady!” he commanded. To her anger, he drew her out of the pavilion with him and left the others to follow. Mrs. Collinwood’s lips trembled, and although she talked to the others in a resolutely cheerful voice, Mrs. Huntington was distressed to see that her eyes were misty.

He was sorry, though. He stopped and let the others catch up, let Mr. Matthews—skilfully relegating Brent to the background—have Cora again; took his wife’s hand and guided her over the “formation” with a boyish, half-surlly attempt at making up—and kept her hand, Cora noticed, while they stood watching the first rumbling splashes of the geyser.

Cora’s own personal affairs were submerged in the drama of the moment. People came running from the tents and from the big inn over the way. Cameras were set for moonlight pictures. Every one was watching, ready. Now was the moment. With a roar, the great jet of water shot up and poured down silver through the moonlight. “Just on time! Good old boy!” a man shouted exultantly. Already people had come to recognize the personalities of the geysers. Some were perverse. But Old Faithful was so reliable, so adequate and satisfying, that he was almost a personal friend. “Say, isn’t that a wonderful sight?” Mr. Matthews said in a low voice to Cora. She nodded. There seemed to be something intimate and confidential in the smallest thing that he said to her. She stood beside him, her eyes darkly shining. She could feel, not merely see, that rush of water up into the cold night sky, so hot and tumultuous, and so ethereal. . . . “Gee, I like Old Faithful. He’s a dandy geyser,” Brent said with approval as they all turned away.

Cora and Mr. Matthews lingered behind the others. But the Collinwoods came up to them.

“Wouldn’t you people like to stay a while? I thought we four might go over and take a look at the inn,” Mr. Collinwood said.

Cora would not look at him. She was angry, for a moment, at Mr. Matthews' easy agreement, that forced her to say she would like to go too. But he did not let Mr. Collinwood take her away from him this time; and she had to laugh, with him, to hear Brent's protesting voice dwindling out behind them. "Well, I want to stay with them. What are they going to do, mother? Well, I'm not sleepy, I want to go with *them*."

"Poor kid," Mr. Matthews laughed easily.

"You seem to have made a hit with your room-mate."

"Nice people, aren't they? . . . You seem to have made a hit, too," he added significantly.

"With whom?" she demanded.

He nodded toward Mr. Collinwood just in front of them. "I don't think I'll let him take you away from me this time. Unless you want me to let him?"

"No, thank you."

"Thank *you*," he said gaily, and lightly pressed her arm.

Cora flushed. "I think he's horrid to his wife," she muttered angrily; and throwing off the remembrance of her own earlier flirtation with him.

"Pretty bad, isn't he?" Mr. Matthews agreed. "Nice little woman, too."

But Cora was rather disgruntled to see that he showed only a lively friendliness when the Collinwoods waited, and they all four went on together. She didn't want the Collinwoods. The glory of the evening, which they two should have shared together, was spoiled.

But wandering about the inn, where they did not belong, gave the four a boy-and-girl feeling of conspiracy and adventure. Although he showed that he was aware of Cora, Mr. Collinwood was being remorsefully attentive to his wife. He was good fun when he was not acting like a big spoiled child. Of course he must manage the party. He was gaily dictatorial to both "the girls," as he called them—forced them to explore the inn, and then took them over to the little shop and bought them candy. Cora rather angrily wanted Mr. Matthews to assert himself against this lordly management; but she was remorseful when she saw how easily and pleasantly he fell in with whatever the others wanted. If he did not quite fulfill his promise not to let Mr. Collinwood carry her off, he stayed beside her with flattering closeness, so that she was able to ignore any advance from Mr. Collinwood. Like a group of high school couples, the four wandered about in the brilliant

moonlight, eating their candy, commenting on other people, and laughing hilariously over absurd jokes.

Mrs. Collinwood was very sweet now, eager and rather tremulously gay. But Cora was exultantly aware that she herself was the leader, the favored and desired one. She felt a naïve elation over her triumph at the dance. She had not known this feeling since that one remote, glorious country party just before the family had left Warwick—that magic night, pushed away but never forgotten, when she and Evelyn and Harold Wing and Eddie Vansickle had run away from the others and slid down haystacks in the moonlight. There had been that same wild rush of spirits that made her ready for anything. That was what the two men felt in her. Her dark eyes shone, and they followed her eagerly, and with little crazy bursts of laughter, in the clear sharp chill of the mountain air.

Mrs. Collinwood was smiling with valiant eagerness, but her eyes had a hurt look of loneliness. She was cold, she said. She wanted to go back to the camp.

“Oh, Louise, you’re always cold.”

She did not answer.

He was ashamed of his surliness again. He would not give in at once; but after a while, he put his arm around her, and murmured, “Still cold?” Her head made a childish little movement of assent. “Well, people, I think we’d better be getting back,” he said.

“Oh, I don’t want to go *back*!” Cora cried wilfully. She couldn’t stop, in this one glorious evening, just because another woman was jealous and couldn’t live up to her own wild spirits.

“What do you want to do?” Mr. Matthews asked her.

“I don’t care. Anything! But I don’t want to go *back*.”

“All right, then,” he cried, “let’s go forward!”

And grasping her hand, he pulled her away with him. They heard Mr. Collinwood calling after them, jealously, but laughing, like two wicked children, they would not stop, and ran away together. They halted, breathless, at the edge of the pine trees.

“Now what are we going to do?” Mr. Matthews demanded.

“I don’t know!”

“I do.”

He made her run with him again, weak with hilarity, grasping her arm tightly, and putting his arm around her waist when she stumbled. "Where are we going?" she demanded, panting. He would not tell her. She liked the easy, gaily caressing sound of his voice, the slim strength of his arm upholding her, and the light touch of his hand. They were at the pavilion again.

"What are we doing here?"

"Dancing."

"Are we?"

"Certainly are."

She yielded with a queer, delicious sense of reluctance now. The pavilion was empty. There was no music. They began to dance, slowly and dreamily, without speaking, to the strange scuffing sound of their own feet on the smooth floor. Nothing needed to be said. Cora yielded to the light touch that guided her—yielded with an inner, mystical, unacknowledged consent, which she had never allowed herself to feel before; subduing all her own vigorous power to that softly touching hand and encircling arm and caressing movement. Her lips were slightly parted. Her eyes were fixed and soft and dark.

She drew away.

"I must go back."

"Must?"

But he gave way lightly to her insistence. They went down the little trodden path to her tent. Cora told him good-night hastily, drew her hand away from his detaining clasp, and went inside. Her heart was beating quickly. She felt mingled exultance and anger. But there was something even more deeply exciting in that strange, mystical sense of consent in her own being than in the masterful insistence Mr. Collinwood or "the dentist" that had roused her to opposition.

Then she began to move lightly about, undressing, combing out her long black hair. She shivered happily at the soft chill of the mountain water in the white bowl. She poured the water out through the flap in the tent, rejoicing in her momentary breath of night air and glimpse of black pine trees. Mrs. Huntington gave a sigh but did not waken; and, feeling like a guilty schoolgirl who had stayed out too late, Cora stealthily snuggled into her blankets. Her eyes were darkly shining. She felt as if she were still dancing

silently, slowly, in the dark pavilion; and she let herself sink down, down into a dreamy memory of the warm light clasp of her partner's arm.

The night breeze came up, and the pine trees moved their branches.

2

And again they were jogging on, down steep narrow roads where the pine branches laced the blue sky with green glistening needles, and even the silver-gray of the fallen timber had a shine of heat far off among the tall trunks.

They were quiet now in the coach, and restful, the Gleasons talking to each other occasionally in intimate voices, or Mrs. Collinwood murmuring to her husband and he answering impatiently. The younger people—Cora and Chip and the Collinwoods—had been having a gay, noisy time all morning, with Mrs. Huntington smiling in gentle acquiescence, and the Gleasons at first disapproving, but later deciding to join in complacently. Mr. Collinwood had changed his tactics now. He pretended to be very anxious about the coach behind them. “Ha! It isn't in sight.” But he wouldn't let Cora alone, and now she was tired of it. She had given up her place beside the driver to Brent, and was sitting beside Mrs. Huntington. Her first day's flirtation with Chip had subsided. There was just enough of his bold attention left to give a flavor to their companionship.

But Cora sat dreamily silent now. Her rich lips curved into a secret smile as she remembered this and that. The trip was separated into small epochs, each one complete, all strung together by the long drives through the timber.

She was re-living that next morning at the Geysers. She remembered the sight-seeing crowd, headless and foolish, gathering in front of the office. The guide, a tall man in a panama and blue spectacles, herded them together at last; and they, blindly obedient, after an aimless and foolish start in the wrong direction, let him head them the right way, like ants turned this way and that by a stick. At first, it had seemed absolutely dreary. Cora had started out with the Gleasons, for no good reason. But then Mr. Matthews had come up beside her as they were looking at the crater of the Giant, and he and she had gone on together. Now the memory of the pools, boiling with liquid turquoise or seen through shifting opal tints, of that hot wandering across the bone-white “formation” in the blazing sunshine, was all mingled restlessly with the caressing touch of his hand lightly guiding her and lingering on her arm.

Brent! Cora had to laugh when she remembered that everlasting kodak. Always shouting importantly, “Wait until I get this picture!” and delaying the whole party . . . roaring at smilingly unconscious ladies, and his mother helplessly reproving him. And sticking to Mr. Matthews like a leech!

But they eluded him. They went about with the rest of the party; but they let the others go far ahead of them—lingered beside the little pools watching the jeweled water—coming up with the rest when the guide’s explanation was almost finished, and not caring. All the strange new beauty was brightened and deepened because they were seeing it together. . . . The Emerald Pool. They had stood together and looked down into the depth of green water where the straight pines were mirrored so silently—such color, such breathless purity . . . and far down, at the very bottom, visible as if seen through flawless glass, and queerly motionless, two fallen logs. . . . Cora had never had that queer feeling of beauty before—except that once on the hillside near Warwick, that cloudy spring day when the April sun was like shadowed water and the ground was damp and chill, the silvery little flowers were soft as fur in her hands, and Evelyn in her red cap went running down the slope. . . .

This plunge into new and strange beauty was conversion—religion. Cora had never had a religion before. Sophie used to go conscientiously to Sunday School, but Cora preferred to stay at home and wash her hair and take a luxurious bath. But this!—it was a changed, enraptured world. The great valley through which they were slowly driving, bathed in green-gold light, the wild ducks flying through the still air and lighting on the faintly rippled surface of the flat, winding stream. . . .

The others seemed to be tired. Mr. Collinwood, disgruntled again now that he could get no response out of Cora, wished this eternal driving was over. There was too much of it.

Not for Cora! She let herself sink down, down luxuriously into dreams and memories and sensations. She was used now to waking in the sharp chill of the morning, when the camp boy came in to light the little stove, and the teakettle began to steam; going to breakfast through the raw forest chill with the scent of dew-soaked logs; and shivering until she got down that first ecstatic taste of coffee steaming up from the thick cups. The more familiar it grew, the more she loved it. Could it really end? The rushing sound of the wind in the pines at night, the waking in the chill mornings? The flourish when the coaches left camp, the snap of Chip’s long rawhide—and always, at the heart of her delight in the journey, her watch for the coach behind and the prospect of a new meeting at the next stop.

At the Thumb, he had not come near Cora at all, but had gone about with two unknown girls. All the time that she was stepping along perilously over steamy ground, Cora had been suffering with hungry jealousy. She could not enjoy the clear color of the water under the blue sky. Then, as they were waiting for the coaches, he came up to her again. She tried to act cool and unconcerned. But the instant that they stood together, their intimacy was magically renewed. The whole day swung into rightness again. The steaming pools were beautiful, the pine trees glistened darkly against the blue sky. "Where were you?" he had asked reproachfully. Where was *he*? But Cora couldn't stop to think of that, to haggle over the rights of the thing. The time was too brief and beautiful, and she was too happy again.

But it was not beautiful without him. His face, with the lively gray eyes, was at the center of this sense of beauty. It had crowded out even her sense of triumph in the admiration of Chip and Mr. Collinwood. She would rather sit here and dream.

That afternoon at the Geysers, they had sat for a long time under the pine trees, and he had talked to her. He had told her about his business. He was with an automobile company in Denver. He was not explicit about his position which sounded vaguely important. But Cora did not inquire closely. She said nothing about her own work except that she was in an office. She did not want to think of things like that. She wanted nothing to break the sunny entrancement of this afternoon into which she let herself drift and rest as she had given herself up to dancing the night before. She had only these six days. And the light, careless, pleasant sound of his voice, the liveliness of his eyes, his slim hands as he picked up brittle little pine sticks and broke them into even lengths, submerged the meaning of all that he said under that sweet entrancement.

She had only six days in the Park—only two weeks of her own. She was going to *have* this time. Nothing was to spoil it. She would not look back and she could not look ahead. When she thought of the office, it was completely unreal to her. Even her home was at a queer distance. She seemed to be living and moving at the very center of this enraptured existence of the Park.

Well, she ought to be able to have *this* much out of a lifetime!

They were getting near the Canyon. The people in the coach began to stir, to look out, the women to straighten their hats. They drove across the bridge over the rushing water of the Yellowstone, and up the heights where

they saw the familiar, homelike circle of tent-houses. The matron met them, tents were assigned, there was another small world to discover.

Cora looked about, but she could not see him. She could settle to nothing in the emptiness of the place. They were trying to draw her into one of those motley parties that were always collecting—Mrs. Huntington and Brent, the Indiana ladies, the fat man and his wife, two unidentified school teachers in middy blouses. They wanted to look at the Falls; and Cora had no excuse—unless she said that she wanted to stay in the office and write letters, which would be too transparent and ridiculous. The two teachers walked with her, and one of them clung confidently to her arm. She pulled back, stopped to tie her shoe-string, and to pick up a pine cone. Well, what did she care, she thought defiantly? She couldn't stop to be ashamed. She didn't want to be with these women.

Then she heard the familiar easy laughter. Mr. Matthews had come up with that funny tall man from Poughkeepsie. Everything was suddenly interesting again. She could look down the great sweep of canyon walls, with their green and brown and thick white and soft dusting of rose—down to where the dark-green twist of river foamed tumultuously. Something seemed to break and stir in her heart, and that same sense of beauty flooded her.

“I thought you'd run away from me!” he reproached her. He took her arm. “I see I'll have to keep hold of you if I'm not going to lose you.” He pressed her arm lightly against his side.

“You weren't so much afraid of that at the Norris Basin,” she could not refrain from saying.

“What do you mean?” he asked her. “I was looking for you to rescue me! But I couldn't get a glance out of you. Honestly!”

Cora laughed jeeringly. But she was too happy to care. She was with him. They followed the others down the wooden stairway to the Upper Falls. The funny tall man was walking with the two school teachers, and they were laughing eagerly and flippantly, forgetting their awe of the great spectacle in their anxiety to keep his interest, tripping lightly and foolishly along the edge of the chasm. But to Cora, too, even while she stared with dizzy fascination at the thick white plunge of water, the sight and sound of the Falls—the whole enormous scene—were only a remote and thrilling background to her companionship with Mr. Matthews. The smallest things that they said to each other were louder than that unvarying roar of water.

“It certainly is beautiful, isn’t it?”

When he said that, the two joys suddenly mingled and made one steady rush of exaltation together with the plunge of the Falls.

They were together all day. They sat next to each other on the long bench in the dining hall. Cora evaded memory of Chip’s earlier offer to take her down Uncle Tom’s Trail to the foot of the Lower Falls. They managed to elude the two school teachers and the tall man; but Brent was another question.

“Well, I can’t find Chip. He won’t take me down. Well, *you* won’t go— why won’t you let me be with them?”

Poor Mrs. Huntington did not know how to silence him. Gerald, secretly pressing Cora’s arm, had to urge her to let Brent come with a false heartiness.

“We can ditch him,” Mr. Matthews whispered.

Cora flushed, thinking of Mrs. Huntington’s kindness. But she wanted Gerald to say that. His too ready, general politeness made her angry sometimes. She wanted him to desire to be alone with her as hotly and jealously as now she desired to be with him. She wanted him to remember, too, that they had only these few, few days.

But she was not sorry to have Brent, after all. It lightened a strain of imminence that she began to feel for the first time. She and Mr. Matthews talked to each other laughingly over Brent’s intent, unconscious head. They were both ready to help him on the trail, and this made them feel more intimate than before. Not that Brent wanted their help. He crawled down mutely, hot and panting, his round eyes bulging behind his spectacles.

“How goes it, Brent?”

“All right.”

“Want any help?”

“No!”

Mr. Matthews laughed, and his fingers tightened solicitously on Cora’s arm. The touch made her weak and thrilling; and ignoring her sturdiness, she abandoned herself again, blindly, to his guidance. It was like a blissful game that they were both playing. If once she put out her own hand, or looked for herself, she would give herself away and the spell would be broken. Shame and her old self-scorn were drowned under a new sense of reckless delight

in abandonment, all the more sweetly thrilling because it was of her own accord that she was giving herself up to him. She felt his slender arms quiver under her weight when they came to bad places on the trail; and there was a queer pleasure, that she had never let herself have before, in helping him to pretend that he was strong and she was weak. They reached the bottom of the trail. The fine cool spray blew into their faces, the plunging thunder of the water was in their ears.

“Tired?” he asked caressingly.

“Not so very.”

Brent scoffed, “Hoo, that wasn’t bad! Gee, it’s only a thousand feet!”

“That all? You don’t say! . . . Suppose we sit and watch the Falls for a while. Rocks are damp, I’m afraid. There! Is that all right? Comfortable? You aren’t afraid of the water, are you?”

Cora laughed, and watched with dark, glowing eyes the wild rush of green water that dashed and broke against the canyon walls.

“I don’t believe you’re afraid of very much.”

“Oh . . . of some things.”

“Not many, I guess,” he said admiringly.

Brent scoffed, “Hooh, these rocks aren’t damp! I don’t mind ’em.”

“They’re damp enough to slip on,” Cora said.

“That’s right. You’d better sit down, old fellow.”

Brent sat between them again. That seemed to give a secret understanding beneath all that they said—something clandestine that made their intimacy more delightful. Cora sat back against the rocks, listening, while he talked. The thunder of the Falls made a deep background of sound to his lively voice and her dreamy answers. The closeness of their companionship was all the warmer for the wildness of the setting, like talk before the fire on a stormy night. He was telling her about a trip he had made through the Canadian Rockies.

“It’s wonderful up there. You don’t know real mountain scenery until you’ve been there.”

“I don’t see how anything could be more wonderful than this,” Cora insisted, with an obscure sense of jealousy.

“Well, I don’t know that it could,” he agreed easily. “It’s the coloring, you know. Nothing could beat these colors.”

“I like the mud geyser better,” Brent asserted.

The adults both laughed.

“Well, there’s one thing,” Mr. Matthews said meaningly, “this place has that the others lacked!”

Cora felt her face flush. The triumphant ease with which she had answered Chip’s bold sallies, kept Mr. Collinwood in hand, seemed all to desert her now. She felt open and vulnerable as a schoolgirl. She was afraid to glance at his face with those lively gray eyes that seemed restlessly to be looking at everything and nothing; she felt a special meaning under everything that they said to each other; and when their bodies touched for a moment, as they sat close together on the slippery rocks, she felt that same sweet thrill that used to go through her, years ago, when she was a little girl, and used to pass Eddie Vansickle’s seat in school.

“You’ve traveled a lot,” she told him, not looking at him, and digging intently at the sand with a bit of rock. She thought resentfully of her own earlier journeyings, the hard and ignominious trekkings of the Schwieter tribe that were all she had known of travel until this one belated excursion.

“Well, I like to get around and see the country. Can’t see why anybody should stick in one place.”

“You never accomplish anything if you just keep going,” Cora said angrily.

“Well, I guess that’s the truth, too. Yes, I guess I’d be a lot farther along than I am if I hadn’t liked to roam around so well.”

She felt resentful of his easy agreement with her, in spite of the flattery it implied, and a kind of angry helplessness, into which she didn’t want to inquire too closely, when he talked so lightly of going here and there. There was a vague reminiscence of her father in it. Still, what did it matter? What had she got for herself by sticking to her job? Impatiently, she threw off her old severities, and let herself fall back into the beauty and delight of this one hour.

“What have you been doing with yourself all these years?” he asked her, letting his hand touch hers for a moment. “You’ve let me do all the talking. Why don’t you tell me something about yourself?”

“Oh . . . working,” she said.

“Well, what is this mysterious work you’ve been at?” He laughed.

“Oh, in an office. That’s about all.”

“That’s all, is it? All you’re going to tell me? Well, I’ll bet you’re good at whatever you do, anyway. Aren’t you?”

“Not so very,” she muttered sullenly.

He laughed at her again, fondly and unbelievably, and squeezed her hand.

“You’re not going to admit it, are you? Well, anyway, if I hadn’t jumped my job, I wouldn’t have got to know you. I wouldn’t be here.”

“Why did you jump it?” she asked him.

“Oh, I had a row with the boss,” he told her lightly. “Didn’t want to stay there, anyway. Nothing in it. I’ve got a chance to go in with a lots better company when I go back. Why stick to a bum job when you can get a better? And it’s worth it, isn’t it?”

“Why?”

“Do I have to tell you why?”

She flushed again. But she felt something reckless and defiantly pleasing in his gay and easy lightness. “Oh, I can always get along,” he told her. “If I jump one job, I can always find a better one. Fact! I guess I’m lucky. Born under a lucky star.” Well, wasn’t he just as well off as she herself? Better! She hated everything that reminded her of the stern fixity of her own career. He’d happened to meet a fellow who was driving in an automobile to Salt Lake City, just the morning he’d decided to cut one job and get another, and he’d decided on the spur of the moment that he needed a vacation, first, and he’d driven along. Thought he might run into something he’d like in Salt Lake, anyway. And then, on the spur of the moment again, he’d decided he’d run up first and see the Yellowstone. Cora listened with a reluctant, jealous stir of admiration, remembering the hard, steady years she had put in, and the fierceness of her resolution to have this holiday at last, at any cost. Well, she was glad!

“Did you find anything there? In Salt Lake?” she asked him.

“No, I didn’t look around, I came up here. I’ve got a good one waiting for me back in Denver, anyway. Oh, I just thought there might be an off chance—might as well take it. You never can tell.”

She thought of telling him that she had been asked to be manager of her company. But what did that mean?—here in the wild fresh air, with the spray of the falls blowing against her cheeks, and that steady, exciting thunder in her ears. With a secret, half-perverse pleasure, she kept it to herself. The thought of Mr. Dutton's face, thin and gray, with the nervous lines, made her angry. She didn't want to see it even in her imagination.

But she could not help remembering Mrs. Huntington and exclaiming when Brent began to scramble perilously over the slippery rocks.

"Don't let him," she begged.

"Oh, he can take care of himself. Kid like that. We can get along without him a while, anyway, can't we?"

"But his mother——"

"Well, what about his mother? Nice little lady, isn't she?"

"But she thinks we're looking after him."

"You've got a sense of responsibility, haven't you? All right, if you say so. Hey, Brent! Come back here. Miss Schwietert thinks you're going to tumble in the river."

"Aw, tumble in the river!" they heard Brent scoff. But he came scrambling back obediently.

"You know, I admire that," Mr. Matthews said.

"What?"

"Oh, having a sense of responsibility like that—admire anybody that has it. I wish I'd known some women like you earlier. I tell you, I'd be a whole lot different person than I am. I was married once. You didn't know that, did you? I was. But it didn't last. Maybe it was just as much my fault. But if she'd been a different kind of a woman—well, I didn't know what kind of women there were in the world then. Guess I thought they were all alike. No use sticking to things if you haven't got the kind of woman that makes it worth while, isn't that so?"

"Where is she now?" Cora asked in a low voice, her face averted, as she dug with her rock at the sand.

"Lola? Well, she's back in Ohio. Married again by this time—at least I suppose so. I suppose that was what she was after! She never sends me any word. A woman ought to have faith in a man. Isn't that the truth? Lola was pretty. I guess I thought that was enough. I didn't know a woman could be

pretty and a lot more too. I'm just finding that out." His hand touched Cora's. "I'm just finding out a lot of things these last few days."

His confidence in her moved Cora, in the difficult fastness of her own reserve. She let his hand rest on hers.

"Why don't you tell me more about yourself?" he begged. "Here you let me pile off my troubles on you! I guess you've had some yourself, haven't you? A woman as good-looking as you are doesn't get by without a few of them. Why don't you tell me some of them?"

"They aren't worth telling," Cora muttered.

"You can certainly keep your own affairs to yourself," he said admiringly. "Cora. You didn't know I knew your name, did you? Are you going to let me call you that? You ought to be that good to me, I think, while we're together these few days. To make up for not knowing you all these years. Don't you think so?"

"Maybe."

His hand pressed down gratefully on hers. "My parents wished 'Gerald' on me. Do you think you could say that? Sounds better than 'Mr. Matthews' anyway."

"I think I could."

"You do it, then. We ought to have a little bit of each other when we happen to meet like this. Even if you aren't going to tell me about anything that's happened to you."

"Gee, look!" Brent interrupted hotly. "Miss Schwietert, you've dug up a geyser!"

Cora drew back her hand. A miniature geyser spurted up from the sand where she had been digging. They all laughed, with a queer, hilarious sound of relief.

"Do you suppose it'll get to be a big one?" Brent demanded, gazing awe-struck at the two-inch spurt of water.

"Most certainly," Mr. Matthews assured him. "That's going to be the biggest geyser in the Park."

"Gee! Honestly? I wish I'd dug one up."

Cora scrambled up from the rocks.

"Rested? Ready to go?"

She nodded. As they climbed over the slippery rocks with the spray in their faces, she turned to give a last mute look at the plunging water.

“Miss Schwietert! You forgot to name your geyser!”

“I named it,” Mr. Matthews told him. “I called it the Black Beauty.”

They heard Brent blundering after them and laughing scornfully, “I don’t think that’s a good name for a geyser. I don’t see any sense to that name. If I dig up one, I’ll give it a good name!”

“You do that,” Mr. Matthews called back gaily.

Cora let him help her again. She reached up to push strands of damp hair from her eyes, and as she put down her hand, he took it lightly. “See what the ropes have done,” he murmured reproachfully. The hand quivered, but he held it, paying no attention to Brent’s sturdy, “Gee, mine’s worse’n that! Look there!” He touched the red, rubbed places on the palm, and then turned the hand over, studying the back, tanned and smooth, and the strong fingers. Again the hand quivered in his light fingers, aware with shame of all the work that it had done, but lying in the sweetness of his solicitude. She drew it away.

“What made you do that?” he asked tenderly. “It’s beautiful. We oughtn’t to let it get marred like that.”

His own hand, as he raised it to push back his hair, was shaking a trifle. She did not deserve his solicitude—she, Cora, with her fierce determination, and her years of hard, successful work. But it was sweet and flattering to her, in spite of her shame.

The tall man from Poughkeepsie came striding along with the two school teachers.

“Hey, what became of you folks? You stole a march on us.”

They had to stop and talk about the trail.

“Too many people around here,” Gerald murmured, as they went on. “Shall we steal a march tonight and see how the falls look then? Better lie down and rest a bit,” he coaxed her. “Will you? I want you to be ready to see the falls with me this evening. Will you promise?”

Cora promised. She went to her tent, that was dim and quiet in the hot afternoon, with a pattern of pine branches shadowed, with a sharp Japanese delicacy, across the blue-and-white wall. Mrs. Huntington was not there. The silence closed about her. She could smell the pine boards in the heat.

She poured out the cool soft water into the white bowl and washed her hot face and neck, squeezing the cloth against her shoulders and stiffening her arms against the shock of the little rivulets. She put on her red silk kimono and lay down on the bed.

Everything was going so quickly, so quickly . . . just as when the elevator in the office building sank and left her with that queer, breathless, half ecstatic feeling. She didn't want to stop. She didn't want to think at all. She closed her eyes, and could hear the steady crash of the falls . . . and then when she opened them, the clear shadow of the pine branches was shifting dreamily upon the striped tent wall.

His solicitude gave her a warm, happy feeling. She turned and nestled her hot cheek into her hand.

3

After supper, the big camp fire was to be kindled.

"We're going to meet you there," Mr. Collinwood said to Cora significantly.

"Do you think you'll go to the camp fire?" Mrs. Huntington asked, as she and Cora went back to their tent together.

"I've promised to look at the falls."

"With Mr. Matthews?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Huntington was pleased and encouraging. "I think he's so nice," she said. "He's so friendly to every one. Brent adores him. My dear, *don't* let Brent bother you all the time." And in the tent, she went on, with what was, for her, severity, "I think it must be so trying for you—I've thought so—you don't mind my saying this, dear?—but I've felt it must be hard for you to have Mr. Collinwood show so openly . . . I'm so glad you won't need to say anything to him tonight."

Cora felt that she ought to blush with the knowledge of her own ruthless triumph. But she would not stop to care. She was so far past that first reckless hunger for power and enjoyment. Her limbs were stiff and aching now from the climb, but she felt a tireless, mystic energy.

As she leaned toward the little mirror to powder her glowing sunburned face, Mrs. Huntington sat on the edge of the bed watching her with a wistful and delicately maternal admiration.

“You’re such a popular lady,” she said. “And I don’t wonder. It seems to me you get prettier every day.”

“More sunburned!” Cora tried to be derisive.

“No, prettier. I couldn’t keep my eyes off you tonight at supper. You just seem to be blooming more and more. You look so lovely! I’m afraid I’ll have to kiss you!” Her slender arms pressed Cora’s shoulders, and with a little laugh, half of apology and half of fondness, she kissed Cora’s glowing cheek.

Cora tried to laugh. But her eyes felt misty, and her hands were shaky as she reached up to pin her hair. It was as if her beauty, long held back, was opening and opening into full blossom in the warmth of encouragement and praise; and she was letting it open, not forcing it, not so much as lifting a hand, aware, but only moving and breathing softly in the very center of the radiance.

As they left the tent together, Mrs. Huntington gently pressed her arm. “I think he’s *very* nice,” she whispered.

The big camp fire was a burning core to the wide darkness of the night. Cora went toward it with a strange sense of unreality. The scene was like a stage set for something to come. The whole great night, with the stars and the pine trees, breathed of event.

A circle had formed. Cora stood at the edge of it. “Here! Get into our midst,” Mr. Collinwood called. She felt a light touch on her arm. “Want to go and look at the falls?” She nodded; and they slipped away.

They talked at first with a kind of ready, superficial hilarity. His hand slipped slowly down from her arm until it covered hers, that lay warm and quivering. They both pretended to ignore the sweet thrill of the contact, as they went on talking and laughing, standing aside for a moment on the path to let another couple pass. He guided her gently down the wooden stairway to the crashing sound of the water. Some other people were there, and Cora and Gerald drew apart, silently.

“Sort of makes you afraid, doesn’t it?”

She felt his arm around her, pressing her softly, and she stood breathing and encircled, looking dizzily down the black canyon walls to the plunge of the falls. She did not yield to the sweetness of that pressure; but she felt it, through the remote terror of the steady crash of water and the drop of the canyon walls . . . she seemed to be falling, falling, with the white water . . .

she had never seen such immensity, she seemed to be lifted, terrifyingly, and with grandeur, beyond herself. . . .

“Shall we go back?”

She nodded. She felt again a blind, terrifying happiness in letting him guide her up the stairs.

“That was almost too much. Too big,” he whispered soberly. “It makes you sort of feel . . . I wouldn’t want to look at that often, would you? . . . Your eyes are shining,” he said.

“I like it,” Cora breathed softly.

“You’re trembling, though,” he said.

“I’m not!”

“Yes, you are. I can feel you.” His arm tightened around her. He laughed with a soft exultance. She felt herself shaking, and her teeth foolishly chattering. Her heart was beating with a hard momentousness. “What’s the matter? Cora! Darling. You aren’t afraid, are you?”

She pulled away from him, wildly and blindly, in a desperate panic. His arms reached and struggled after her, her face was crushed against his chest. She let herself go in his arms, felt herself plunge with the plunging water, gave herself up to the rapturous pain of his lips pressed into her soft rich mouth raised helpless to his. She heard him saying over and over, “Cora! Cora!” Her eyes stared into his, open, with tears brimming over the lashes and running down her cheeks.

Chapter III

1

The last day in the Park. Rain was falling. The bright weather that had held all through the trip was over. A soft oppression of weariness and leave-taking clouded the landscape.

Cora had deserted her own coach. She was sitting with Gerald. She cared nothing about the lamentations of her own party. This was their last day together.

They were driving along that same timber road. Was it only six days since they had left the first camp? An era had passed. It was in another age that they had driven here, that bright chill morning, looking out so eagerly at every wildflower. Could it be only six days that Cora had known Brent and his mother, the Collinwoods, the Gleasons, Chip in his bright green shirt? Only six days ago that she had first seen Gerald? Six days out of a whole lifetime—just six days of happiness?

“What are you thinking about?” he murmured.

“Oh . . . not much of anything.”

“That’s right. Don’t think.”

His fingers pressed her hand under the warm cover of the robe.

The tired horses plodded along. Cora sat, only dimly aware of the river and the trees veiled by mountain rain, misty and gentle; less aware of the people in the coach; but feeling the insistent warmth of Gerald’s body close to hers and tingling under the pressure of his fingers. They could not talk much now. There was too much to be said, and too little. All about them was the smell of wet earth, wet logs, pine bark and needles drenched with rain.

Every day of the whole journey had opened up into fresh delight. The first afternoon at the Fountain Basin when she and Gerald had looked into the boiling crater of the Excelsior together. The night at the Geysers when they had run about in the moonlight, like children, and danced together in the dark pavilion. The rim of the Canyon, where they had kissed. Sitting out under the pine trees when he had told her about his childhood with his old grandparents in Ohio, how he had quit school and taken to wandering about the country, about all the women he had known, and how he had broken

with Lola. Cora had told him little about herself in return. She did not want to remember any life outside this bright existence of the Park. She had sat, opening her heart in a soft, warm, silent receptivity, letting the sunny breeze, and the pine scents, and the touch of his arm, put to sleep all her doubts and hard, critical questionings. She had only these six brief days into which to crowd the happiness of a lifetime. She would take them. Nothing should spoil them. . . . Were they over? The sunny hours among the pine trees, the secret pressure of hands, the hasty kisses and smothered laughter when they lingered on behind the others who were trailing away from a view of some wonder? . . . When she thought of going back into the office, into the quiet household of three women, taking up the strenuous difficulties of her new position, committing herself finally to the firm of Dutton and Cross, her life seemed to stop in a hard rebellion. But when she tried to imagine any other future, she felt a profound uneasiness stir under the soothing of the rainy air.

Her head moved restlessly. She tried to draw away her hand from Gerald's.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. Nothing.”

He whispered, “Sweetheart.”

Cora’s eyelids quivered. She could not withdraw her hand from the tingling sweetness of that pressure. She would not think. There were these last few hours.

They were drawing into camp, past the log buildings dark in the rain, past the shallow river. Here were the semi-circle of blue and white tent-houses, the office building, the long platform. . . .

“Back to the start!” announced the driver.

The horses, tired and quivering, stopped at the platform.

“Well, sir,” the fat man said, with a look of hurt astonishment, “our trip’s over!”

The coach stood at the platform. The men got out, reached back careful hands to help the women. Lost and desolate, unsteady from the long drive, they stood on the platform. Cora and Gerald still sat there.

“Shall we get out?”

“I suppose so.”

They were out of the coach. Their hands unclasped.

“Ha! Here she is! Here’s the traitoress! She got here!”

Cora heard in a daze the welcoming shouts of her own party. “Thought perhaps you’d got lost,” Mr. Gleason said, “out in that timber.” Mr. Collinwood cried, “Come here, you’re in on this. Chip says he won’t leave until you’ve said good-bye to him.” Chip! Their little flirtation was in an age too remote to be even credible. He was smiling at her and shaking her hand, leaning down from his lofty eminence where she had sat beside him. She heard him calling to his horses, the big brown horses. The coach turned and rattled off. Chip, and his green shirt, were gone!

“I gave him ten dollars,” Mr. Gleason was saying with complacency. “Not too much? No, I thought not. We can make that up among us. Mrs. Gleason and I want to contribute five as our share.”

“Why, we can’t——”

“No, no. That’s all right. All settled.”

Mr. Gleason waved them off magnificently.

“But look here——”

“All right, then. All right.” He accepted Mr. Collinwood’s bill and said grandly, “This excuses the ladies.”

“Miss Schwietert,” Brent was begging. “Why didn’t you stay in our coach?”

The office was full of voices, people saying gaily, “Well, it can rain now!” and others saying, “Well, the trip’s over!” Here they all were—the fat man, and little bright-eyed man, the two ladies from Indiana. That same blonde girl was selling souvenirs at the counter. The Gleasons came up, smiling most urbanely. Their leather jackets were streaked with rain, but still heavy and shining, as they made affable adieux. There was an exchange of cards and addresses. Mrs. Huntington pressed Cora’s hand.

“I missed you.”

Inwardly rebellious, but helpless, Cora went to the tent with Mrs. Huntington to prepare for dinner. Gerald touched her arm.

“Wait for me in the dining room.”

She nodded.

Brent had to tell her about the antelope they had seen in the timber. “Gee, you ought to have been in our coach, Miss Schwietert!” He wanted to

take a chipmunk with him. "Say, didn't we see a lot of things?" he was gloating. Old Faithful, the Emerald Pool, the falls—they shone now in the beauty of distance. It was all over. Dreamily, desolately, the rain pattered on the roof of the tent.

"Such a wonderful trip!" Mrs. Huntington was saying, in her soft, nervous little voice. "I can't believe it's really over. My dear . . ."

She hesitated. Her frail hands touched Cora's shoulders, fluttered away . . . her eyes looked solicitously into Cora's face, and then were delicately veiled.

"It isn't *poss-ible* we won't see each other again. I don't intend to believe it. . . . My dear—I hope you have all the happiness in the world." She kissed Cora.

Cora could not answer. Her throat ached painfully. It couldn't be that the trip was ending. She couldn't leave this place where she had been so happy and so triumphant. The wild air and the smell of the timber, the fond admiration of Mrs. Huntington, the half unwelcome attentions of Mr. Collinwood and Chip's bold favor, the jealousy of Mrs. Gleason, the waterfalls and geysers, the funny people—all were blended in the delight that was crowned by her love for Gerald. She couldn't let it all go. She couldn't just go back to work in the office. Somehow . . . but under it all, she felt the stirring of that deep uneasiness.

The big dinner bell rang loudly through the rain.

Here was the crowd gathered together for the last time. "Say!" the fat man was shouting, "I'm certainly going to miss these biscuits!" The Indiana ladies had returned their brown veils and wore their nice little black hats with the ribbon stickups. Mrs. Gleason had discarded her leather jacket and her bosom shone resplendent in black satin. Jokes were bandied back and forth. The fat man and the little man kept up a genial fusillade of insults. But every one was tired. And it kept raining.

Cora and Gerald sat at the end of the table, apart from the others, in a mournful enchantment.

"We've got a little time. Shall we walk around?"

He drew Cora away with him. His liveliness was strained. Cora saw that he was pale.

"They won't go off without us. Not that I should grieve if they did. Would you, Cora?"

She said in a low, intense voice, “I don’t want to ever leave this place.”

They were away from the others. He kissed her again. But the fresh, wild joyousness had gone out of their kisses. He strained her to him, with an angry fierceness. But in a dull unhappiness, she could not respond.

“What’s the matter?”

“Don’t.”

It was over. It had to be over.

They walked down to the river bank. Mats of brown needles under the trees were wet and soft, and their feet were noiseless. They stood watching the silver lines of rain splash softly into the dark water. There stood their own coach, horseless and mud-splashed, near the river bank. Cora shivered as she listened to the hiss and splash of the river.

“Cora,” he said. “We can’t leave each other this way. Why, my God, we haven’t——”

He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face to his. The rain was fresh on her cheeks and little drops were meshed in her black hair. Her eyes kept staring into his, dark and brimming with tears, as that sweet helplessness poured blissfully through her drowning her pain and uncertainty.

“I can’t let you go, Cora. I can’t let you go.”

“It’s over,” she tried to whisper. She could not make the words sound.

Time was lost as their bodies pressed together.

“Come on! Everybody come!” they heard people shouting.

With a long shaken sigh, a look of fear and surprise at each other, they drew apart. They went slowly back to the platform together. They could not speak; and the two bodies quivered with the shock of pain at that disruption.

The coaches were forming. They had to meet the facetious comments. “Thought we’d lost you two people! You want to stay with the chipmunks?” The affair was known to the whole party, and to half the “savages” in the Park—watched, derided, enjoyed and discussed. Was it serious? Were they engaged? Was it a real Park romance?

They climbed into the big “formation” where Cora sat between Gerald and that same, mute little man in leather leggings. In a hub-bub of laughter and shouts of good-bye—the waitresses waving their little white aprons at

the door of the office, the matron waving, the drivers standing and grinning—the “formation” left; rattled up the steep incline; entered the dripping stillness of the road between the fir trees.

They were leaving the Park. Their empty coach was standing in the rain beside the river. It would have strange occupants tomorrow. The fallen timber was darkly soaked and the great fir branches hung heavy with rain.

They came out of the trees at last to the station. The people who had gone hotel way were there, the gruff old Scotchman in his tweeds. Wilderness still made these people friendly in an elemental way; but tomorrow, when they reached Salt Lake City, they would separate and be almost strangers again.

This couldn't be the end of it. Not this dreary wait in the rain, with the crowd on the platform. Cora and Gerald were still together. It was still the Yellowstone. Behind the station buildings, the dark pines stretched back and back into the gray sky.

But the train was coming. The smoke was floating low in the great rainy sky. “Good-bye! Good-bye!” people called back to the drivers. They climbed aboard the train.

2

After the fresh wet air of the wilderness, the Pullman smelled stuffy and warm.

Cora had her section to herself. There was a sudden emptiness of leisure. No more crack of the long rawhide, no more drives through the green timber. Already the intimacy of the party was broken and scattered. After tomorrow, she would not see Mrs. Huntington, and the Collinwoods, and the fat man again. All around her, she could hear talk of the six days' journey. But a horrified desolation weighed upon her. She had thought if she could only let herself go and be happy once—just once . . . and now it was not enough. She had blindly refused to think beyond those six days. But all the same, the time beyond had come.

Gerald stopped beside her.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Putting my things away.”

“Come into the observation car when you're through.”

She looked after him. Why, he was a stranger! In the Park, that didn't matter. There was only the present. Only the bright delight of moment to moment, which the restless gleam of his eyes, the touch of his hands and his lips, had heightened to rapture. For six days, she had promised herself, she would think of nothing, forget everything, have all the life that she could. Well, it had happened—more gloriously, more amazingly, than she could ever have imagined it. But the six days of free, full happiness had changed her. The thought of the office was a dark horror. Her mind seemed to cringe away from the old stern force of her will. She felt that sweet abandonment pour through her as she gave herself up to the resistless speed of the train.

She didn't want to go back. She couldn't go back. She remembered when they had left Warwick, just at the time when this same delight of sheer personal existence had been opening up to her—the crowd, the parties, the gaiety of girlhood, and Eddie Vansickle. She had had to tear herself out of it, close herself up to it, and go to work. She *had* worked, too, fiercely and unrelentingly, until she had got for herself, and for her family, some of the things she had meant to get. But she felt a mysterious sense of being at the same place again. The end of the six days had not rounded and closed her holiday, and left her satisfied forever. It had opened up a new region of existence, that quivered with brightness, and trembled with that deep uneasiness.

She wanted it. She rebelled. Why should she work forever? Why couldn't she have her happiness, like other people?—like Evelyn . . . even if she paid for it, as Evelyn was doing now. She couldn't just put it out of her hands again, at the very moment of promise and completion. Happiness. Rapture. They were shining far above her old hard, definite certainties. She didn't care about being manager of the firm. She hated the very thought of it. She admitted that, gloriously, to herself. Why go back? Anything was better—anything. Any hold that she could keep on that bright rapture. Abandon part of herself—keep it hidden, secret, passive—abandon herself to the sweetness of happiness.

She knew that was a lie. She knew she must go back. Cora Schwietert. She wasn't a fool. She thought again, sensibly and scornfully, of that last glimpse of Gerald going down the aisle—the back of a stranger. Cora took off her hat, smoothed her hair, coolly arranged her luggage. She was a traveler, who had had a holiday, and now was going home to take up her work again.

Home . . . that last vision of it, herself out on the lawn in the late summer sunshine, in the midst of the grass that was getting sparse and the flowers

dry with the change of the season, that sense of being alone, that sense of finality. . . .

Through the window, through the rain-flecked glass, the pines grew darker and darker, merging into each other. Those six bright days were left behind and hidden in the midst of that dark forest. The train was rushing on, away from them.

“Aren’t you coming?”

It was Gerald. He tried to speak gaily, but there was something frightened and urgent in his voice. The moment he was there, leaning over the seat and looking down at her, all the magic was back again.

“Come on into the observation coach.”

She followed him.

The Collinwoods were there. The old Scotchman was reading a magazine. The society of the Park was not yet broken. It was not over. The oppression lifted.

“Sit down, fellow travelers!” Mr. Collinwood said. “Well, how does it seem to be riding in a civilized manner again?”

“Oh, Dudley, you know you enjoyed it!” Mrs. Collinwood protested.

They were sitting together again, the same four who had been together that night at the Geysers. Mr. Collinwood was in an expansive mood. He was ostentatiously fond of his wife, whose light eyes beamed with happiness. Well, it hadn’t been so bad, had it?—he said. In spite of those eternal hot biscuits that had ruined him. They talked over all the funny things—Brent’s kodak, the equipage of the Indiana ladies, the little Frenchman who had run from the geyser. He teased Cora in a lordly manner for her lack of allegiance to Chip; teased Cora and Gerald for their devotion. It was too bad to have the crowd break up.

“What are you two people doing? Why don’t you stop off a day in Salt Lake City? All four of us take a day there together?”

“Would you like to do that?” Gerald asked Cora, in a carefully veiled tone.

“I don’t know.”

“Of course she’d like to!” Mr. Collinwood said.

“I don’t know whether I can.”

Mr. Collinwood was accepting it as settled. He yielded, now, to his wife's pleas of sleepiness.

"Was the little girl sleepy? All right, all right." She gave him a happy, childish smile. "As long as it isn't good-bye, good-night! I don't suppose you people will be ready to retire for some time. Louise and I will bid you god-speed."

After they had left, a strained silence came upon Cora and Gerald.

"You haven't told me that you'll stop in Salt Lake."

Gerald laughed nervously. His easy lightness was broken. Cora saw with a kind of fear how pale he was.

"Aren't you going to stop?"

"I can't," she said in a low voice.

"Why can't you?"

"Because I have to get back to work."

That dark oppression had come back upon Cora. She heard Gerald move and laugh again, uneasily. He tried to take Cora's hand. "Well, that doesn't matter so much, does it?" he said.

"It matters to me," Cora retorted, with a flare of anger.

"I can't see that it's so desperate—a day or two."

How could she talk to him? He didn't understand what her whole life had been. He couldn't realize what the security of her position meant to her. She was angry at him because he didn't know, although she had hidden it so cannily from him. She was angry at herself for her own secrecy. She hadn't wanted to acknowledge, even to herself, that she held a better position than he did. And yet she resented that lightly belittling tone in his voice.

"They ought to give you a little holiday," he said.

She didn't want to tell him, even now, about her new position. She stared into the rainy dusk beyond the windows. The train was taking them away from all the happiness they had shared together. She couldn't bear to let it go. She couldn't even bear to lose the sound of his voice, low and insistent, so that the other people in the coach could not hear.

"Cora. Listen. I can't just let you go like this. You might stay another day. Another day couldn't make so much difference."

She was stubbornly silent, fighting against the delight of his voice and his touch.

“We’ve just begun to know each other. It can’t end like this. Why, Cora, you know it can’t. I tell you, I can’t just let you go that way.”

What if she stayed?—threw everything else to the winds! She didn’t want just happiness now. She wanted him. She wanted Gerald. Her warm, strong, awakened body ached for completion. She wanted to yield wholly to that bliss of abandonment. It didn’t matter what else happened. Nothing else mattered. Her desire left her quiveringly helpless to the broken, whispered insistence of his voice.

“You’ve got to give me just one day more. Why, God, Cora, it’s just begun! You can’t go back on me like this. Why won’t you stay? Tell me. Why won’t you? You aren’t afraid of me?”

She shook her head blindly.

“Do you think I’m not good enough for you? I just feel as if I could do anything if I had you back of me. Don’t you want to stay with me, Cora? Don’t you care a little bit about me?”

“Yes, Oh, I don’t know! I can’t. Let me go.”

She got up and went blindly out of the coach. In the passageway, she fumbled brokenly for the door knob. The wet darkness outside enveloped her in desolation. As she reached the division between the two coaches, and put out her hand for support, he caught up with her. He took her shoulders and drew her back to him with a desperate finality. All her strength went out of her and she was lost in the rapture of his arms, hardly knowing what he was saying, as he held her there, in that dark windy swaying place, with the wet night air streaming past them.

“Cora, I’ve got to have you. We’ve got to get married. You can’t go. I won’t let you. Cora, you have to stay with me. We’ve got to go on with this.”

Chapter IV

1

Cora got off the street at her own corner.

“Well! You back again?” the conductor said.

“Yes, back again.”

“You bet! That’s the way of it. Always have to come back again.”

Cora smiled. His friendly consolation was not for her!

She went up to the house, noticing that the leaves on the little poplar tree out in front were turning yellow. The vine was getting dry, small withered leaves strewed the clean porch floor. How strange to hear voices inside!—her mother and Aunt Soph, and Sophie and little David. All the time that she had been away, absorbed in another existence—still so vivid, so that she could smell the pine needles, feel again the thrill of the blue air—they had been living on here. There was the feathery green fern in its basket in the living room. Everything going on just the same, they quite unconscious . . . while she had been far away. She was not the same person, not the old Cora Schwietert. The glow of the last days was still upon her. What had she to do with this little house, with those low unconscious voices? . . . But as she stopped, pulled open the screened door and reached for her bag, she had the sudden feeling that the air of the house brought her out of a radiant dream into flat reality.

She would have to tell the family. Tell them at the office. . . .

She cried out briskly, “Hello! Isn’t anybody going to welcome the stranger?”

Then the four heads in the kitchen turned, she saw the amazed eyes.

“Cora! Well, look who’s come!”

She put down the bag again, met their kisses and embraces. Little Dave shrieked, “Aunt Cora! what you bring me from Yelluh-stone Park?” She held him away from her, bending down once to rub her cheek against his flossy head; and then, holding his warm little hand, went with them into the kitchen and sat down in the gray-painted chair.

“Well, Cora, did you have a wonderful time?”

“We didn’t know when to expect you.”

“Aunt Cora, what did you bring me?”

“Yes, wonderful!” She tried to say it carelessly, but she felt her secret tingling through all her veins. She bent down and hugged little David. “Well, old scamp, you can’t wait, can you? Shall Aunt Cora open her bag?”

“Oh, Cora, you needn’t do that now. Aunt Cora’s tired, lover, let her stop and rest.”

Tired! Cora could have laughed jubilantly at Sophie’s commiserating tone. But, now that she was here, she began to feel a shy embarrassment and queer uncertainty. “No, I’d just as soon open it now.” She was glad to turn her attention to the bag. “Now, just wait a minute, Davie, my young man.”

“You could have left that heavy bag at the station and let Dave bring it over,” Sophie complained.

“I didn’t want to. There! Now, wait a minute! Let Aunt Cora dress you up. Now show your admiring relatives. You’re a real cowboy.”

Little David, entranced, turned with ingenuous pride to show off the big orange silk handkerchief that Cora had tied around his neck. “Look, mommy! Look, gran’mama! Look, Aunt Soph! Look, Aunt Cora!” They admired him extravagantly.

“Is that the way the fellows dress out West?” Aunt Soph demanded. “You bet. You’re a cowboy now.”

“I’m a cowboy, grandma!”

“Yes, I see.”

“Well,” Aunt Soph demanded genially, “and how was Yellowstone Park?”

Cora launched out into an over-animated description. She told about the geysers, Old Faithful, the Excelsior . . . but all the while, conscious of the shining remembrance that played like an irradiation about all these things. Sophie wanted to know if the colors were as bright as they were in the pictures. Brighter!—Cora told her indignantly.

“Wait. I brought some pictures. And I’ll have a lot of snapshots before long. A boy who rode in our coach had a kodak, and . . .”

Brent! Mrs. Huntington, the Collinwoods, the Gleasons, were strangers, meant nothing to her family here. Would she never really see them again?

But she wanted to keep her family looking at pictures instead of asking questions. She began to feel a strange breathlessness and sense of unreality.

“Let’s leave them until after dinner,” Aunt Soph said. “We’ll have more time to look at them then.”

“Yes, Dave will want to see them, too,” Sophie put in.

“You sit here and talk to us a while. Guess we’ll have to have a good dinner to celebrate the wanderer’s return.”

“Have you been having good meals?” Mrs. Schwietert asked anxiously.

“Meals! Mother, if you knew——”

“Look at her!” Aunt Soph cried. “Then ask if she’s had good meals!”

Cora sat back, hot-cheeked and laughing, thrillingly conscious of the secret she still withheld from them. It seemed impossible that they should not guess when they looked at her. Her brown eyes glowed darkly back at them. There was a softness, a warmth, a radiance about her, that surely they could sense.

“She looks ten years younger!” Aunt Soph proclaimed.

But it was late. They had to get busy with the dinner again. Cora sat back, a visitor. Her secret sang in her heart, almost bubbled into laughter. She reached down and swung little David onto her lap and hid her smile against his smooth little head. “David! If you had seen the bears! And the chipmunks!” She showed how the chipmunks held up their funny little paws.

“I wish you’d brought us a chipmunk.”

Now Cora could laugh. She had never loved little David so much. And he basked happily in her unexpected yet easily accepted fondness. Oh, yes, Aunt Cora always brought him things, but she didn’t pet him. She didn’t want him to put his sticky fingers on her nice clothes. Now, she was different. He snuggled to her with confidence.

Cora felt herself bloom with happiness. And then, with that same queer swoop, her breath seemed to be gone from her again, and she was struggling up from panic. She was Cora Schwietert, back in her own home, in the midst of her own family, going to the office in the morning. Who was Gerald Matthews? She came out of a wild daze to hear her mother say:

“Don’t you want to go upstairs and get washed, dear, before we have dinner? Your room’s all ready. We’ll have dinner for you when you come

down. You can tell us all about the trip this evening.”

“I guess I will.”

She was glad to escape from them.

The bathroom, fresh and cool, was just as she had left it. Even her old can of talcum was set back on the shelf. And Mr. Walsh’s array of bottles! She had forgotten to ask about Mr. Walsh. But the face in the mirror belonged to the new self, not the old—the softness of the skin, the rich curve of the full lips, the deep and secret glow of the eyes.

She stepped into her room. Clean, quiet, strangely alien, with its bare dresser top, its closet half empty. All the things had been freshly laundered. She saw the neat bed, the cool smooth counterpane.

Her room. Cora Schwietert. She was not Cora Schwietert any more.

She saw the face in the mirror. The dark eyes glowed back at her. She remembered the day in Salt Lake City. The night. She stretched out her arms, laughing, with a sense of richness and warmth, as she felt her alienation from the cool order of this place.

But how was she to tell her family? For the first time, she seemed to comprehend what she had really done. The familiar furnishings of her room stared back at her with amazement. Tell them that she was going away from them—she, Cora!—leave the office, leave the house, leave everything that belonged to her. She struggled again with that breathless sense of unreality. Her ring nestled, its gold hidden and secret, among the medley of coins and buttons and street car slugs in her hand-bag. But that day in Salt Lake City, that day of reckless happiness—the wedding in the empty church, the dinner of celebration in the big hotel, the culmination of the whole glorious week in the Park—it was gone from her. Gerald, in Denver, seemed too far away ever to come to her.

What had she done? Would they think her mad? Her pride turned to terror. Throwing away her work just at the moment when it promised most. Marrying a stranger.

“Gerald!” she whispered. She tried to get back the feeling of his arms about her that had kept her proud and warm through the journey home. “Black Eyes,” he called her. “Beautiful.” The most wonderful girl in the whole world. And she thought of his whispered, broken promises, when he had held her in his arms, before they went to join the Collinwoods, before she married him. “I’ll do anything if I just have you. God, I’m going to work harder than I ever did in my life. I never thought I’d meet any girl like you.

Do you know what you are? You're a queen. Oh, God, I'm happy!" The warmth and pride came back into her body. It didn't matter what she did if she only kept that happiness.

"Cora! Come down to dinner. Dave has come."

2

Cora was restless and absent-minded all through dinner. Afterwards, they wanted to see the pictures that she had brought and to have her tell them about all that she had seen. There was a quivering remembrance of joy in turning over the colored pictures. But Aunt Soph's eager participation, her mother's fond delight that she had "seen such nice things," gave her a feeling of remorse and shame. She got out her presents; and again she was remorseful at their gratitude, Aunt Soph's hearty but uncomprehending admiration of the photograph of Emerald Pool. "I'm going to have that framed. You bet. Well, sir, I'd like to go there myself." Dave and Sophie stayed until late; and then, of course, Aunt Soph would not let them go without some wine and cookies. She brought out some of the clover wine she had made last summer. She had driven out with the milkman to get the blossoms. "Well, isn't this as good a time to waste the stuff as any other?" she demanded. Cora could scarcely drink the wine. These were her people. They did not know that she was going away from them. But the longer she kept silent, the harder it was to tell them.

Dave and Sophie went at last. She couldn't tell while Dave was here!—have him think her a crazy fool, as he would like to do. She *was* a crazy fool, when she saw herself with Dave's eyes. Cora, the money-maker, the success of the family, who had been so much too good for him! Aunt Soph wanted a good talk, Cora knew, such as they had often indulged in over a glass of wine and one more cookie, after the rest of the family had gone to bed. "Well, old lady," Aunt Soph said, hugging Cora, "I'm glad to get you back." Her mother was the one whom Cora wanted. Aunt Soph, her old compatriot, would not understand. She wanted to tell her mother first.

Cora was too restless to undress. She could not sleep until she had told her secret.

"Mother!" she called down the stairs, "Aren't you coming up pretty soon?"

She heard the slow feet climbing the stairs, and then her mother came to the door. Tall, gaunt, and gently smiling, with her fond light eyes behind the

glasses—suddenly Cora felt young and childish again, she wanted the smoothing protection of her mother’s arms, and her mother’s reassurance.

“Mother, I wish you’d come in a while.”

“I mustn’t keep you up. You need your rest. You’re quite sunburned, aren’t you? Let me get that salve of Mr. Walsh’s—he doesn’t care.”

Cora did not answer this matter-of-fact suggestion. Dave and Sophie might think what they liked! She felt a proud defiance. Gerald’s love was her proud protection against anything they said. But the uneasiness that still lay under her happiness made her crave her mother’s sympathy. She looked into the hall, closed the door softly, and coming up to her mother, put both arms around her. Her face was pale.

“Mother, I’ve got something to tell you. I didn’t want to tell the others until I’d told you. I went and did something. . . .”

Mrs. Schwiertert was strangely silent. Cora was smiling with a frightened exultance.

“I went and got married.”

She hid her face on her mother’s shoulder. The silence in the room beat with the beating of her heart.

“*Say something, mother!*”

“Why, Cora! Why I—I don’t know what to say!”

Cora’s lips began to tremble. This new warm softening of all her old sullen strength betrayed her. Tears forced themselves to her eyes.

“Mama, please say something to me. I want you to say you’re glad.”

She seemed to bend toward her mother, to weaken and crumple. She felt the soothing, weak clasp of her mother’s thin arms; the familiar comfort of the gaunt, ample breast. She buried her face and clung blindly through the panic that engulfed her. What had she done? What had she done?

“Why, Cora—why, my dear! You mustn’t expect me not to be surprised. I’m surprised, that’s all. Tell me more about it. You see—why I don’t know a thing!”

They went over to the bed, Cora still clinging blindly, and sat down on the edge. Cora lifted her head and brushed her hair from her forehead. She felt strangely refreshed, now that mother knew, and she smiled tremulously.

“You mean you’re really *married*?” Mrs. Schwietert breathed in wonder. “But when?”

“In Salt Lake City. That day I stopped there.”

Mrs. Schwietert looked at her bare hand.

“I’ve got it in my purse. I took it off,” Cora said childishly.

“Why, but, Cora! I don’t even know his name!”

Cora laughed in hysterical relief. To tell it to mother, made it true again. She told about Gerald, and about the wedding, about the Collinwoods being there. She forced mother’s bewilderment slowly to give way to belief. But why were they married in Salt Lake City? Why hadn’t Cora brought him home?

“We wanted to be married there.” Cora’s lips took their old sullen curve and her eyes flashed darkly. “I knew what a to-do there’d be if I came home first.”

“Cora! No,” her mother said reproachfully.

“Well, there would be. Dave and Sophie. And at the office.” She spoke defiantly. Then she turned to her mother again. “Oh, mother, we wanted to be married. We did it because we wanted to. Mother, please, please!”

She couldn’t tell it all—the reckless joy and impatience, the wild sense that she must make it desperate and final. But her mother had to understand. The long and tender years with father had softened her heart into depths of compassion and comprehension where Cora felt herself drawn and lay sobbing and at rest. She had been her mother’s champion and defender, against the softness of womanhood. But it was that, now, that they shared in silence. Mrs. Schwietert kept her questions to herself.

“You don’t blame me, do you, mother?”

“Cora, you know I don’t. I want my girls to be happy.”

“I *hate* the office,” Cora said wildly. “I won’t spend my whole life there. I had to just stop off everything short. I *never* could have anything, the way other girls did. Evelyn. Even Rosie!”

“I know it. I know that, Cora.”

“I’ve got the home. I want you and Aunt Soph to have it. And you’ve got my insurance.”

“Cora! You know I’m not thinking of that.”

“I don’t care. I can’t think about everybody. I *couldn’t* think, mother. I just had to *do* it. I’m glad. I don’t care what happens. I want to get clear away.”

She didn’t need to explain. She felt the tender soothing of her mother’s arms. Slowly, some of the happiness came back to her, and the warm pride blossomed in her heart. Gerald was coming soon, she told her mother. He had to see about his job in Denver, and get a place for them to live. And she had to tell Mr. Dutton she wasn’t coming back.

“I’m glad, Cora. It’s what counts most,” Mrs. Schwietert said.

She pressed Cora gently. There was a look of tender, sad, worn remoteness in her eyes. She smiled.

They heard Aunt Soph in the hall.

“What are you two fellows going on about in there?”

Aunt Soph was looking into the room, astonished at the sight of Cora’s tears.

“Shan’t we tell Aunt Soph?” Mrs. Schwietert said gently.

“I don’t care.” Cora wiped her eyes, brushed back her hair, began tremulously to smile.

“Well, I like this! What are you up to?”

Mrs. Schwietert said, “This girl has stolen a march on us. What do you think she’s done?”

Cora had to laugh outright at Aunt Soph’s face of wild conjecture. Her pride bloomed softly in her again.

“Lord! *I* don’t know what she’s done!”

“Well—!” Mrs. Schwietert used Cora’s own words. “She’s gone and got married.”

“She’s . . . !” Aunt Soph came in, plumped down on a chair. She gasped. “Cora Schwietert! Well, you’re a *great* one!”

Part V

Chapter I

1

Cora was awake before Gerald. His dark head was turned aside from her, half sunk in the pillow, but one hand lay touching her thigh. When she moved, the hand stirred restlessly, groping for her. She lay still.

It was another of those sunny, beautiful, autumn mornings. Fresh air came in through the open casement window that looked out on the little green court where the sprinkler played brightly all through the day. The lacy end of the dresser scarf blew up softly and folded across the disarray of pretty brushes and jars on the dresser. Cora had never loved any place as she loved their own apartment.

And never any season like this October in Colorado. Before, the weather used to be only an accompaniment, pleasant or troublesome, to what she was doing—horrid, when she had to go to work in the rain, with the dinginess of rubbers and umbrella, or when it was too hot to breathe in the office; nice, when there came a fine Sunday, and she had anywhere to go. But she had never had time to enjoy or think of just weather in itself. Now, golden day followed golden day. In the early afternoon, Cora wandered by herself among the once-stately streets upon the hill. Yellow leaves fluttered down from the silver maple trees. They littered the wide, old-fashioned lawns. The scent of their dusty dryness was in the air. When she looked up, she saw the golden dome of the capitol building burning into the blue sky. She walked and walked, until it seemed at last as if the golden sun was tingling in her fingertips; and she was glad to hide away in the cool stillness of the apartment, and bathe her dazzled eyes in its shade.

Her life was so changed. It was a miracle. She lay, her eyes open and bright. Gerald was warm beside her. The touch of his hand against her thigh kept a remembrance of the night. She felt the faint stir of reawakened passion, and turned to him restlessly. His eyes half opened, and she saw their gray glint, and he went to sleep again in her arms. Cora lay still. She saw images of her room at home, of the street car she used to take every morning, and the office; but they were distant, and she smiled at them. The sense of uneasiness and uncertainty that gnawed at her happiness was sunk under the sweet, deep rest of the night. The bright air blew softly over her.

The time. Why did she have to think of that? To think of time was a desecration on a morning like this. But she couldn't help doing it. The old scrupulous anxiety wouldn't let her alone. Gerald would be late. He would sleep forever if it wasn't for her. She was ashamed of herself. She hated even this reminder of old necessities. She wished he would wake up of himself. She waited a while.

“Gerald.”

“Hm?”

“We ought to get up.”

He yawned, and wakened lazily, and put his arms around her.

“Oh, Gerald, we mustn't.”

“Why mustn't we?”

“Because it really is time to get up.”

“Why don't you get up then?”

He pretended to loosen his arms. She struggled . . . but without much conviction. Half in exasperation, half in a warm abandonment of pleasure, she let her sense of anxiety be smothered again under his kisses and half-teasing caresses, and ridiculous, praising words. Where did she get those black diamonds in her eyes? What did she want with all that hair? She knew that it was getting late, that this wasn't the way to get anything done . . . and she hated the scramble to get a little breakfast ready, to get Gerald off in time. . . . But the faint opposition that her anxiety roused in her only made Gerald the more eager to win her lips back to their warm softness; and guiltily, half resentfully, she gave way to the sweetness of the moment, hating her own sense of necessity, letting time go by, and answering back at last, with choked laughter, to his ardent absurdities.

“Judas Priest!”

She breathed, “I told you it was late” . . . and they lay, rigid for a moment, listening to the striking of the clock in the next apartment. The startled look in Gerald's face gave way to his ready lightness.

“Oh, well, it'll only take you a minute to get the old man some breakfast. You don't need to dress.”

“I don't *like* to go slopping around a kitchen in a kimono!”

He laughed at her, trying to kiss her face out of its fierce concentration. “Slop around in your nightie. I like you better in that, anyway. What a fierce little face! Come out of it.”

“I hate to have you late again.”

“Well, then, I won’t *be* late!”

She had to laugh, finally, as he gave her a spank and sent her into the kitchen, and as he began to dress in a wild scramble. But the scramble didn’t last long. As she hurried to get some breakfast together in the kitchenette, giving up in angry despair the good meal she had planned the night before, she knew from the sound of singing in the bathroom that he was gaily taking his time. Gerald simply couldn’t hurry, no matter how much need. That was all there was about it. She shivered in her thin voile nightgown in the chilly kitchenette. She hated the long black hair that she didn’t have time to comb, and that got in her way—she stopped and yanked it fiercely, tangles and all, into a braid. Gerald wanted her to have her hair loose at night. How was she going to stand this way of doing things? If she kept at Gerald too much, he got angry and unmanageable, and accused her of taking all the joy out of life. And it didn’t seem to do any good to talk to him, anyway. He couldn’t make good in his new job if he was going to be late every other morning. And did it simply mean that she was going to have to think of everything herself? She wouldn’t! She was through with that. She wouldn’t have everything left to her. She burned the bacon in her haste. The eggs looked limp and black. It was all so unnecessary! If he would only—that gay warbling in the bathroom infuriated her! She dashed into the bedroom.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m cold!”

Even when she had breakfast ready, he wouldn’t come. In a cold fury, Cora pulled off her nightgown and reached for her clothes. Gerald had come into the bedroom. The black blaze of anger in her eyes daunted him. He couldn’t see what it was all about—just because they were a little late, and she had to hurry a little. . . . He stood in the doorway, actually at a loss, with a feeling of guilty inadequacy, afraid for a moment to go near Cora. She pulled on her stockings, her head bent, struggling with anger at his carelessness and delay, and with the remembrance of the beautiful night and the gay morning that threatened piteously to submerge the anger. She looked up once and saw his frightened face. The anger all broke and she began to cry.

“Cora! Why, sweetheart—Cora!”

He came over to the bed eagerly, and took her in his arms, and rocked her.

“Why, darling,” he begged, “I didn’t want you to get cold! I just thought—why, you look so pretty that way, with your pretty bare feet . . . why, I didn’t mean for you to get cold. . . .” He thrust her into bed and pulled the covers around her, with hasty frightened touches, still whispering to her and pleading with her, loosening and stroking her hair.

“It wasn’t getting *cold*,” she sobbed painfully.

“What was it, honey? I thought you were enjoying yourself just like I was.”

“I *was*.” She turned aside her head. “I just can’t bear to have things go hit-or-miss this way! You don’t seem to care.”

His hands stopped stroking and he sat huddled on the bed beside her. She looked up for a moment, and saw his furtive, frightened, uncomprehending look. The burst of anger and tears had relieved her. The covers were warm about her. There was too much to tell him. She couldn’t. She couldn’t harden herself to break the sweetness that was growing between them again as he sat there close to her. “You wouldn’t come and eat,” she whispered piteously; and stretched up her arms to him.

He laughed in quick relief. “Was *that* the trouble? Why, honey, Cora, I didn’t know you had breakfast ready! I was just fooling around waiting for you to call me.”

“You knew you had to hurry,” she managed to whisper, trying to turn aside her face that was crushed against his chest. But she couldn’t bear to accuse him any more.

“Does this look like hurrying?” he murmured, with a teasing laugh. He kissed her. “Don’t cry. Honey. I’m going to eat. I’ve got lots of time. Plenty of time,” he told her hastily. “You stay in bed. Keep warm. I guess she did get cold.”

“Your eggs are cold now. They’re burned, anyway.”

“Oh, I like ’em burned!”

Cora heard the loud and ostentatious cheerfulness with which he moved about in the kitchenette, trying to prove to her that everything was all right. Her anger was all that he cared about—being late didn’t really bother him.

But he was late now, anyway. She lay in the warm coziness of the covers, weak and relaxed after her outburst. The cheerful noises did not deceive her, but she could not hold her anger in her mind. Was he going away without telling her good-bye? That would be worse than anything else.

“Well, I guess I’ll go now.”

He came into the bedroom to get his hat from the closet.

“Oh, it isn’t so very late,” he said with pretended carelessness, and a glance at his watch. “Old man never gets there on time, anyway.”

Cora didn’t believe that. It wasn’t the way to make good in a job—she knew that very well. But she wouldn’t say anything more. Now that Gerald was going, it seemed overwhelmingly important to part from him with love; and she wanted to hide from him her real thoughts about his carelessness and his excuses.

He came over to the bed. He was still a little afraid of what she might think about it, she knew. But Cora lay still. Her lips were soft and quivering. She opened her eyes and looked up into his—a dark look, intensely yielding; and relieved, all gaiety again, he bent and put his arms around her.

“Warm now?” he whispered.

She nodded childishly.

“It doesn’t make so much difference if I’m a minute late now and then. You’re used to punching a time clock, that’s the matter with you. I put in enough time hunting up fellows all over the country and trying to make ’em buy a car—taking women for drives.”

He pinched her ear—then bent down and laid his cheek against hers.

“Rather stay here with you,” he whispered.

Cora was silent. But she pressed him to her, pressing down into secrecy all the thoughts that worried her. They were together again. Warm happiness lived in the room. She lay softly breathing, feeling the beat of Gerald’s heart against her breast, not breaking the happiness by a single move; until at last he kissed her again, and left, and she heard the rapid sound of his footsteps dying away on the walk outside.

After a while, she got up. It was well along in the morning. The kitchenette was in a mess, just as Gerald had left it. Ashamed of the lax

contentment in which she had been lying, Cora got at the room and cleaned up the disorder with a thoroughness that gave her back a sense of virtue. She took off the bedding, and made up the bed all over again. Then she went with the dustless mop into the living room.

But the sunshine of the autumn morning was filling the whole apartment with leisure. Leisure . . . it was something Cora had never had before. Her movements grew slower and slower. Her work in the pretty little apartment was only a kind of cherishing. When she was through, in the early afternoon, she would go down to the florist shop at the foot of the hill and buy bright marigolds to set in her wedding present vases from Sophie and Dave. And then she would do her marketing. But now she had only to shake up the cushions and dust the few ornaments about the room, set everything to rights and give herself back the cleanly sense of order. Out in the court, the sprinkler was already throwing bright sprays of water, and the sun was warm on the scarlet flowers ranged about the brick walls of the apartment house.

Why had she been so wrought up this morning? It seemed utterly foolish and distant now. The beautiful order into which she had drawn the rooms seemed to spread through all of her married life with Gerald, and make the outburst of the morning trivial and irrelevant. The culmination of that outburst had left her happy and at peace. She had forgotten why it had seemed so momentous and dreadful that Gerald wouldn't hurry and get to work. He couldn't have been more than a few minutes late, after all. . . . Oh, of course she knew—and she felt a faint stir of uneasiness under her peacefulness again. She wanted Gerald to make good in his new job. She was always, somehow, wanting him to prove that she was justified in having thrown away her position with Dutton and Cross—prove it to herself, and to the eyes of other people, of her family, and of Mr. Dutton, which still seemed to be watching her with a dubiousness that verged on triumph. Only her mother had wanted her to marry Gerald. Sophie had been tearful, Dave unable—through all his solemn, brotherly congratulations—to conceal the horrid triumph in his eye; and even Aunt Soph, in her spinster impregnability, couldn't see why on earth Cora should suddenly go off like that!

But now, in the enclosing peace of the rooms, those dubiously watching eyes no longer mattered. She could crush down into silent passivity her own judgment and ability. It was her happiness with Gerald for which she was living. That was the reason for everything. When it was shaken for a moment, her whole existence threatened to go to pieces. She tried to deny and hide away in secret darkness a strength that wanted to rise up against

Gerald and assert itself. It was because of that, that he felt an uneasiness in regard to her, as she did in regard to him—a fear of his inadequacy, she could see it in his eyes. He was frightened, sometimes stubborn, sometimes glibly explanatory, when Cora tried to urge anything upon him. If she wanted to keep all that was precious to her now, crowding out her old ambitions with a jealous anxiety—at times, when it was full and free, with a rush of joyous exuberance—there was nothing to do but sink herself into the sweetness of life from hour to hour. . . . As she could do, now, kneeling down beside her fireplace, and arranging the branches of golden aspen leaves that she and Gerald had gathered last Sunday in the mountains.

As she moved about the room again, she smiled, listening in her mind to the happy repetition of all the lover's words that Gerald used to her. "The Black Beauty," was what he called her—and pausing a moment before the glass above the fireplace, she looked into the dark glow of her eyes in a softly blooming face. Her whole body, and her heart, were softly blooming . . . and she shrank from the hard assertion that getting a grip upon ambition, taking their way of life into her own hands, must mean. It was better to stay motionless in the sweet enchantment of the quiet rooms. That was all she seemed to care about.

The quietness reassured her, and the doing of her small tasks. Their life in the apartment, brief as it had been, took on an aspect of stability. Partly it was a dream—a dream stability. Doing all these things was a kind of play at householding. There was another life, hard and real, waiting for her somewhere in a shadowy background. Or was that other life the dream?

She ate luncheon in the green breakfast nook, shaking off a memory of the soda fountain in the office building where she used to get a tuna fish sandwich and coffee when she was hurried at noon. Then she went down to the foot of the hill to do her buying. She wandered about the autumn streets for a little while, until, dazzled again with blue and gold, she turned back into the shelter of her apartment.

It was so sweet and homelike and cool. Cora sat down beside the window to wait until the dazzle of the sunshine cleared away from her eyes. Their home . . . she had never felt that, never dared to feel it, in just the same way before. Always it had seemed as if she dared not love it for more than the moment. That had been enough—to drink recklessly of moment after moment, with some dark, unexpressed notion of filling her life full of enough of happiness to last, after . . . she didn't know, had never formulated to herself, what that "after" might mean. It seemed different just now—still, and quiet, and secure. She heard the shrill sweetness of children's voices

from the court. A warmth stole softly through her blood until her cheeks slowly flushed. Was this actually herself—Cora Schwiertert? The wild rapture she had felt in the Park was all she had wanted—she didn't like children, never had liked them, like mother and Sophie and all the soft tribe of womanhood; but now it was as if the love of her house was opening up into another existence that she had never really glimpsed as her own before. She sat quite motionless. The warm flush stayed on her cheeks. Away somewhere, beyond a queer dark distance, there was a thin little figure outlined against a dim light . . . and a little pale face, chilly little clinging hands, confiding. . . . May. Cora felt the stirring of an old ache of pain. She hadn't consciously thought of May for years.

But it brought back too much. Houses where they had lived—little dingy rented houses; and horrid train journeys; a flock of kids—always having to look after a flock of kids—wash faces, unbutton panties, take them to the privy, wipe noses, just when the girls were all wanting her to come and play. No, thank you! None of that again! Ashamed, as if she had given herself away, she got up from the big chair by the window and out of the soft radiance of her vision; began to hum loudly to get away from that old disintegrating ache of pain that hung around the memory of May's chilly little hands. But a smile clung to her lips. An inner hardness had given away in her.

It was four o'clock—time to take her bath, and then dress to go out to dinner with Gerald. She rubbed, and splashed, and hummed, luxuriously, in the white room filled with steamy fragrance; and then, going into the shaded bedroom where the fall breeze stirred the curtains, she began to array herself. Gerald didn't care about eating at home. He always wanted to take Cora out to a hotel or restaurant, and show off his own gay good looks and her dark bloom of handsomeness. Impatiently, she refused to think of whether they could afford it or not.

Cora's eyes shone darkly back at her from the glass. She stood there half dressed, wondering and exulting at the soft rich bloom that seemed to have come over her, lovelier even than the girlish radiance of the days in the Park—the gleam of her shoulders, and the sensuous richness of her lips, the fall of her long black hair about her. Her movements were soft and languorous. Her arms moved now as they moved and dropped under the sweetness of her lover's kisses. She was a loved and sheltered woman, decking herself—for lo, the bridegroom cometh! . . . She thought of Gerald's quick steps in the passage, the rattle of the key—and she stood in a quivering readiness. She

thought of how his arms closed around her, felt the languorous warmth burn to heat, spread to warmth again. . . .

There really was somebody coming. The doorbell rang under a quick pressure. Cora gave a mutter of impatience, as she hastily put on the first dress she could find in the closet. She hated to have anything interfere with the slow, luxurious rite of dressing herself for Gerald. And probably just someone—some woman—to try to make her come to another church. She knew nobody here.

“How do you do?”

“How do you do? Is this Mrs. Matthews? I know your husband but I guess I haven’t met you. Ames, is my name.”

“Won’t you come in, Mr. Ames?”

“Well—uh—hate to trouble you. I might for just a minute.”

There was something apologetic, and yet hard and businesslike about him. Cora couldn’t make him out at once. But she had a premonition that this wasn’t a social call. Her old business sense grew alert, hardened, and wary, taking in the short stocky figure and hard dark eyes; while she said as little as possible.

“Mr.—uh—your husband not here?”

“He hasn’t come back from business.”

“I see. Be here soon, will he?”

“I don’t know. He’s often kept later.”

“Let’s see, now, what does Mr. Matthews do?”

“He’s in the automobile business,” Cora said briefly.

“Oh yes, sells cars, doesn’t he?”

Cora was silent with an instinctive hostility. She knew that look that gave nothing away, but had something back of it. What was coming? But he would get nothing out of her! She could meet with his kind. The small talk which he tried to make, uneasy under her silence, did not deceive her; but she would put the burden of statement upon him.

Mr. Ames crossed his knees, took out his handkerchief and blew his nose—said finally:

“Well, I guess I might as well get down to the matter I came about.”

Cora, her face cold and expressionless, merely waited.

“Satisfied with the apartment?” he said.

“Why, yes, I think so,” she answered cautiously.

“I’m Mrs. Chenoweth’s agent. Look after the renting of her apartments for her. Your landlady, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know who owned the apartments. I’ve only lived here a little while,” Cora answered distantly.

She felt her heart pounding with anger and fear.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t like to make these little calls upon tenants—rather just call in a friendly way——” Cora failed to smile. “But don’t you think it’s about time you and Mr. Matthews were giving us some rent?”

“Some rent?” Cora repeated.

Through the loud pounding of her heart, a haze that seemed to come around her, she heard the voice go on:

“Guess you must have forgotten about it. Been here two months, you know, haven’t you? Well, Mr. Matthews hasn’t given us anything except the deposit he made when he took the apartment.”

The haze now was a haze of rage—whether at Gerald or at Mr. Ames, Cora could not stop to know. But, no matter how she managed it, she had to get this horrid little man out of here. With eyes burning and black, she stared him down. She would make him feel shame for coming here like this and putting the humiliation upon her.

“I’ll tell Mr. Matthews,” she said. “It’s a mistake, of course. If you don’t receive the payment in full tomorrow, you can ask us to leave.”

“Oh, come now, Mrs. Matthews.” Her eyes had daunted him. He was backing into apologies. “You know we hate to do these things, but then, you see how it is—business is business. And these are mighty nice apartments. I have a chance to rent one every day. We can’t afford to take losses when there’s people ready any minute——”

“Well, I shall certainly see that you get your rent. It will reach you tomorrow. It’s a mistake. I’m no more accustomed to dealing with people this way than you are.”

Horrid little creature! She had got him out at last—faced him down and talked him down! He was looking for a scared little wife, and evasions, and

promises! She had handled him. Cora laughed with angry triumph. She hadn't forgotten. If she had looked scared and tearful, he would have bullied her. But she had made him afraid! She had got the better of him, and made him go off, with nothing but a statement that he would receive his money. Oh, but how she hated him—coming into the orderly peace of her pretty rooms! And behind him, the haughty, impregnable image of the grand Mrs. Chenoweth!

But she was hot all over with humiliation. She paced the floor, feeling that she was falling back into the old pit of uncertainty and shabbiness from which she had climbed with such years of difficult effort. She couldn't stand it—she needn't. She would go to work. She would get money tomorrow on one of the bonds she had kept for herself, in her own name. Never was she going to suffer the humiliation of a visit like this again. The very walls were shamed—the pretty curtains, sheer and dignified at the windows, the immaculate order of the furniture, the golden aspen leaves from the mountains in the cool cavern of the fireplace. What had Gerald been thinking of? How dared he leave her open to a humiliation like this? And oh, worst of all was the shame of the visions she had let herself have, sitting blushing like a fool at the window, in this place this very afternoon!

Cora turned away sick. She felt as if the ground was out from under her feet. All her happiness was vitiated. They hadn't a right to happiness in this place.

She went into the bedroom. The pretty, feminine disorder in which she had left it was a mockery now—little sprinklings of fragrant white talcum on the dresser, powder and rouge boxes open, her negligee flung over a chair. She could have cried over the lost self who had stood here, warm and voluptuous and lovely—a fool, bedecking herself, in the midst of chaos! . . . and she hated the hard, cold, capable self who had taken possession of her again and got that little wretch out of the place. Oh, she didn't want to go back to that! She flung herself down on the bed with her face in her arms, hiding away from the old necessities in the midst of the warmth and fragrance. She almost wished she hadn't kept those bonds—wished she couldn't do anything about it.

Everything was spoiled now. They wouldn't go out to dinner. Maybe they ought to leave the apartment.

She heard Gerald come in. He paused—he seemed to sense something in the silence. She heard his voice . . . frightened.

“Cora! Where are you?”

She made no move. Hadn't he known that something like this must happen? How could he have just left her to meet it—taken the chance?

“Cora!”

He came to the bedroom door.

“Why, what's the matter?”

He looked angry—probably thought this was a prolongation of the scene this morning—but she would be angry ahead of him. She lifted her head and propped herself on her arm. She said in a hard voice:

“I had a visit this afternoon. Just now. From Mr. Ames.”

“What did he want?” . . . But she had seen a queer look come into Gerald's face.

“He wanted the rent!”

Cora began to tell him about the visit. To her anger, tears of rage and shame and helplessness kept coming up into her eyes—that was what this softness had done to her; but she kept on, through Gerald's first alarmed silence, and then his effort to placate her. He had seen the softening—her tears reassured him. He put his arms about her now. Cora struggled to keep her anger against the charm of his touch and the restless glint of fear in his eyes that threatened to melt her into pity.

“Was it true?” she demanded. “Well, why hadn't he paid it? How could he have kept her living on in this apartment in ignorance, and open to such a visit as this? *Couldn't* he pay it? Well, why had he done such a thing?”

He tried to bluster at first. Such a fuss to make over a little thing! Why, God, almost nobody was right on tap with the rent on the first of every month—didn't expect to be. Some of the richest people never paid their bills at all. That was the way they got by. She was after him this morning about the time, and now when he came back thinking everything was fine, and crazy to see her, there was something else! But as Cora's rigid hostility did not give way, in spite of her tears, the bluster broke.

“Cora, don't act this way. My God! I'm going to pay it. Meant to pay it before this. But there were so many things coming, all coming at once—I got behind, I guess, and I let it slide.”

“We've got to pay it tomorrow,” Cora said tensely, “or I won't stay in this place where we haven't any right to be.”

Well, they would pay it tomorrow, he told her.

“Can we?” she asked him. She drew back and looked at him.

“Don’t you believe me?” Gerald demanded. His face flushed.

“Because if you don’t,” Cora told him, “I’m going to pay it myself. And then we’ll leave here. I couldn’t stand it any more.”

Gerald wanted that to end it. Hadn’t he promised to pay it? Wasn’t that enough? He reproached her, and Cora cried. She did not struggle away from his arms. But she was angry when he tried to kiss and cajole her, and make her get ready to go out to dinner with him.

“I can’t,” she told him. “You oughtn’t to ask me. We haven’t got any right to go out and spend money like that when we haven’t even paid our rent.”

“I thought it would make you feel better.”

“Well, it wouldn’t! We’re going to eat here.”

And she went out into the kitchenette and began wrathfully to open cans.

Gerald’s voice followed her.

“Well, if you want to make such a fuss about a little thing!”

3

Even through the kitchen door, Cora could feel his hostility. When she came into the living room to set their drop-leafed table, he did not turn his face from the paper he was reading. She saw the same good-looking profile that she had seen dark against the summer sky when they were standing together at the crater of Excelsior.

Her own hostility met his in an angry joy. Her mind was going over her passionate grievances; the visit of that horrid creature, Gerald’s failure to see the enormity of the thing, all his other failures. She fought against the merging of her own hard uprightness with Gerald’s light and easy slipshod ways. She didn’t have to sink into that way of doing! She was still Cora Schwietert, as she had proved when she got rid of Mr. Ames this afternoon. How could she put any faith in Gerald’s promises? She had already seen so much of them. She couldn’t bear to give in to them again, to go back on the promise she herself had made this afternoon, and that she herself was capable of keeping. She would make Gerald pay or else she would pay herself. The very walls of the room had lost their security and she felt as if she were struggling again at the bottom of a pit.

She went into the living room again with the plates. Gerald was still sitting there with his face turned from her. But now she could see, not so much hostility, as the defiance of secret fear and shame in his figure. She caught his eyes following her, and then looking quickly away. She knew what that fear was. He thought he couldn't live up to her. She remembered how queer and uneasy—at first subdued, and then glibly talkative—he had been at home, when he saw what a prop the household regarded her, and learned of the job she was giving up. He had whispered to her that night, "I'm going to try mighty hard to make you satisfied"—his face pale, and meaning it, as much as Gerald could possibly mean anything. She didn't care then about anything else but the delight of being with him. He was afraid of her now. Let him be!

But she could not seem to endure the loneliness of her pride. Hardness seemed to go out of her again. She wanted Gerald. She thought of all the other things—the presents he was always bringing her, flowers, a piece of jewelry . . . his pride in taking her out with him, or in showing her off to the other men, and to the boss, when she came down town . . . his eagerness, when she seemed to forget things, and was ready to make up with him. The happiness they had felt together this morning . . . what was there for her in the world if she let it go?

She remembered when she had taken his hand going down Uncle Tom's Trail, and the deceptive, half-shameful bliss of her pretended helplessness. She didn't know whether or not he had the money to pay Mr. Ames tomorrow—or what good it would do, how long they could stay here, anyway. But now that she was letting her happiness slip away again, it seemed the only thing in the world worth keeping. The importance of fulfilling obligations, of living decently, of order, stability, seemed to lie at a distance from her, and she was wild again—like a wild girl—for the happiness of a moment. The bedroom was still filled with the fragrance of femininity . . . something cried out in her to slip back into it, lose herself in that blissful letting go again. . . .

Gerald came to the door.

"What's the matter?"

"I didn't hear you."

Cora had forgotten that she was getting a supper ready—she had stopped, lost in her thoughts, in the very midst. Gerald looked pale and frightened again. But suddenly he put his arms around her.

“Cora, come on! Let’s go out and get dinner. Let’s get out of here and forget this.”

“Now?”

And in a wild flare of decision, she was ready to go. She pulled off her apron, let the dishes stand . . . what did it matter, anyway—how could she tell whether Gerald would pay the money tomorrow? They could have tonight. She could have that much left to her. She began to dress in a fever of haste, laughing wildly, feeling that she was sacrificing all those different visions of the afternoon in this one snatch of happiness. Maybe it would be all right. She couldn’t tell—didn’t want to stop to think. Gerald was gay and confident again. It wasn’t bills that worried him—it was Cora’s attitude. They were going out to have a good time together.

Chapter II

1

Cora had fought against coming to Fort Davis. She had believed the account that Gerald had given her of his sudden determination to leave the firm in Denver. She couldn't persuade herself that the opportunities could be so much better in a little place like this; and she had no faith in the new car that Gerald was selling. It was a cheap imitation of a high-class car, flimsily built, but with showy attachments, and Cora was certain that the company behind it had none too much capital. Gerald tried to tell her that this new agency gave him a wonderful opportunity. Think of the territory he had! Well, it was enough territory, certainly! The only trouble was the scarcity of people in it, and the still greater scarcity of money. But it didn't do to say these things. Gerald always got evasive or too explanatory when she did. Cora was certain, in her own mind, that he had lost his position in Denver. But she was afraid, shameful as that was, to force an admission out of him. She shrank from knowing how things stood. It was even better to come to Fort Davis.

Gerald was out on a trip. He would be back this afternoon, he had assured Cora; but the length of these trips was getting more and more uncertain. It seemed to Cora now that he was away most of the time.

Cora hated both to get up and to lie in bed. When she did that, when she got up late, she felt disheveled and dissipated all day. The milk would be sour if she didn't put it in the ice box. She gave an impatient sigh and tumbled herself out of bed somehow. Her bare feet thudded flatly on the bedroom floor. Mrs. Foster would know just when she was getting up. Of course, Cora would have the perfect excuse for her laziness if she would tell Mrs. Foster what the old lady had been suspecting and hinting about for days. Snoopy old woman! Cora wasn't going to have her "condition" talked over by Mrs. Foster and her cronies and to have all the details mulled over and over in the neat, shiny parlor downstairs.

When she was alone, there seemed no reason for doing anything. But she dressed, somehow or other, and went down the outside wooden stairway at the back of the house to get her milk. The sun was already hot.

"I come near setting it inside where it would be cooler," Mrs. Foster said accusingly. "I didn't know but you'd forgot it."

“Oh, no,” Cora answered coldly.

This constant surveillance from the lower floor nearly drove her mad. They knew just when Gerald came home and when he left, what letters she got and what groceries she ordered; noticed every time that she washed out a piece of silk underwear; and smelled what kind of meat she was cooking.

And then, just when she was most furious, and was making up her mind that she would rather live in one little room at the hotel,—up the stairs Mrs. Foster would come toiling, one step at a time because of her stiff knees, and she would appear at the door with something savory and delicious on a small old-fashioned plate covered with a fringed napkin. “I baked a fresh currant pie this morning, and I thought you might like a piece for your dinner. It aint worth while to do baking when you’re by yourself, was what I said to Mr. Foster.”

And when she went down the stairway in the evening to set out her milk bottle, Mr. Foster would call her to the garden to look at his bed of giant pansies. “Look at those fellows! Ever see such whoppers as them? We never could grow such big fellows at home, with all the rains we got. Here—take a bunch up with ye.” He let her choose her own, the royal purple, and a velvety kind of brown and gold. The garden smelled fresh, the grass was bright and wet with the fine spray from the sprinkler that must always be going in this dry air. It seemed to Cora, as she felt the evening coolness and smelled the flowers, that living in Fort Davis was not so bad. It reminded her of Warwick. She liked the old man when he was out in his garden, in his vest and shirt sleeves, pottering about so happily. He made her think (with a twinge of remorse) of her own father.

Cora heated some coffee, cut a dry slice of bakery bread, and sat down at the kitchen table.

What was the use of doing anything? She had so little work that it didn’t seem worth while to bother with any of it. And what did it amount to when it was done? There was no pleasure in taking care of these rooms. They seemed so temporary. Fort Davis did not seem to be a place where people would really come to stay. The square frame houses were raw and new. Hot dusty winds blew through the streets. So many of the people were transients—Mexicans, Japs and Russians in from the sugar-beet fields. Gerald might talk about its being an up-and-coming new business town, but it had a long way to go. Automobiles whirred through on the way to Denver, automobiles from everywhere. “I see a car from South Car’lina today,” Mr. Foster would

say proudly. “Well, sir, they all come through here.” But what was there to make any one want to stay?

It had been very different in their apartment in Denver. Cora went back, for a moment, into the rhythm of those first, beautiful autumn days. Then she had loved to take care of her rooms, to lavish on her own possessions all the love of homekeeping that had been pent up in her and that she hadn't even known that she possessed—because, of course, mother and Aunt Soph had done everything like that at home. Cora had merely supplied the money. She could see the green court and the low-ceiled rooms with the pretty furniture. She looked with distaste at the furnishings supplied by Mrs. Foster—mission chairs and bleak table and hard shiny davenport. But it had been just the same with the furniture as with everything else. Gerald had made only the first payment on it. Oh, the humiliation when she had found that out!—Cora burned with it still. She had insisted that they return it to the company and make good the loss. Gerald had wanted to bring the best pieces with them—the company couldn't do anything about it, he said. Cora's anger had frightened him, but the thing itself he took so lightly.

Oh, she knew something about him now. She knew that he wasn't just a “roamer,” as he had romantically told her in the Park—unable to settle down because no woman believed in him; but capable, of course, of doing all kinds of things if he would. He couldn't keep a job, and Cora knew why. He was always behind hand, he was unstable, he lied, he made easy promises to customers that he couldn't keep. Had she ever really trusted him? Hadn't there always been this uneasiness from the very start so that her happiness had seemed unreal even while she possessed it? She had closed her eyes.

Cora got up and wandered restlessly about the room. She saw the four walls, and the none too clean wall paper, and the hot street outside. She saw the truth behind every one of Gerald's evasions. . . . But no, no. She turned aside her head. She could not make herself look straight into her own vision. He was the Gerald who had turned the six days in the Yellowstone to rapture—who had sat with her at the foot of the falls, and kissed her among the green pine trees; and who had turned to her, pale and voiceless, after their marriage in the church. She clung even to the dream of those beautiful days.

And they were beautiful even now. Moments of hard vision could not clear away the mist of that beauty. She and Gerald drove for miles and miles into the sugar-beet country down sandy twisting roads with the yellow dust swirling ahead of them. They ate at the Fort Davis hotel, feeling themselves city people in a small town. Gerald never failed to bring her something—flowers, or a piece of jewelry that he had picked up. He was still her lover.

She could have whole hours, almost days, of scornful clear-sightedness. But still when he put his arms around her and murmured, “What’s the matter with my girl?”—her stiff and righteous anger slipped away from her. She was powerless and then passionate under his kisses; and with him, she could plunge recklessly, forgetfully into delight . . . but it was no longer with the first eager, glowing response; it was with defiance or helplessness; and she turned away her head and felt tears wet the lashes of her staring eyes.

Cora dragged herself up again to go into the kitchen and get some lunch. The kitchen mirror showed how dreadful she looked, with her hair straight and straggly, her face dark and sallow from the heat. She went into the bedroom to lie down. She turned restlessly on the rumpled quilt, staring with dark somber eyes at the window with the street and the cottonwoods veiled by the thin curtains.

How did she come to be in this place? How could she live in these uncertainties? She got up in a fever.

But when she had taken her bath, combed and curled her hair and put on her crêpe de chine, she felt like Cora Matthews again. The crêpe de chine was not new, but it looked well in Fort Davis. She still loved Gerald’s pride in her good looks, although it irked her not to be able to buy what clothes she pleased. She had to keep Gerald from giving her things—she couldn’t take pleasure in those presents any more. She did not have her old “style,” for which the girls in the office used to envy her; but she was prettier. She fluffed out her dark hair, that used to lie smooth and shining, and she used more powder and rouge. She put on her big flower-trimmed hat beneath which her eyes shone dark and mysterious, and pulled her hair softly about her ears.

“Going out?” Mrs. Foster asked alertly, when Cora went downstairs.

Cora said “Yes,” briefly.

“Mister’ll be home today, I suppose?”

“I don’t know. He may get in.” It was one of the minor interests of Cora’s life to foil Mrs. Foster in her attempts to keep track of Gerald. But there was that last piece of raspberry shortcake to be remembered. “Can I get anything for you in town?” Cora asked with an attempt at graciousness.

“No, I guess not, ‘he’ went down a little bit ago and I give ‘him’ some errands. I guess he’ll be back before long if he don’t stop in anywhere.”

That was a way to live—like the Fosters! They had come out from some little town in Illinois, with a daughter who had tuberculosis. The daughter

had died, the other children were married, and the Fosters lived on in this square frame house that they had built. Mrs. Foster kept house in the four rooms downstairs, did tatting, and kept tab on her roomers. Mr. Foster took care of the lawn and the garden, went down to do his “trading,” and talked with other old men who made a gathering place of some benches outside a hardware store. The Fosters were almost the only people whom Cora knew in Fort Davis. But she had a sore, jealous reluctance to let other people know about her affairs, a bleak rejoicing in the fact that there were so few people to wonder how she and Gerald got along. She had never written how things were to her family.

Mrs. Foster’s questions had stirred up her uneasiness again. It seemed to her—as it had countless times before—that she must do something this very moment to set her life in order. She saw Ford Davis again with that hard clearness. Her lips curled as she looked down the wide streets bordered with cottonwoods. What was she doing in this place? She wouldn’t let Gerald keep her here. She thought of Onawa, the crowded streets, the hustle and the feeling of growing prosperity, the tea-room where she used to eat with the business and professional women—and for the moment, in the midst of this dust and dreary quiet, she wanted to be back there.

It seemed to her that she must have the old clean feeling of doing a day’s work again. She was sick all over with the shame of her idle softness. Yes, but what could she find in this place? “John C. Calhoun Williams, Atty.,” she read on a dingy window across the street. Anything she could find would be small and useless after the responsibility of her old position—nothing more, really, than Sophie’s part-time work. She wouldn’t come to that. Her break had been a clean break. There was no halfway about it. She had thrown aside everything else for happiness. . . . And like a harem woman—the Black Beauty that Gerald called her—idle and warm and bedecked and lovely, a little shoddy now, a trifle overblown, she was walking slowly down the wide plain street where Russian women, in from the beet fields, with shawls over their heads, were doing their trading.

She could not go back into the old hard and narrow concentration. She was no longer untouched and whole. She had sunk half of herself in a passionate passivity, and she could not rise out of the sweetness of that into the old cool completeness again.

The glamor of the days in the Yellowstone still lingered in a hazy brightness over the dusty streets and the cottonwoods. Mexicans lounged in the stores, and a lank cattleman came riding into town on a big brown horse.

The mountains were just visible, a dim bluish bank against the sky, streaked with silver.

Cora was aware of her body flushed and warm in her silk gown. A man turned and looked at her with a bold cool admiration that reminded her of Chip. What mattered beside this hot, rich sense of life? And what did it matter how she kept it? In quick revulsion, her earlier existence seemed to her only sterile. It would simply be dying to go back into that. When she thought now of the sweetness of Gerald's love for her, and its ardor, she revolted from her cool judgment. She wanted him to come.

With a feverish desire to bring back the happiness of those first days in Denver, Cora laid the table with the best linen and put on the bowl of pansies that Mr. Foster had given her. She got ready a good dinner.

He didn't come and didn't come. It was the same old uncertainty. Cora went from the kitchen to the living room again, with despairing glances at the clock. The potatoes were getting dry in the warming oven. All the good juice was gone from the meat.

She waited until after nine. Then she sat down alone at her festive table. There would be the whole night, probably, for her to listen and wonder and worry . . . to have Gerald come breezing in the next day, with his blithely plausible explanations, all the evidence, nothing lacking but the sense of being convinced—while his eyes, those restless gray eyes of his, shifted away from Cora's face. "Simply couldn't get here, sweetheart. Got hung up by a deal. Well, I tried to telephone you—I couldn't get you" . . . and Cora holding herself apart, to give in finally, with a despairing passion, to the old fascination of his touch.

Her throat was choked with anger and dreariness. She took the good meat, went down the wooden stairway, and laid it on the walk for the Foster's waddling dog that she detested.

"There. Eat it. Make yourself still fatter."

She went into the living room and lay down on the davenport, taking a wretched pleasure in its hard discomfort. She burned, first with fear, and then with humiliation and anger. The sense of transience, of peril and unreality, was all around her, so that she clung to the sides of the davenport with the feeling that it was about to float off into the air. Gerald, away from her, was gone from her. Perhaps this time he would not come back. What if he had divined the thing she hadn't told him, and had gone away from her? She clutched the davenport with both hands and lay staring into blackness.

He knew. She had seen a different look in his eyes. He was afraid. He couldn't keep them going, just the two of them, even as it was. He was afraid of Cora's sullen strength, of its demands and its judgments, and he lied to cover his failure. Because he still wanted her. He dared not open himself to the chance of her scorn. He had to pretend and pretend. But this made it different. And how did she know that other things he had told her had any foundation? About Lola. She hadn't really thought about Lola, because she couldn't bear to have to imagine any other woman in Gerald's arms. She had accepted his story and shied away from it, just to save herself pain. How did she know that he hadn't deserted Lola?—and perhaps other women? Oh, there was no truth in him!

Cora moaned, and moved her hand restlessly. Something in her, something ruthless and wilful, refused to admit that happiness itself had failed without the backing up of the old integrity. It couldn't live of itself—just rapture. She hated Gerald for bringing her to this. But she would not let herself pity him. She would not give herself up to the memory of his glib, fearful persuasions and his uneasy eyes when he showed his inadequacy. Soft, eternally forgiving, eternally yielded, like Sophie, like mother, and never seeking or facing the truth except in the hidden, secret parts of their being. For months—all through her marriage—she had closed her eyes, not daring to move, like some one standing on a broken plank. Shame filled her. But if she once opened her eyes, they would be open.

She could not endure this. She need not endure it. She had herself. Mother didn't—she had given herself to other people; and now, alone, with father dead, the children gone, her whole life was scattered.

Tears came slowly up into Cora's eyes. Except for pride, what was there in turning back to herself again? She could not do it. She felt that with a dark helpless knowledge that pressed down upon her as she lay there alone. She wanted Gerald. She needed him. She thought with terror of what was ahead of her; and she knew, now, why she had put off telling Gerald, why she had put off even admitting and making it certain to herself. But there was no use denying it to herself any longer. She could make herself face that much of the truth. She was going to have a baby, and she didn't want it. Not now—not when she thought of that furtive look of fear in Gerald's eyes. He didn't want to have to provide for a child. He couldn't—not even for his wife. Why, even Dave Robbins could do that much! This was the outcome, then, of that passionate yielding to happiness.

Cora lay staring at the dim wall. How different it was from that day in Denver when she had sat at the window, the green court and the scarlet

flowers outside, the air in the room sweet and cool, and thought of this. She hated herself. She couldn't admit how utterly weak and deserted she felt. Even if Gerald came back . . . what would that really matter now? She might as well know that she would have to take things into her own hands anyway. The old days of blind happiness were ended.

She heard the sounds of the old people moving about in the rooms beneath her, and automobiles whirred past on the asphalt below the windows. Her future was a feverish blackness before her eyes.

2

Now that it had come, that it was finally over, Cora was almost glad to be freed from that torture of expectancy. Even if Gerald came back to her now, it did not matter. Her baby was born, and she was alone, and had got through it without him.

She had got through that hideous time in Fort Davis. She had hated to go upon the street, where strangers stared after her, and she could almost hear the whisper—— “Her husband's deserted her”;—and she had endured the constant watching and attentions of the Fosters, had listened over and over to their reassurances—— “They'll find him. Don't you worry. He'll be here when you need him.” She had forced from the manager the admission of the money Gerald had taken with him; had said, in a hard voice, that it would be paid: not permitting his reluctant sympathy for her “condition” to let him evade and humor her. She had turned a stony face to Mrs. Foster's repeated, “Your mother ought to be told. Some one ought to tell your mother.” And, finally, she had left the town that was humming with interest in her, escaping kindness and curiosity both, and had come alone to Denver. She had, at least, the bleak, hard satisfaction of having gone through it by herself.

It was a dull relief to be lying here in the hospital. She did not mind the sisters. It was their business to care for her. She was not forced to keep up her pride before them. She did not even mind that Ed and Rosie were here. It was over now. Let people know. She did not care.

This room was small, clean, but battered. The one large window was slightly open to the sunny air. Steps padded softly down the corridor. Doors opened, far away, somewhere. Cora lay motionless.

She heard the cautious, squeaking tread of the Nagel family in the hall outside, and Rosie's subduing murmurs to the two little boys. Their faces looked in from the doorway. The little boys stared.

“Hello,” Rosie called; and, to the children, “Now be quiet if you’re coming in here; don’t disturb Aunt Cora.”

Cora forced her lips into a smile to welcome them. Mrs. Foster had got their address and written to them because she “thought some one ought to know”—they had driven over from the ranch once, to see Cora and Gerald, and the Fosters had remembered them. Ed had found her here at the hospital. She had not wanted them near her. She had wanted to hide herself. It was easier to have strangers know her humiliation than her own family. But she had accepted them, now.

They all came squeaking solemnly into the room. Rosie kissed her, and admonished the two boys to do the same.

“Kiss Aunt Cora.”

Cora felt the moist, frightened touch of their lips on her cheek.

Ed said, “Hello,” in an embarrassed way. He sat down in a chair near the window, and Rosie sat at the foot of the bed. Rosie was pretty, but a little careless and rustic-looking, now; and the boys were two little fellows with shaven, fair heads and brown faces, brown little wrists and hands. Cora liked Ed—a taciturn, embarrassed young farmer, a few years older than Rosie, but younger than Cora herself. He was afraid to look at her, though, both because she was ill and because of her misfortune. They all, even Rosie, had a strange, scared look, because such a thing had happened to Cora.

“Did you think we were never coming? I had to wash out suits for the boys, and the things didn’t get dry——”

“Here, keep away from those flowers,” Ed admonished the boys.

All the rest of the Nagels’ talk was punctuated with warnings and commands to the children.

“Stop that now. You can’t stay here if you aren’t going to be good. If you make such a racket, you’ll wake up all the sick people.”

Rosie did most of the fussing; but when Vincent, the smaller boy, who was at the darting and clutching stage, grew too obstreperous, it amused Cora to see how Ed simply reached out, caught the little fellow by the seat of the knickers, and held him firmly between his knees. He touched the strands of light, sun-bleached hair on the boy’s hard brown head. He leaned down, to say in a low voice:

“Daddy’s got you now. Where did you think you were?”

“Oh, *where’s* the baby?” Rosie demanded.

“One of the sisters took her. I think she’s asleep.”

Lorin began to cry. “I want to see my little cousin. You told me I could see my little cousin.” He looked around with a blank, startled gaze through his tears, and his mouth stretched piteously in the grimace of weeping.

“You’ll get to see her before we leave. You can look at her.”

“I wan’ see my little cousin!”

“Shut up, Lorin,” Ed said, sternly. “You can see her before you go. Keep still, now.”

“He wanted to stay and play with the little girl in the house where we’re staying, and we promised him he could see his little cousin,” Rosie explained. “Have you named her yet, Cora?”

“No.”

Cora knew that they were trying to arouse her interest in the baby. She never felt colder toward the little thing than when Rosie exclaimed over her, and reproachfully caught her up and held her against her face. They thought the baby would be a “comfort.” Cora was grimly aware of all their kindly schemes. As if it could be any comfort to have brought another girl baby into the world to find everything leagued against her—find that, no matter what she did or what she wanted, she was between the devil and the deep sea! When Rosie was there, Cora was too coldly perverse to show the slightest interest in the baby. She was not going to be solaced so readily in the old, accepted, feminine way. But when she was alone, when the lay sister had brought the baby to her, she sometimes touched with wondering, exploring fingers the thatch of black hair. The expression of her dark eyes was neither cold nor hostile then. It was remote, with something withheld, and deep with pain.

“I should think you might name her after mother, Cora. I don’t like Carrie, but you could change it to Carolyn, and that’s awfully pretty.”

Cora said nothing.

“I wish I had a girl to name. You can give them so much prettier names than you can boys. I wanted Vincent to be a girl. I had him all named. I was going to call him Laurette. There’s an actress has that name. Why don’t you call *her* that? Don’t you like it?”

“Not very well,”

“I do.”

Little Vincent, on another headlong tour of investigation, came near the bed. Rosie caught him and held his head against her cheek.

“Yes, mama likes you anyway, if your name is only Vincent. Why don’t you name her after Evelyn, Cora? I should think you might like to do that.”

“Let Cora choose her own name,” Ed said.

“Well, I’m just suggesting. But I wish I had a baby to name Laurette.”

Ed reached out and drew Vincent between his knees again. “He’s all right the way he is,” he muttered to the little boy. “Ain’t you? Huh?”

“Mama, when am I going to see my little cousin?”

“Lorin, be *still*. When mama says you can.”

There was an uneasy pause. They heard the wind in the cottonwoods; a few dry leaves blew past the window. Rosie fidgeted on the bed, then said, in a childish tone:

“Cora, Ed and I have been talking.”

Cora would not help them. Let them do what they wanted. She did not care—cared about nothing in the world. She wanted to be left in this heavy languor in which her pain and humiliation were drugged and quiet.

“We honestly think you ought to write to mother.”

“No.” Cora pulled herself out of her stillness. “I won’t have it. I don’t want any one to worry mother about this.”

“But let us write to Aunt Soph, anyway. Perhaps she would come out here. Mother wouldn’t have to know the whole thing.”

Cora said, “I’ve told you that you and Ed needn’t stay here with me. I’m all right. I don’t need any one.”

“Well,” Rosie said, apologetically, “of course, we’ve got a lot to do on the ranch.”

Ed flushed and moved, but said nothing. Cora’s eyes were closed. She had made her mistake, and grimly she would take the consequences. Her mother and Aunt Soph were not to be dragged into it. Her lips moved to say, “You can go home,” but she was too tired to speak the words.

Ed and Rosie looked at each other as if nerving themselves up to mention something that had been talked over and decided upon between

them. Ed blurted it out.

“I’d like to find out something about that man of yours before we go off. Any man that would leave a woman at a time like this!—hanging’s too good for him. I’d like to get my hands on him. He’d do the right thing or I’d know why.”

Cora’s eyes were open and her face turned toward Ed. She was astonished to see how his face darkened and how the veins at his temples were swollen. She could feel no excitement herself. She lay with the same somber stare in her eyes, that looked black and dull in her pale skin, and with a slight, bitter smile on her lips.

“I wish we *could* find him,” Rosie said, piteously. “Don’t you think, Codie, if we got a detective——”

“No!”

“Well, but, Cora——”

“I said *no*.” Cora roused herself to energy. Her cheeks flushed. “He wanted to sneak out—let him. I can get on without him. Better than I did with him. I was a fool to marry him. I don’t want ever to see him again. Quit trying to find him, and quit talking about him.”

She lay down, panting. Ed and Rosie looked frightened at this sudden flaring into the open of all that had been smoldering under Cora’s silence. Rosie dared not say a word. But Ed muttered:

“Well, I’d like to get hold of him and make him help support his child. I don’t like to see a hound like that go scot free.”

Cora was tired and dull again. She turned her head and let her arms drop listlessly on the bed.

Ed and Rosie looked at each other for courage again. Rosie began in a small voice:

“Codie, Ed and I don’t want to just go off and leave you. We want to know what you’re going to do.”

Cora forced her lips to murmur, “I don’t know.” She was angry because they could not seem to see that she didn’t care.

“We thought maybe—we’d like it awfully well if you’d come out to the ranch. We haven’t much room, or things fixed up very well, but we thought _____”

Cora felt a sick desire to go with them; to lose herself in the great, bare country with the sky and the sweep of level plains, where all day long there was the sound of the windmill pumping water. She was not utterly deserted. Through her bitter lethargy, she felt a stir of kinship and affection. But she was going to throw herself upon no one. She would live out her own mistakes.

“But what are you going to do when you leave the hospital?” Rosie wailed.

“I’ll go home.”

“Do you think . . . will you try to get your old job back?”

Ed flushed and got up hastily.

“Come on, Rosie,” he said. “These kids are getting too rambunctious. I guess Cora doesn’t know what she’s going to do yet. There’s plenty of time to think about all that. I think myself she’s doing the best thing to go home. Though she’s sure welcome to stay with us.”

“Well, I was only asking her.”

Cora lay back, silent, during all the business of the Nagels’ starting off—marshaling the boys, putting their little round hats on their little round heads.

“Well, good-bye, Codie. I guess we won’t——”

“Sure we will. We’ll see you again.”

“Well, but Ed, you said——”

“Sure we’ll be back.”

The little boys began to cry: “Want to see the baby. You said we could see the baby”; and Rosie, at the door, had to pacify them. “Well, come on, we’ll see. We’ll ask the sister if the baby’s asleep. Maybe you can just look at her. But don’t you wake your little cousin up!” She went out, with the two little boys tiptoeing solemnly, and Ed waited. He stood awkwardly near Cora’s bed.

“Well, Cora, you don’t want to worry about all this. You’ve got plenty of folks. They’ll look after you until you’re on your feet again. I guess you’ve done enough for your family. It won’t hurt them to help you a little when you get in trouble.”

Cora managed to smile at him, through the searing of her pride at the mention of her being “in trouble”—she, Cora, who had always done things

for the rest of them!

Ed was trying to say something else. At last, he blurted:

“I guess you’re right, you’ll do better without him. Well . . . you know you can count on us.”

Rosie and the children came back to the door. The little boys were talking wonderingly about their new cousin, and Rosie tried to hush them and agree with them at the same time. “Yes, she’s got tiny little hands. Isn’t she sweet? Isn’t she a nice little cousin? But, sh-h-h!—don’t talk about her so loud! . . . What have you two been talking about?” she asked, with her old, Rosie-like silliness.

“Oh, nothing much,” Cora answered.

Ed flushed. For a moment, she felt the lean hardness of his brown hand.

“Good-bye. We’ll be in again. Take care of yourself.”

Cora held herself quiet until they were gone. She heard the sound of their feet on the rubber matting of the hospital stairs; heard a protesting wail from Vincent. He wanted to take his little cousin along! Cora turned her head again, and lay staring at the window.

She was getting better, as she herself had to recognize. The respite of terrible pain and weakness was almost over. Ed and Rosie had only been comforting and reassuring before. Now, they evidently thought her well enough to “begin thinking about things.” They had been cautious today, but prodding her all the same. She would have to consider now what she was going to do; would have to take up all the difficulties just where she had dropped them. Gerald was out of her life. She had said that she would go home. Well, she would have to go somewhere . . . but the protection and succor of even her mother and Aunt Soph made her shrink. Beneath her pride, beneath her quivering awareness, was the bitter apathy that came from her disillusionment and failure. She had died out of the life of the last year, and she would have liked to lie in this dull state forever. She was getting well in spite of herself, because she was strong and could not help it.

There was only one thing to fall back upon. She could go back and face it out and live through her own mistakes. She did not fool herself. She knew that she had had what she wanted. When Ed talked about Gerald, she had been too weak to combat him. But she knew how it really was. The marriage had been her own. It was the fierce determination, ambition, and power that lay under her passionate acquiescence that had terrified Gerald and that he could not meet. He had given her delight, but that was all that he had to give

her. Beyond that, she could only think of him with a tired and bitter scorn; but the mistake was her own.

3

Soft steps padded along the corridor. The lay sister came in, bringing the baby. The little thing looked helpless and grotesque, in the long hospital clothes, with that thatch of black hair and those tiny hands beating the air so aimlessly. “Just look at that black hair! She’s going to look just like her mother,” every one said, reassuringly. Cora’s mouth twisted in an ironic smile. She could see nothing of herself, or Gerald either, in that small wrinkled face with the wide mouth and bluish eyes. The lay sister, smiling and noiseless, laid the baby softly in the bed beside Cora, and turned back Cora’s nightgown to bare her breast. The tiny hands fumbled, the toothless mouth nuzzled moistly and hungrily. Cora’s bitter remoteness was faintly thrilled by the softness of the tiny fingers. With a feeling of remorse and pity, she helped the baby to find her breast.

“Yes,” she whispered, “poor thing, you haven’t any name or anything else. You’re simply a mistake.”

But those last words formed silently on her lips. She could not quite speak them, even to the heedless ears of this strange little being. She lay staring at her child, shamed by its greedy, blind, trustful nuzzling of her breast. Her hand fumbled for the tiny feet, and she pushed the baby up closer along her side.

Steps padded through the corridor again, softer than the lay sister’s, but more certain. Cora looked up and saw Sister Mary Josepha. The nun had come into the room as quietly as the shadow of a tree might move across grass. The breeze through the open window stirred the long sleeves of her black habit, and her rosary chinked faintly as she moved. But her face between the bands of stiff white linen, and under the fall of dense black, was rosy and calm. Her gold-rimmed spectacles gave a queer practicality to her aspect.

“Here’s the little lady! She knows how to eat.”

But Sister Mary Josepha’s cheerfulness did not leave Cora with that sense of grim irony, like the anxious and transparent praise of Rosie, the loud, beaming, false “Here we are! Ah, fine—fine as silk!”—of the plump doctor. She was weak. Some one must be trusted; and it was Sister Mary Josepha whom she exempted from her bitterness. She had no pride with the nun. She said to her what she pleased. She said she didn’t want to come

through; that she was sorry for her strength; that the Hindus were right when they drowned girl babies in the Ganges. The world had too many of them, and it would be happier for most of them to be drowned at the start.

She looked up into the nun's rosy face. It had, not so much wrinkles, as many lines printed upon it. There was about it a peculiarly Catholic rosiness and serenity—a look that seemed to go with the silence of cool corridors and the hushed steps sounding through them, with vineyards and good feeding, the lace of altar cloths and the gilt of altars; and yet with the chill austerity of worn, hard benches and the smell of wax candles, of narrow sheltered walks where women paced silently under bitter-smelling box. This was the face that Cora had seen through the haze of torture. She made an exception of Sister Mary Josepha. Her accusations against the world did not apply to her. The nun seemed able to listen to anything, without shock, and without comment; and yet to accept none of Cora's fierce statements. She had put herself beyond the reach of love and delight, and she was free from the difficulties that besieged other women and tumbled down the structure of their lives. Cora used to scorn comfort from the "contraptions" of the church, as Aunt Soph called them; but now, lying dull and weak, with the baby's wet mouth suckling at her breast, hearing the faint chink of beads and the soothing rustle of black garments, the sensuousness of gilt and ruby-red and the austerity of bleak candles opened a dim vista of refuge to her.

"And she hasn't a name yet!" the sister said, reproachfully.

"Not yet," Cora answered stubbornly.

"Poor little lady! I think shame on her mother."

The nun reached out and took one of the baby's hands and gently opened it. Her own hand was red, with swollen veins, the fingers small and feminine, but the knuckles showing plainly. Her eyes, as Cora looked up at them, were curiously unmoved and almost cold, in spite of their bright blueness set in the ruddy skin. Her face had the chill shiny redness of a winter apple. She knew the world and its passions and weakness; but she knew it from without.

"I think we'll have to get your grandmother to name you," she murmured.

"I can name her myself."

In a curious way Cora found relief, even a certain enjoyment, in the nun's calm reproaches and in her own obstinacy.

"Why shouldn't she have her mother's name?"

“No, I don’t want her saddled with a name from any of the Schwieter family. They all make fools of themselves. Nor to saddle my mother with her.”

“Yes, and what a way is that to talk? It isn’t this little baby’s fault.”

“I’ll name her for you. Then she may grow up and have some sense.”

Sister Mary Josepha did not reply. Cora had an impulse to ask what her own name had been. But she did not want to know. She did not want to think of her as anything but Sister Mary Josepha, or to contemplate her having any existence outside the cool corridors of the hospital.

“Perhaps I’ll call her Josephine.”

“Josephine is a good name,” the nun said approvingly.

The baby lay still, just as she was, on Cora’s breast, her wet, warm little mouth still drowsily touching the nipple. Sister Mary Josepha laid down the tiny limp hand. Her touch was kindly, but very competent and calm. She moved with her queer softness from the room; and Cora, drowsy, from a kind of dream that was drifted over with the leaves of the cottonwood trees, heard the chink of her rosary and the neat thud of her rubber heels. Still from her dream, she looked at the baby. She saw with amazement the reality of this tiny being, the black thatch, and the small hands so incredibly equipped with minute finger nails. Cora picked up one of the hands, uncurled it, almost stealthily smoothed it out on her own immense palm. Her lips pursed into a faintly pitying, faintly ironic smile.

“Are you Josephine?” she whispered.

Her fiercely reckless marriage with the stranger, after those six rapturous days among great pines and brilliant sky and dripping rain, had vanished bitterly. Her uneasiness had always told her that she could not keep it. Her old resolution had forced her to build stability upon vanishing delight. She might track Gerald down. He was in love with her still, and, face to face with her, he could no more stand against her resolution than she against his charm. But the rapture had vanished, too. She was through with it. And here was this little creature, unknown, scarcely believable, and yet complete, with her black hair and her tiny hands and feet, to be with Cora for the rest of her days.

Josephine!

It was a name she would never have thought of giving to a child. But it made the little person strangely real. The tiny hand stayed upon Cora’s palm.

It was wrinkled and soft. Cora listened to the slow, subdued steps, and the pauses, of the sister going down the corridor. She was content to have her pass the door and to leave this little Josephine lying where she was. If it were not for the grim self-admission of her own mistake, Cora might have loved her.

Chapter III

1

Ed and Rosie had gone back to the ranch, but Ed had sent Clarence to take Cora home. He was almost afraid to look at Cora for fear that she might be changed, or be crying, or say something dreadful and tragic. He tried to ignore the baby. But Cora was like herself. She talked to Clarence in a matter-of-fact way, and even laughed at the sombrero with four dents in the crown which he was proudly wearing as a badge of the West. His fear of her wore off, and he began to talk to her as he had always done. He was getting tired of the ranch. Ed worked him too hard. Ed was hard on all his help.

“Ed doesn’t ask any more of you than he’s willing to do himself.”

“Yeah, but it’s his ranch, ’t isn’t mine. Gee, you don’t know the work it takes with those old sugar-beets. Ed, he can go off in the car whenever he pleases, but us fellows, we have to stick right there, with those old beets.”

“Ed doesn’t run around for the fun of it. Don’t you tell me that, Clarence Schwietert, because I know better.”

“Yeah, but he can go whenever he pleases.”

“Of course he can. It’s his car. If he hadn’t worked good and hard, he couldn’t have bought it.”

Clarence silently and reluctantly agreed to this. But he went off on another track.

“Oh, Ed’s all right; he treats a fellow pretty good, and he’s too damn good to Rosie, but I’m getting sick of that old ranch. It’s ’way off from everywhere. You can never get anywhere or see anything. I got a good notion to get a job at home and not go back there.”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind,” Cora said indignantly, as he had expected—and half hoped—that she would. “Whether you like that ranch or not, you’ll stay there until the time you’ve promised is up. Ed has been perfectly square with you, and you’re not going to leave him in the lurch like that.”

Clarence muttered something; but really he was asking for Cora to bolster up his indecisiveness and keep him at work. He depended upon her now, as always, for that. But Cora, even while she scolded and expostulated

with him, forced herself to do it out of listlessness. She could not resurrect the old hardness of her determination to have Clarence get on, to *make* him do it if he couldn't do it for himself. After she had spoken to him, she leaned her head back against the plush and let her darkened eyelids droop.

Relieved that he must keep at work, Clarence even began to develop an interest in the baby, as his embarrassment with Cora wore off, and when he had got over fearing that she would talk about her misfortunes.

“Look at her grab!” he cried, proudly, sticking out his brown forefinger. “Gee, can't she take hold?”

Cora smiled slightly.

“She's got black hair like one of those little Mex babies. Ain't you, Josephine? Huh?”

“Clarence, will you get me some water?”

“Sure.”

Clarence went off, blushing now at the thought of the baby's existence. Cora let herself go and closed her eyes. She could keep up her usual manner before Clarence, but he had only an uneasy consciousness of how the journey was tiring her. Clarence's notions of what it entailed to escort an invalid were vague. Little Josephine had been very good—Rosie, the sisters, all of them, had declared over and over what a *good* baby she was!—but now she began to whimper, and then to wail.

“Oh, hush!” Cora said, in a fierce whisper of exhaustion. Then she looked at the little red face, with the mouth wide open and piteous, and murmured:

“Poor creature! You have a right to cry.”

She smoothed out the baby's wrinkled clothes. The sense of reproach and responsibility settled heavily upon her. She moved restively, and took her hand from the baby's dress. . . .

The country was getting familiar again—great, flat cornfields, where now the pale stumps of the stalks were left in the gray-black earth. They were drawing into the city. The rows and rows of dingy frame houses with clothes hanging bleakly on the high back porches, the station with its roar and its movement of people—they were here, back again. . . . Clarence, now that his fear of her was allayed, was proud to be his sister's protector in this emergency. He became attentive and masterful.

“You wait here while I get a taxi,” he commanded.

Cora sank listlessly upon one of the long benches. This was her own station. She knew the magazine stands, the marble stairs leading down to the lunch-rooms, the big clock over the door. But its very familiarity was strange and alien.

Clarence came back.

“Come on! Say, shan’t I carry the baby?”

He picked up the little bundle gingerly, but manfully, and they went out into the noise and the chill, darkening air.

Cora dreaded to go home to meet her mother and Aunt Soph. She cringed at the thought of Dave and Sophie. She had not written a word since the baby was born and the truth of Gerald’s desertion of her was known. Rosie had written to Sophie, and Sophie had broken the news to her mother. Cora had given commands that no one was to talk to her about what had happened. She would have no fuss. She could not bear it. Gerald was gone, and her marriage was broken up, and she had herself to blame, and that was all there was to it. Sitting in the jolting taxi, breathing painfully, she held sternly to that arid self-control that she had kept ever since she had gone away from Fort Davis and taken her life in her own hands again.

“Here, I’ll take her,” Clarence said, embarrassed and scared again.

Cora got out of the taxi. Chilled and exhausted, she went up the cement walk to the house. Mrs. Rawlins was out on her porch next door. She suddenly became motionless, with her head turned toward the Schwietert house. Cora felt bitterly aware of herself; but the bitterness was so great that she did not care for Mrs. Rawlins or any one else. If only they let her alone and didn’t try to talk to her! She was sardonically conscious, even through the aching soreness of the actuality, of the sordid old drama of which she was a part—a deserted wife, coming home with her child!—she, Cora Schwietert. The house was small and bleak in the late winter. She noticed the detail of a rough, empty coconut shell hanging from the porch ceiling. Aunt Soph had taken the plant into the house.

They opened the door as she came up the steps and there she saw both their faces, both smiling, but her mother’s eyes filled with tears.

“She got home, bless her old heart!”

Aunt Soph’s tone championed her fiercely. Her mother kept her hand and pressed it quiveringly. But they were trying to obey her commands and

not refer to what had happened, even when their affectionate hearts were almost bursting with need to protect her and make a great display of pity and indignation over her. Cora held herself stiffly through her exhaustion, and kept a slight, proud smile. She was determined to act just as she had always done, and to make them act so, too.

It was a relief when they could let out their pent-up excitement and affection by a great to-do over Josephine.

“Well, see here! Who’s come—who’s *come*! Let’s have a look at her!” cried Aunt Soph.

Mrs. Schwiertert took the wailing bundle from Clarence’s arms, and with hands trembling, and yet practiced, undid the soft blue blanket that Rosie had bought in Denver.

“Look at the little girlie!”

Both of the women broke at once into fond baby talk.

“Does she know grandma? Of course she does. Bless her little heart. Was she cold?”

“Look at that black hair, would you!” Aunt Soph cried in ingenuous delight. “Isn’t that just Cora’s? That’s right—you grab your Aunt Soph!”

“Is she grandma’s baby?”

Cora stood near, smiling slightly, and yet feeling the same cold aloofness she had felt when Rosie, or the nuns, exclaimed over the baby. It troubled Mrs. Schwiertert to see that she made no move to take the baby from them. She too, and Aunt Soph, had been counting on little Josephine’s being “a comfort.”

But it was a relief to Cora to have them expend their excitement upon Josephine. Only, while she was asking seemingly matter-of-fact questions about Ed and Rosie, Cora was aware of her mother’s eyes, fixed anxiously and with yearning compassion upon her. She would not meet that look; and then the eyes, pale and loving behind the lenses of the glasses, grew wet again.

“Come, Cora, and sit down,” Mrs. Schwiertert begged.

She went with Cora into the living room, and for the moment that they were alone—Aunt Soph had taken the baby—put her hand on Cora’s hair.

“Why didn’t you write to mother? Why did you go through all that alone?”

Cora stared straight ahead with cold eyes. Aunt Soph, just entering the doorway, looked at them, startled.

“Don’t, mother! I’m not going to have you crying about me. I can’t stand it. I’ll not stay here if there’s going to be any fuss made.”

She got up and started for the door. They both begged her to stay and forced her into the chair again. Mrs. Schwietert choked off her crying and felt blindly for her handkerchief. Aunt Soph began to jiggle the baby in her arms and to talk to it at random.

“Was it a little pet, a little rascal? You bet it was! Did it like Aunt Soph?”

Cora sat back, breathing heavily, her eyes still black and hard.

“Was it a good trip?” Mrs. Schwietert asked, with one last quiver of breath.

She tried piteously to talk to Cora about commonplace things, and not to offend again. Cora knew that the cold and thorny aloofness of her manner made her mother hurt and bewildered. Aunt Soph was ill at ease, spending her attention upon Josephine, and Clarence had vanished. Mrs. Schwietert could not keep from asking questions.

“Did those sisters take good care of you in the hospital?”

“Yes, of course. Who made that new table-runner? You, Aunt Soph?”

“Nope. Your mother.”

Cora’s hard self-control baffled them. Her mother’s heart ached to see how languidly she lay back now in the wicker chair, how large and hollow her dark eyes were in her colorless face, and even her black hair dull and lank. They had seen her rich and blooming, and Aunt Soph’s lips tightened and grew grim at the thought of “that man.”

“I believe I’ll go upstairs a while,” Cora said indifferently.

Their concurrence, and their anxiety for her comfort, were pathetic. But she did not deserve it, and she could not accept it. She felt all the unasked questions—she could not stand it. Going slowly up the stairs, trying proudly not to let them see that she was helping herself by the railing, she heard the fond murmur in the room below.

“This little girl—grandma’s little girl—little Josephine.”

Let the baby have their tenderness now. She had a right to it.

The upper hallway was hushed and chilly and clean. The door of Mr. Walsh's room stood open, and Cora could see its austere neatness. She went into her own room, softly, almost stealthily. The air was chill, blank, stale, although it had been made ready for her. There was no feeling of homecoming, nothing but bleakness. She heard hushed sounds in the rooms below. It was a household of women: three old women, Cora thought, bitterly—one widowed, one deserted, and one never taken—and a baby for its center. There was nothing, now, for her to do. She had lost her place. Already she had turned over Josephine to her mother and aunt. They worried about her coldness. It was her terrible aching remorse for having brought Josephine into the world. It made her turn away.

But they were going to let her alone. That was all she wanted. She pulled off her shoes and lay down on the bed . . . lying heavily inert for a while, and then forcing herself up, with an impatient sigh, to get the thick soft quilt with the yellow border that was folded at the foot of the bed.

The quilt was soft and warm over her. But she felt sore and cold—achingly cold, as in a bitter, airless room. She moaned, and moved her head, as she realized that she had come home. If Gerald had died, it would not be so hopeless. Then she would have her grief. She could keep her memory of him. Now, she could not even miss Gerald. She despised him. She did not want him back. His desertion of her was something that could never be undone, even if a miracle happened. There could be no miracle after this.

She did not want him. But she missed him all the same. She moaned again, in an agony of humiliation. She knew now the bleakness of this solitary room. She wanted his own arms to comfort her for what he himself had done. That was the very worst, most terrible part of it. Under the drugging apathy, her strong body was still alive. Her baby could not give her back the hot, glowing happiness, that had gone too soon, too terribly soon, and left behind this bitter taste of ashes. Her throat ached, but she lay almost motionless, without crying, with open eyes, and proud.

Mrs. Schwiertert sat downstairs, holding the baby, murmuring to the little thing at first, and then rocking and rocking with the soft bundle in her arms. Tears were still wet in her eyes, but her old calm, comprehending motherliness had returned. Although she was thin and ailing, it made her feel strong again, powerful and compassionate.

Aunt Soph came into the room. "Ought she to be alone up there?" Aunt Soph spoke in the stage whisper she always used in misfortunes.

"If she wants to be. We've got to let her have her way. You know Cora."

Aunt Soph came closer and looked at the baby.

“I believe she’s going to look like him!” she whispered, awed.

Mrs. Schwietert pressed Josephine to her and pursed her lips in compassionate protest. But she was silent. The feel of the little body brought back to her a soft, mysterious content, that was real, and yet fragrant and dim with memory. She rocked gently, but there was an absent look in her eyes. While she held this baby, she was protecting, too, her child upstairs.

“Well, it’s an awful business!” Aunt Soph suddenly blurted. “I’d like to get a hold of him!”

She stalked off to the kitchen and began to work with fierce intentness. She would see that they all had a good supper, anyway!

2

Mrs. Rawlins stepped carefully over the snow, crusty on top and soft underneath, that lay in thin patches on the strip of lawn between her house and the Schwieterts’. An old lavender-gray knitted shawl was thrown over her shoulders, and she wore her faded blue dusting cap. She carried a small dish with a blue-and-white Japanese napkin wrapped about it. She went cautiously up the slippery back steps; and while she was waiting for her knock to be answered, she looked at the small back entry with the refrigerator and mopping pails, and good-sized rubbers piled near the back door—all so chill and desolate in the spring morning that was like winter.

“Oh, it’s Mrs. Rawlins!”

She began hastily, at once, “No, I won’t come in. I just ran over with this little dish——” even as she spoke, stepping into the back entry, and then into the kitchen; Aunt Soph urging her:

“Come in. It’s too cold to stand out there.”

“Well, I really can’t stay,” she said, apologetically. “I was doing some baking this morning, and I just ran over with this little turnover for Cora, I thought she might enjoy it.”

Mrs. Schwietert had come into the kitchen too, and both she and Aunt Soph exclaimed over the delicious look of the fresh apple turnover, browned so nicely, crisp and darkly syrupy along the edge, and fragrant with cinnamon.

“Well, she certainly ought to eat that!” Aunt Soph cried.

Mrs. Schwietert said, "I don't know how long it is since I've baked turnovers! The children used to be so fond of them."

"Well, I don't bake them myself so very often," Mrs. Rawlins said, with a nervous laugh, faintly apologetic. "But Herby likes them, and I had these few apples. And then I thought maybe it might be something different for Cora."

Mrs. Schwietert murmured thanks and assurances. Aunt Soph looked both pleased and rather comically astonished. She and Carrie often went over with cookies or gingerbread, when they were baking—they had always been "good neighbors"—but it was something new for Mrs. Rawlins to bring over anything of her own accord. Once she had returned a plate, on which they had sent her some little cakes, with a few ancient pieces of store candy on it. Cora had been disgusted. "What on earth do you keep giving that woman stuff for?" she had demanded. "Well, there's just she and Herby . . ." Mrs. Schwietert had replied, vaguely. Mrs. Rawlins looked small and scrawny, her thin neck withered from the cold, her thin lips blue, beside the two tall women, gaunt, but graciously proportioned, in their neat house dresses.

"How is Cora?" she asked, in a low, significant voice.

Mrs. Schwietert answered, "Not so very well." But she then went on to explain the situation as it was now, led on by Mrs. Rawlins's interest, and the little gift, to say more than she usually did. "She's so nervous. The least little thing upsets her."

Mrs. Rawlins made a sympathetic sound. "My, I thought she kept up so wonderfully when she came back!"

"Yes, but she couldn't keep that up," Aunt Soph put in, gruffly. "There had to be a let-down."

"Oughtn't she to go out a little more and see folks?"

"She won't do it," Aunt Soph said, briefly.

"Well, I suppose she feels . . ." Mrs. Rawlins did not finish. She was nerving herself up to ask the question she had been wanting to put for a long time. "You haven't heard anything of . . .?" She left it mysterious, and looked from one to the other.

Mrs. Schwietert shook her head in silent distress. But Aunt Soph blurted:

"No, and we won't. Don't know that we want to."

Mrs. Rawlins murmured, "I don't blame you. I guess maybe it's better. To get a girl like Cora for a wife, and *then* to treat her that way!"

Mrs. Schwietert's eyes slowly filled with tears. Aunt Soph cleared her throat, and looked threatening.

"My!" Mrs. Rawlins whispered.

Then her face cleared.

"Oh, *I* hear something!" she chanted brightly. "*There* she is!" A wail sounded from the hall; Mrs. Schwietert hurried out. Mrs. Rawlins kept on, in a singing, exultant murmur: "Her grandma'll get her! She doesn't have to cry very long. . . . Here she comes! HERE she comes! Let Aunt Rawlins see her!"

Her sympathy for Cora might be badly alloyed with curiosity, but her interest in the baby was genuinely effusive. The moment the little thing appeared, blinking and crying, her voice softened; she smiled, and began to coax.

"Isn't she a fine girl? Well, I guess so! And fat—how *fat* she's getting!"

The two women were pleased and melted by her praise; Aunt Soph, indeed, almost fatuously delighted. "You bet she's a fine girl!" Aunt Soph declared; and gave the baby a good pat. Mrs. Rawlins had to take Josephine in her arms, to discuss the color of her eyes, and of her hair. What she wanted to ask was, "Does she look like *him*?" But she did not quite dare. The baby's eyes, no color at all, at first, except a nondescript bluish darkness, were now a real gray. Mrs. Rawlins couldn't remember whether Cora's husband had gray eyes or not. She had only once managed to get a good look at him.

She had to leave without asking about the eyes. And although they had said so much more than they usually did—really quite "loosened up" for them!—there were so many questions in her mind that had to go unanswered. They were the best neighbors she had, but still she did not feel free to gossip with them as she did with some of the others. Mrs. Schwietert had the reputation, in the whole neighborhood, of being a very reticent woman. Aunt Soph was less so; but, in spite of her blunt speech, she did not really tell much. It was not that these women were secretive. Mrs. Schwietert had a dignity that made her admired and respected among her neighbors; but a dignity so unconscious and so unaffected that they did not resent her lack of intimacy. Mrs. Rawlins went tripping and shuffling back across the snow quite well pleased with her little visit, really warmed by the

thought of having done something for Cora, whom she had always admired, but in a veiled way and from a distance, until misfortune had brought her within the reach of sympathy. She smiled at the thought of the baby. But she did not know even yet whether Cora planned to go to work again, whether she would go back to her old job, or what had become of that husband.

“Come on down, Cora,” her mother begged. “There’s no one here now. It’s so nice and warm.”

The cosy warmth of the kitchen, however, was all subdued as Cora slowly entered. It was more than a month, now, since Cora had had her breakdown. She had kept up so marvelously before that—insisted on being treated just as always, letting no one utter a word of sympathy for her. They did not know just what had brought this on. She had been shopping with Aunt Soph, and perhaps she had got over-tired. Aunt Soph said that they had met several people whom she knew, and that perhaps that had been harder upon her than she had been willing to admit. “She was just fine, though. She never let on.” Dave and Sophie had come over for dinner, and it was some little word of Dave’s—though no one else could see why—that had started her to crying. Even now, she would admit no comfort. She wouldn’t go to stay with Ed and Rosie on the ranch. But she dragged around the house, eating almost nothing, crying at the slightest thing that went amiss, making no pretenses any longer; and the two older women did not know whether to be more terrified at such a change in Cora, or relieved that her cold aloofness had broken and given her into their affectionate hands.

She sank down on the kitchen chair.

“It was only Mrs. Rawlins,” her mother said, soothingly.

Cora answered, fretfully, “I don’t care who it was.”

“She brought you a present,” Aunt Soph said. “Must have had a change of heart some way!”

Cora would not answer, nor look at Mrs. Rawlins’s gift. It was a sign of her humiliation that Mrs. Rawlins should bring her things. She was in one of her periods of bitter hatred of Gerald this morning. If it had not been for him, the neighbors would not have dared approach her. She let her head rest on her hand on the chair back, and sat huddled there.

“The baby has her bottle now,” Mrs. Schwietert murmured.

But she would not urge Cora to take an interest if she could not. The doctor had said that it was better to leave her alone for a while. But Cora’s dull indifference—even while she ached with sympathy for it—did hurt her

when she brought Josephine. It made her hug the baby tightly, and whisper, “Her grandma loves her. Yes, she does. She loves little Josephine. This little girl is her own sweetheart.” Sophie thought that Cora’s indifference was dreadful. She worked up an indignation against Cora, that helped to relieve her and Dave’s discomfort at the seemingly long-drawn-out hopelessness of the situation, and she told her friends, piteously, that Cora had “turned against” the child.

Cora got up with a sick, impatient sigh, and went into the living room. She could not stand Aunt Soph’s consciously brisk and cheerful movements as she hummed and rolled out noodle dough. Mrs. Schwietert, after a moment, followed her.

Cora stirred. “Oh, I hate myself!” she muttered. “Why do I hang around this way? I ought to go to work.”

At the very thought, she began to cry again. Her mother stood silently stroking her hair. Cora accepted her sympathy, since there was no one else to see—needed it, wanted it, childishly; and yet it hurt the poor sore remnants of her pride. This was what, after all, she had done for her mother! She shook off the thin hand, angry because, no matter how unreasonably she acted, she could not make her mother angry with her.

The baby made a little sound. She had finished her bottle. Mrs. Schwietert bundled her up in her pretty cream-white coat and her little bonnet for her sleep on the back porch. Before taking her out, however, Mrs. Schwietert could not resist wheeling her in to Cora. The baby did look so clean and lovely, warm and soft and fresh, against the white pillows. And with those funny mittens, too! Her grandmother did not see how any one could resist her.

“All ready to go to sleep!”

Cora stared, somberly at first, at the baby. Then, suddenly, she bent down and hugged the little thing so fiercely that Josephine began to wail. Cora, just as suddenly, took away her arms.

“Wheel her out, mother.”

When her mother had left, she got up and wandered aimlessly into the hall, put her hand on the newel post and leaned there a moment as if to go upstairs. Her arms were still tingling from that warm contact and her breasts had a thrilling ache. But she was a fool. She must admit it. She had made her own bed. She could not let herself be assuaged by that old easy consolation. So it seemed to her.

The mail carrier came up on the porch. She heard the rattle of a letter dropped into the box. Gerald—she always thought, then, of Gerald. Every day the mail hour gave her a sense of sickness. How would she feel if a letter had come from Gerald? If he made his old excuses, pleaded his old passion? She stood still and calm, searching herself to feel if a miracle could stir her deadness. It would not help.

At first she thought she would not bother about the letters at all. The whole world was too tiresome. But then she stepped out on the cold porch—as if to show that Gerald’s letter could not matter—and reached into the box, making a fretful, exasperated sound as her finger nail scraped the metal. There was only one letter. It was hers: “Mrs. Cora Matthews, Care Mrs. C. Schwietert.” Her lips twisted in a grim smile. She was being addressed, evidently, as a widow! Even when, staring listlessly at the pale blue envelope, she saw that it was postmarked “Warwick,” she did not open it. She did not want a letter from Gerald. But no other handwriting interested her.

Let mother and Aunt Soph open it if they cared. She put it down on the hall seat and crept upstairs to her room, to huddle down on the chilly bed.

She heard her mother’s voice in the hall.

“Why, Cora, did you know you had a letter?”

Mrs. Schwietert came up to her room with it.

“From Warwick, and you haven’t opened it! It might be from Mrs. Anderson.”

“ ’Tisn’t any of their writing.”

“I wonder whose it can be.”

“I don’t know.”

She reached out, now, for the letter, and listlessly tore it open. She looked at the signature. “Why, Bessie Allen!” Her lips barely moved in her languid surprise. As she read—“Bessie Allen!” her mother repeated uncertainly. “Oh, yes, I remember. Why, isn’t she married by now?” Cora was reading intently. Her eyes darkened strangely and seemed to grow larger. She thrust out the letter—“Read it!”—and lay back, her lips open, and panting a little.

Mrs. Schwietert took the closely written, pale blue sheets. Instantly, her thoughts had leaped to the Andersons—she knew.

“Oh, just some more! Just something else!” Cora said wildly.

She began to pant heavily. In her concern, Mrs. Schwietert, distracted, could scarcely take in the sense of what she read.

Dear Cora:

I expect you will be surprised to hear from me after all these years but I knew you would want to hear the sad news about Evelyn and poor Mrs. Anderson is too broken down to write to any one. She thought of you though and wanted you to hear and yesterday when I was over she said before I left Bessie I wish you would write to Cora . . .

The small, round handwriting flowed on and on. Mrs. Schwietert turned over the pages to see how many there were, and then read anxiously. Cora lay in an attitude of rigid despair, with her black hair tumbled on the pillow. Only a few phrases stood out and had a meaning for her mother. . . . *We all feared that she was going but Mr. Anderson and Harry still hoped to save her although Mrs. Anderson said to me yesterday Bessie I knew from the first it was no use we had to lose her. . . . They were just ready to start for San Diego when Evelyn caught this dreadful cold, they did all they could for her but it developed into pneumonia . . . two darling little children, Harry will leave them now with their grandmother and grandfather and will comfort them if anything can for the loss of Evelyn. . . . Everything—the funeral, the letters, the flowers—was recorded, conscientiously, by Bessie. . . . Poor Mrs. Anderson is nearly broken-hearted—Mrs. Schwietert read—and Mr. Anderson too is so changed you would hardly know him, Evelyn had been sick so long but still they could not give up hope that somehow she might be saved. Of course they thought everything of Evelyn their only child, every one did the whole town feels so badly as well as our own crowd. . . .* But there was no real feeling of Evelyn—vivid, bright-haired—in these long, flowery, sentimental phrases of mourning. And that little Bessie Allen, who used to play with Cora and Evelyn, with her pale, small features and long braids of soft, light hair . . . she used to cry when the other girls took off their shoes and stockings at the creek, because it hurt her to go barefooted . . . and she would come and sit in the Schwietert parlor and look at photographs. . . .

But much as Mrs. Schwietert loved Evelyn, she could not stop now to suffer over the news. To have this come, too! She wished she had never brought the letter to Cora. She moved over to the bed and put her hand on

Cora's hair. Cora did not move nor respond. She felt frightened by Cora's rigidity.

"Cora . . ."

"Mother, go downstairs. I don't want any one."

Mrs. Schwietert rose after a moment, and moved quietly away. There was an aching sense of disaster that pervaded the house. But since Cora had returned, the need for it had brought back some of her mother's ample, protecting serenity. She was "like herself again," the children said. But she was weak. It showed when she went downstairs, sighing a little and leaning on the banister. All through these last years, she had relied on Cora. When Cora broke down, the house had lost its prop.

Aunt Soph was at the foot of the stairs. Her face had a frightened, guilty look.

"Anything the matter?"

"Sh-h-h. Evelyn Anderson is dead."

With the unbelievable pronouncement of those words, Mrs. Schwietert's strength seemed to leave her. She began to cry, weakly, and then went slowly into the kitchen where Cora could not hear her. They were both her girls and she could do nothing for them. It was she herself who needed care. She looked at her worn, nerveless hands, and felt their helplessness. All that she could do was to leave Cora alone upstairs with her suffering.

Aunt Soph stood at the foot of the stairs listening. Cora had broken down completely and was sobbing wildly now. "I wish I didn't have to *live!*" The voice was queer and choked. There was a terror in that abandonment, at last, to suffering. Cora could be proud and silent over her own disaster, but she could break when Evelyn, the fortunate one, went down to defeat. . . . Aunt Soph's heart began to beat heavily. The little hallway had its everyday aspect—wintry sunlight coming in through the frosted glass of the door, wraps on the hall seat, a paper unopened. But she felt a darkness of horror settle over her. It seemed as if the whole world were coming down about their heads. Yes, in this world—you had to face it—anything could happen.

"Dinner, Cora!" she called. "Cora, can you eat some dinner?"

The wild sobbing continued.

Aunt Soph went out to the kitchen. Mrs. Schwietert was sitting at the table, her head propped in her hand; and Aunt Soph's heart beat heavily again, to see her look of age and weariness. No use counting any more upon

Carrie!—and now, with no Cora to turn to for sustenance. . . . What was going to happen? What were they to do?

Mrs. Rawlins's dish was still on the table. The dinner was on the stove, untasted. Aunt Soph was ashamed because she alone had an appetite.

She went back to the hall to listen, frightened, to Cora's sobs—went halfway up the stairs, and paused. She was pitying, but at a loss, because at times like this she knew that it was always their mother the children demanded. She remembered how Rosie used to push her away when she had tried to be comforting. "It's a shame, that's what!" she muttered, darkly. But she felt as if she had only an impersonal consolation to give. She went softly back to the kitchen, and said to her sister:

"Go on up to her, Carrie. See if you can't . . . ach, I don't know!"

Her big warm heart felt sore with pity for Cora, for Evelyn—the girls . . . she would fight for them, do anything. . . . "Yes, go it now! Go it!" she muttered bitterly—to something, some blind and cruel power. Perhaps, she thought grimly, it was the old devil himself, that old Sammy Hand used to describe with such relish in the prayer meeting at Warwick and that had so tickled Chris Schwiertert's sense of the absurd. "Old Sammy, he must have met dot old Nick," Chris used to chuckle. "Dey must be well acquainted mit each udder, Sammy he can describe dot old Nick so goot!" She might as well call it the devil. Why not? And give herself the relief of something to hate.

Aunt Soph heard a little cry from the back porch. She hurried out. The baby was awake, had got her mittens off, and was beating the air with purple hands. Aunt Soph snatched her up, took both of the tiny hands in one of hers, and carried her into the warm kitchen, so incongruously cheerful with its good smell of neglected food.

"Did they all forget her? All forget this little girl? Aunt Soph heard her—Aunt Soph knows she's here!"

With mutterings of consolation, she changed the baby, washed her face vigorously with a damp cloth—as she used to scrub the Schwiertert children, making no allowance for ears—and then sat down with her beside the kitchen stove.

"You bet! She belongs to her Aunt Soph. Did she have a hard time of it?"

She patted the little baby head, from which the first black thatch was gone, leaving a shining down, golden, but dark at the points of all the little

wisps. She listened to Cora's sobs, wild but weakened now, finding a relief in the warm tininess of the baby, whom she had, now, all to herself. As she sat there, sore with sympathy at the sound of Cora's weeping, she felt as a heaviness in her own breast the disappointments and the emptiness of her hardworking life . . . she, almost an old woman now, with no home of her own to go to, and, much as she loved "the girls," not a chick nor child belonging to her. . . . Her smothered resentment at Theodore for promising her a home, when he got her to leave her own little business, and then "going off" at this late day and marrying again . . . well, she didn't just blame him, those things were bound to happen . . . but the resentment burned. She rocked vigorously, hugging the baby, and gave vent to her one form of comment and protest.

"Yes—you bet!" she muttered, gloomily.

Chapter IV

1

Cora came to the point, one day, when she could not stand it any longer. Her mother's weakly spasmodic attempts to toss off an easy and motley amount of work in the old way—look after the house, look after Cora and the baby, bake cakes for the Woman's Exchange; and Aunt Soph's valiant statements that she had been a lazy old fool long enough, and was going to get back into the dressmaking business—were simply too much for her. The misfortune of the household could not seem to rouse her, but its incompetence did. There was nothing in the world worth doing, but she had to do something anyway.

So that now, she was working again.

It was queer how quickly she could get back into the routine, when at first it had seemed to her that she was out of that forever. It was second nature to get up when the alarm sounded, hurry through breakfast, and catch the eight-fifteen car. Just at the very first, she had felt so rusty—almost like a novice!—and had worked so hard; but already her job—she was private secretary to the president of a wholesale tea and coffee house—was too easy to be interesting. Mr. Rugg, her employer, was boasting about his good secretary. "She's a clipper, Mrs. Matthews!" he said. Business was dreary, purposeless, almost unendurable; and yet there was a bleak, sharp, half wicked satisfaction that Cora felt in tearing off the work and proving her easy efficiency, after all that had happened to her.

Here, in the office, she was simply Mrs. Matthews. "She had some kind of trouble with her husband," the others said. But her ability, and a dark withdrawnness in her eyes, made her interesting to all of them. The girls in the office regarded her with a romantic respect, because they thought she had "a history"; and the men were both admiring and speculative concerning the good-looking widow. How funny!—that all the torture and humiliation should have an aftermath like this! Cora wanted to break into wildly ironic laughter.

Well, let them admire her, the little fools! And, regally, she kept aloof from the curious girls. Half perversely, she went up to Miss Gersten, the stenographer on the retail floor, who was putting on her hat at the long, dingy mirror.

“Are you leaving now?”

Miss Gersten looked around, startled and flattered.

“Oh, yes, I’m ready.”

She was not quite easy with Mrs. Matthews. She admired her, too—she *was* good-looking—but she wondered if Mrs. Matthews wasn’t little too free with the men? Miss Gersten was thin, rather tall, with a long throat in which the cords showed too plainly, a small chin, a wide childish mouth, and large blue eyes. There was something pretty about her, or would have been, except for a tightly drawn, colorless, nervous look that was almost haggard. Beside Cora, she was pale and spinsterish in the chill of her virginity; and although she chattered nervously about business, she sat up stiffly with her hands clasped about her packages. Cora felt a cynical pity for her. Her large pale blue eyes followed every movement of Pat Griffin, the silver-tongued salesman, whenever he came to the office. She laughed quickly and nervously when he spoke to her, and Cora could see that she treasured every detail of her moments with him. He paid her an idle, patronizing attention, with his eyes stealthily on Cora, who got a dreary amusement out of seeming to be aware of and then completely ignoring him. Miss Gersten regarded Cora with nervous suspicion, making pitifully too much out of what to Cora was worth nothing. Well, her marriage, reckless failure that it was, had at least given her this advantage over the starved and thin!

Miss Gersten left the car at the corner of Bluff Street, and Cora saw her turn down a side street that had shady trees and small frame houses, with here and there a narrow-windowed old brick house among them. Living on such a street made Miss Gersten’s tall figure, in the summer dress that fit just a little too closely in a prim way, more pathetic to Cora. She pictured Miss Gersten with a frail old mother, as prim and thin as herself, and they living with careful frugality in one of these small houses. . . . But the street was so cool, quiet, almost dark with shade that lay thickly patterned across the asphalt. This aging girl might be pathetic, but she was unspoiled. Her little face, with the wide mouth and small chin and the nervous, large blue eyes, was untouched, ingenuous. She could get more significance out of the foolish and meaningless things Pat Griffin said to her than it seemed to Cora she herself could find in the whole world. The craving was gone from Cora, and the inner core of her mind was an ashy barrenness.

Oh, of course, there were other men in the world. There was Ed Nagel, her brother-in-law. Whenever she thought of Ed, Cora felt a thrill of hard respect. And there was Tommy Redding, and his remembered sweetness.

But she could not free her thought of men from her own experience, in a mingled contempt and cynicism that was directed half against herself. She knew that she was warped and unjust. But she could not help it—did not want to help it.

The house looked shabby. Cora felt as if the old weight, so much heavier than ever before, was settling down upon her shoulders. She was not ready. She often lay awake at night in a tight fever of nervousness. The family drew breaths of relief and turned to their own interests once more, because Cora was “getting over it” and was safely settled in business again. Her mother had gone to visit Ed and Rosie; Sophie and Dave went about their own pursuits; and Clarence had left for California to seek his fortune. Cora was the center of the household again. They did not know how precarious her composure, her faintly and reluctantly awakened energy, were. At any moment, she might give it up—give up everything. . . .

“Oh, here you are!” Aunt Soph said. She was just bringing Josephine in her little carriage out to the porch. “This little scamp’s been giving me no peace.” Aunt Soph noticed that Cora looked somber and tired. “Why don’t you wheel her over to the park for an hour or so? And then I’ll have dinner ready.”

“All right,” Cora assented drearily.

Josephine began to prance with delight, stiffening her little legs in their ribbed white stockings and bracing her feet against the bottom of the carriage. She was strong. The Fosters had sent her this pretty little cushion. Mrs. Foster had embroidered it herself. They refused to let go their interest in Cora and the baby, and Cora had accepted it at last, with all that went with it.

The little park, a few blocks from the Schwietert house, was vivid with green grass and summer flowers. Josephine squealed and held out her hands toward the flashing rainbow spray of the big sprinkler.

“Would baby like to have that?” Cora asked, idly. She smiled a little. All the other women—mother, Aunt Soph, Mrs. Rawlins—exclaimed over how soon Josephine had begun to notice things. Was she really more clever than other babies? Well, maybe she was! Cora, who derided this belief, was ironically amused to realize that she cherished it herself.

She spread out the baby’s blanket, half in the shade, half in the sun, and laid Josephine upon it. She herself sat down on one of the green painted benches near some tall lilac bushes that made the narrow path, and the

trampled earth around the tall garbage can, black and damp-smelling, and that gave them a small mournfulness. The tall cannas flared deep scarlet in the round bed bordered with short blue flowers. Cora watched her baby. Now that mother was away, Cora spent more time with Josephine. People thought her very undemonstrative. “No, Cora doesn’t pay much attention to the baby.” But when she was alone with Josephine, like this, she talked to her in a voice low and half ashamed. “She knows her mother a *little* bit, doesn’t she?” She leaned forward, smoothed out the baby’s fine hair, and pulled her dress straight. She had seen the dearest little dresses in town—she wanted to get one of them for this child.

“You have some one to take care of you! Yes, you have.”

She said it in a low, fierce whisper.

She thought about Sister Mary Josepha. Once or twice she had gone into the big Catholic church on Eighth Street for a few minutes at noon. The Gothic doors pulled back stealthily. The floor was cool, a little dusty water was in the stone basin of the font. The lofty room was quiet except for the slow, deadened steps of a woman leaving and the loud echoing noise when a foot struck the prayer bench. Gilt and brown wood, the white lace of the altar cloths, the ruby light silently flickering near the altar. . . . Cora sat hunched over, too self-conscious to get down on her knees. She waited with a dim, quivering expectation . . . she would feel something, some inner sense. . . . But she could not. Her mind remained aloof from it, impatient and scoffing, while she tried to hypnotize herself with the flickering light and the hush. Now that she was well and back at work, the feeling of this as a refuge had seemed to wither under the daylight. Even Sister Mary Josepha, doubtless, was not so wonderful as Cora had imagined her. There had been nothing personal about her kindness, there was even a coldness in it. She stood apart. If Cora went back, well and no longer a patient, she would be a stranger to the nun’s cold blue eyes. Her feeling for the church had been born of her weakness, of the air by turns languorous and intoxicating, of the movement of the cottonwood trees, and the faint, stealthy chink of the rosary.

She could not lie back in silent acceptance. She had worked too hard and too long. She must *do* something. Her strength, even through her tiredness, restlessly craved activity. When she had sunk down into happiness, it had betrayed her. She dared not look to any one but herself again.

Sitting here, idly watching the baby clutching at the grass blades, and the cannas flaring in the late sunlight, Cora slipped back into memory. The

thought of her marriage was still too close to be relived, too painful and too sweet. Her mind stopped at that. But she could not help a wondering remembrance of herself—a stranger, with a queer theatrical unreality—moving about her pretty rooms in the apartment in Denver. Her face was set in a painful absorption; her eyes were dark and remote. The shouts of the children in the playground seemed distant and thin.

She was free of Gerald at last—she thought she was free. Her nervous breakdown, and the deadness that followed, had freed her. He had died out of her heart. If she should look up and see him coming through the shade interspersed so brightly with sunlight, past the scarlet cannas, she would not want the gay flash of his smile and of his gray eyes, so queerly set, that had always stirred uneasiness in her. The light touch of his fingers could no longer make her tremble. She could hold herself aloof and look calmly at him; and she no longer must live through that interminable dream in which he came back to her with some impossibly righteous explanation that gave him back to her again. There was only one thing that could touch her. She moved her head a little to get away from her comprehension and her pity . . . those foolish excuses, flimsy and incredible, the evasions that grew out of his uneasy and humiliating knowledge that he could not live up to her . . . but she fell back with a bitter rejoicing upon the hardness that necessity had long ago bred in her.

Her eyes grew more remote and her thoughts went deeper. She did not see Josephine or the cannas any more. She was thinking of Warwick, and the very beginning of her girlhood there. She remembered the blue eyes and full lips of a boy named Eddie Vansickle. She felt a queer return of that thrill of wild delight when she passed his desk in school. She had torn herself away from that, but it had waited, demanding her . . . and now it seemed to her that the madness of her marriage with Gerald had been a late, wild grasping after that forfeited delight, and that she had taken up the life that had been broken off when she left Warwick.

Nothing but that, after all. She wondered if that could be true. It eased her bitterness toward Gerald, but made her feel her smallness in the huge and almost incomprehensible midst of existence. It eased her pride, and yet left her no pride at all . . . only that nothing stopped with what it was. She could not snatch the mere delight—she had to try to build it into stability. Perhaps she should not have married Gerald at all—only . . . but, fool that she was, she would not be content with that.

When she looked off toward the sunlight, she thought of Evelyn, of her bright hair, and that flying eagerness she had. Mr. and Mrs. Starr, from

Warwick, had come out to Onawa again, and they had called upon the Schwieterts, most affably, this time. They had told about the Andersons. Evelyn's children were living now with their grandparents. Neither of them, Mrs. Starr said, looked like Evelyn. The little girl had straight coal-black hair. Mrs. Anderson was making both of the children take piano lessons, and they detested it. And then, after Mr. Starr had gone out with Aunt Soph to inspect the garden, Mrs. Starr went on, in a compassionate but highly interested whisper. . . . It was too bad. Everybody felt so sorry for the Andersons. They were just wrapped up in those children. But it was said, now, that Harry was interested in the nurse who had taken care of Evelyn, and Mrs. Starr thought that it was true. They were afraid that if he married he would want the children, and it would kill Mrs. Anderson to have them taken away from her. Yes, it was true, Cora supposed! It fit into her hard bitter scheme of the universe and gave her a cruel satisfaction. . . . She had an aching remembrance of Evelyn, running lightly down a hill slope under a spring sky—and when she looked out toward the low sunlight, and the flashing spray, a vision of Evelyn's bright hair dazzled her eyes with a shining pain. They had come to the same thing: her own bitter struggle through peril and necessity, and Evelyn's eager and trustful security.

Except that she was the one who was left. A flush of shame went through Cora as she realized that she felt a kind of sympathy for Harry. She knew that her own vitality was left in her and that it would not let her alone. Something must come of it. She didn't know what. She got up impatiently. She didn't want to know, or even to think. She was contemptuous of herself . . . like a murdered hero on the stage who rises to come back for a curtain call! And the next moment, in a revulsion of bitter disgust, it seemed to her impossible that she could have felt like that for a moment.

She was sick of the park.

“Come, Josephine. We have to go home now.”

The baby wailed, and clutched at the blanket with both little hands. Cora picked her up firmly and set her in her carriage.

“Yes, we have to go.”

As they moved into a patch of bright sunlight, she had a sudden clear sight of the beauty of her baby's gray eyes in their black lashes and skin as fine and frosty-textured as a flower below the dark-tipped golden hair. Oh, yes, she supposed that would follow too! After all, she would have to live for her child!

Cora had gradually got back into something like her old life again. Since she had been pushed into business, she had lost her first morbid hatred of seeing people and had developed a cold hardness that, only a protection at first, was becoming second nature. Sometimes she felt as if the old pain were gone, and had left only a bright smooth crust over deep scars. The city was large enough so that her history need not be definitely known to every one. And having a "history" did give her a romantic value, she often ironically perceived. Of course, there was still the flick of humiliation that came with the perception of Dave's attitude of consciously indulgent kindness toward her, in place of his old uncomfortable respect, and with the possessive intimacy of Mrs. Rawlins. But her employer used a special gallantry toward her since he had learned of her desertion by a good-for-nothing husband. "Such a bright little woman!" he fondly, if rather incongruously, called her; and his attitude amused Cora, and touched her a little, too. Mr. Rugg was a kindly old fellow. The office had been a refuge. It was out of the way of the regular business, the big and booming business, of the city. She had no fear of meeting Mr. Dutton there. Mr. Dutton was the one person whom Cora feared and dreaded. There was something personal and fretful about him. He would never forgive her desertion of him. She could not face him until she had done better for herself than she could ever have done in his office.

The trouble was that her work came too easily now. She felt restive, and yet without ambition to put out her energy and find something better. But she was not done for, after all, she was beginning to feel; in fact, she could work more easily than she had ever done—perhaps because it meant less to her now.

It had been impossible to avoid her friends forever. Dr. Wallace was the one who had sought her out. She and Miss Bridge had both insisted that Cora come back into the club, but Cora had refused, both out of dislike for facing those women after her catastrophe, and out of an ironic sense that being merely Mr. Rugg's secretary gave her no right to belong. She did consent, however, on one of her Saturday afternoons, to go to see the two women and that house of theirs of which she had heard so much.

It was lovely, too—a rambling old brick house, with a big garden, on the outskirts of the city. It had been remodeled, but without spoiling its character. Miss Bridge, as the librarian, was no longer wealthy, but Dr. Wallace—besides having money to start with—had done well in her profession. She was the one, Cora could see, who had done most of the

planning and most of the work, who drove the car and looked after the garden. Miss Bridge had supplied some of the fine old furniture and dishes from her own home, which had been one of the old homes of the city. Down on Grant Street—Cora remembered it, a tall, yellow brick house with narrow, arched windows and a square wooden porch painted brown, a brick walk under heavy vines leading out to the yellow and brown carriage house. But evidently the doctor was the real proprietor here. It amused Cora to see how Miss Bridge, on the other hand, played the part of hostess. The relationship between the two women exaggerated the feminine in one and the masculine in the other. Miss Bridge clung to Dr. Wallace and was unnecessarily helpless—for she was thoroughly efficient, and not plaintive at all, in her post in the library; and the doctor strode about and was downright and protective. But neither was the doctor, in her own right, masculine. Indeed, she was amusingly absorbed in her house and her furniture and her luscious cookery. Her love of children was wholly feminine and maternal—any child, dirty little brats, Cora thought, whom she herself would not willingly have touched.

Now, as they walked about the garden, the fat little doctor puffed and leaned companionably on Cora's arm. Miss Bridge followed them with the other guest, a Mrs. Graettinger, and a great friend, evidently, of the doctor's. Cora had heard of this Mrs. Graettinger and was interested in seeing her. She was a youngish matron, often mentioned as having done this or that, in the Sunday *Examiner*. Viewed at close range, like this, she seemed quite different than in the photographs that appeared frequently in the society page, and that Aunt Soph and Mrs. Schwietert always studied with an apparently irrelevant interest—thin and slightly haggard, but good-looking in an odd, smart way. She wore her hair parted and straight and pulled over her ears, and she had a sallow, piquant face with very large gray eyes and spectacular, curling lashes. Her upper lip was long, thin, and curved, with the corners deeply dented. Cora could scarcely keep her eyes from the odd attraction of that face. All the while that she walked on with Dr. Wallace, being informed about the garden, she was aware of Mrs. Graettinger just behind her, in her queer, straight, tight dress of dark blue and red, with her long rope of big red beads. It was lovely out here, so quiet, so removed from the city, the summer flowers blazing in color under the bright hot sky, the water cool and bright and shallow in the little round lily basin that was fed from an old spring with an ingenious pipe device of which the doctor was tremendously proud. Mrs. Graettinger, lounging idly, almost silently, in the background, with a queer angular grace, added a certain sharp distinction to the small afternoon gathering of women.

Dr. Wallace was very attentive to Cora, and Mrs. Graettinger quite inattentive. Cora felt secret gratitude for the attention and secret interest at the easy inattention.

“Oh, your zinnias!” she exclaimed.

She broke away from the doctor and went over to the zinnias, turning to look back at the others with a dark-eyed glance of glowing delight. The arid tightness of her feeling suddenly gave way and was overflowed with a rush of warmth. For the first time since she had come back to Onawa from Denver, she felt the inward stir of her old, deep, silent enjoyment. The zinnias grew in a thick hedge; and their hairy stems, their broad strong leaves, their massed burning colors, gathered up all the delight of the past half hour of sunny wandering in the garden and seemed to offer it, visibly, tangibly, to Cora. She brushed her hand quickly over the stiff flower heads, taking into her heart all the colors, from deep flaming orange and thick scarlet to the queer, old-fashioned, faded tints of yellow and puce and pink. . . .

Dr. Wallace came up panting.

“Well, I’m glad you like the ‘zinnies’! Ethel won’t appreciate them.”

“I think they’re so stiff,” Miss Bridge protested. “They have such coarse colors.”

“Oh, not this one!” Cora cried. She touched a lovely, faded rose. But anyway, to call orange and scarlet “coarse”—colors that held the fierce heat of joy at noon. . . .

“I don’t like their leaves.”

Mrs. Graettinger stood close by, smiling slightly, and it seemed to Cora, ironically.

“Pick some,” the doctor urged.

Cora chose, with firm restraint, one of orange and one of yellow and one of deep, rich red.

“Oh, take some more! Why so modest, young woman? Here, we’ll take some in with us, to grace the board.” The doctor planted her fat little legs solidly and bent over, with a grunt, to make a business of gathering a bouquet of the zinnias.

Cora wandered slowly toward the house with Mrs. Graettinger. Miss Bridge had gone in ahead of them to see to the tea. The garden was

patterned all over with shadows of leaves. The shallow water in the pool, among the smooth green lily pads, had trembling spots of brightness and of darkness. Cora looked over at the grapevines and saw among the leaves the tight, perfect clusters of unripe grapes, their clear pale green just tinged with purple. Beyond, at the end of the flagged path, the screened porch opened to them a recess of cool shade, and beyond that recess the door was open into the quiet, darkened house. Once more, Cora felt the stir of that enjoyment; a faint sense of freshness that was like the smell of new rain upon the gray dust. She felt as she used to feel long ago, in Warwick, when little fresh drops pattered down and made spots of darkness in the burning, pale, dusty road, and she and Sophie could run out with their bare feet. . . .

It was a miracle. It was life coming back to her. Why had it come today? . . . She raised the three zinnias and brushed their stiff petals across her lips and chin.

“They’re your flowers,” Mrs. Graettinger said approvingly. “You can live up to them.”

Her eyebrows, fine and eccentrically curved, were lifted in her perpetual ironic amusement, as she turned her little face toward Cora. But she was approving. The social gulf between them was suddenly bridged by a spontaneous mutual liking and approval.

“I love this place,” was all that Cora said.

They crossed the stone doorstep, white in the sun, into the porch, and threaded a neat way among the low chairs in flowered covers, into the living room.

The big, high-ceiled room was shaded and cool, charming with its low dark gleam of old furniture, with the subdued colors of the cushions and the draperies, the silver and the thin china on the shining tea table. Cora sank, obedient to Miss Bridge’s careful command, into an old chair upholstered in tufted satin that was faded almost to the tint of the pinkish zinnias and delicately threaded over with silver. This, then, this pleasant and luxuriously appointed way, was how these women lived at home! The voices of the other two women were intimate and low, and she heard them as in a dream.

“I wonder if I should have had the tea iced? Doctor doesn’t care for it, though.”

“Oh, no, the hot tea will taste good in here, you keep the place so miraculously cool.”

Cora felt, with hot intensity, the pleasure in the elegance and intimacy of these feminine gatherings, which she had never known, never since Evelyn and Bessie and the girls used to give afternoon parties in Warwick. Well, she thought defiantly, and with a dull twinge of old pain, there was something left, something that she could enjoy, something with which Gerald had nothing to do. It seemed to her, with a sense of not unhappy envy pressing, that it was worth while to have worked, as the little doctor had worked, and to have got for herself this beautiful home, the loveliness, the space, the freedom, remote and apart from the rest of the world. What affection the two women needed, they found in the relationship with each other, better, more material and actual, than Sister Mary Josepha's impersonal kindness; but free, too, from the pain and the heat and the bewilderment of the things that beset men and women.

The doctor had come in panting with her huge bouquet of zinnias. "There's a bunch for you!" she cried, naïvely proud; and—"Ethie, my girl, these stay in here. I've found some one to appreciate them."

"What nice effects you can get with them!" Mrs. Graettinger commented, idly.

She lounged, with her queer grace, in a corner of the davenport, watching the doctor arrange the zinnias in a dull green bowl. Her thin, silken ankles were crossed, the buckles on her narrow, dull kid slippers glistened.

"Can't you? How does that suit you, lady?" The doctor stood back and surveyed her work with satisfaction. "Well, Eth," she said with mock compassion, "I picked these larkspurs as an offering to you." She laid a few sprays of pale blue larkspur on the table. "There are Ethel's flowers."

"Yes, they really are," Mrs. Graettinger observed, idly, but with an effect of compliment.

Miss Bridge was slender; there was a pale charm about her ladylike hands with their old rings and the dull fleecy gold of her faded hair. Her eyes were blue, but paler than the larkspur.

"Give me another sandwich, docky," Mrs. Graettinger added. "I require it."

"What's the matter with you?" the doctor demanded, humorously.

She had strict rules for living, and, in fact, had drawn up a hygienic chart that was published by the Health Department. But in private, in her own house, she relished stuffing her guests with her remarkably good cooking.

She had a weakness for chocolates, too, and kept fat ones in a pretty compote of dull blue glass.

“Oh, I loathe you. You’re too fat and contented,” Mrs. Graettinger said, with envious disdain.

The doctor laughed richly. “You eat what I tell you, and quit drinking so much coffee, and you’ll get some meat on your bones, too, Marianna!”

“Don’t talk to me about food, gourmand! She’s infinitely worse than I am, Mrs. Matthews. She consumes riches inordinately. I follow her health chart to the letter.”

The doctor laughed again.

“That health chart’s all right, though,” she added, with professional seriousness.

Miss Bridge leaned forward. “Let me give you more tea,” she said to Cora. Her voice had a note of reserve in it.

“Oh, thanks.”

Miss Bridge looked graceful and accustomed at the little table. But Cora could see that the easy comradeship and admiration between the doctor and Marian Graettinger was unpleasant to her. She was a third, then, and rather pathetic—or would have been pathetic, if her vaguely injured tone, and her head held with a slightly martyred stiffness, had not irritated Cora. Even this feminine household did not run with perfect smoothness. Miss Bridge gave herself a great deal of occupation with the tea things, and did not join in conversation with the others.

Neither did Cora. But then, Cora never did much talking. She sat, with that dark glow of pleasure in her eyes, looking at Mrs. Graettinger when it was not too obvious that she was doing so, warm with the charm of the place and the hour . . . with the lawn outside both bright and shadowed, the water clear in its round basin, the grapes cool and perfect among their leaves, and the colors of the zinnias hot in the sun.

The conversation consisted almost entirely of good-humored accusation and retort.

“You need something to do, Marian, besides running to bridge parties.”

“Docky, you forget that I’m a golfing lady.”

“No, I don’t. That’s all right, too.”

“And that I flirt.”

“Yes, I know it! But it makes me cross to see a good brain going to waste.”

“Isn’t she *candid*, Mrs. Matthews?”

Cora smiled with reserve. She remembered gossip about Rudy Graettinger. She had seen him once, in the office with Mr. Dutton—a big, ruddy-faced, slightly pop-eyed man, sportily dressed, with hair shiningly brushed, a significant look for every good-looking woman. Cora wondered about his relations with his wife, and thought her experience gave her the meaning of that long, ironical curve of Mrs. Graettinger’s lip.

“How went the dance?”

“Like all the others.”

“Which dress did you buy? The red or that vile green?”

“The vile green, as you so flatteringly describe it.”

“Shouldn’t think you’d look well in green.”

“She *is* candid!” Mrs. Graettinger, with eyebrows raised, observed to the room at large. “I didn’t. I also looked vile.” She reached over her beaded bag and took out a cigarette case.

“Smoke, Mrs. Matthews?” she murmured. She lighted a cigarette and puffed slowly and thoughtfully. Miss Bridge took on an expression of tight-lipped distaste. Cora refused, not wanting to show herself awkward and a novice. Mrs. Graettinger slowly withdrew the case and blew soft, widening rings.

She laughed.

“Mrs. *Greening*, in her lo! these considerable years, not to mention virtues, has learned to smoke! Some idea of rejuvenation, I judge—a gesture that says she is not past a naughty trick or two. I love to see her get the smoke in her eyes. She’s so determined to ignore the tears and smiles through them like a heroine!”

“What a mean thing you are, Marian!” the doctor commented.

“I?”

“Yes, you. To other women.”

“*Only* when I dislike them, docky.”

“Yes, but you dislike most of ’em, seems to me.”

“Most of the Onawa four hundred, as the *Examiner* so charmingly calls them, are to be disliked.”

“Guess there’s truth in that!”

“Really, I’m not nasty, Mrs. Matthews,” Mrs. Graettinger said, making big candid eyes at Cora.

She talked to the doctor now about her son, who was at boarding school. Cora was necessarily silent, but she did not feel excluded. Mrs. Graettinger’s manner to her was distinctly approving, and when she went to the bedroom for her hat, she heard Mrs. Graettinger murmur to the doctor, idly, but with interest:

“Who *is* Mrs. Matthews?”

Evidently the doctor had made a little confidence, for there was another murmured and interested:

“Indeed!”

Miss Bridge sat at the tea table, looking silently and nobly distressed, and now and then passing her fingers, with obvious unobtrusiveness, across her forehead. Cora felt a sudden, vigorous distaste. The attitude so evident on the part of Miss Bridge spoiled the idyllic peace of the house. It gave a thinness and pallor to the lives of the two women, something vaguely unnatural. The doctor was all right, because of her downrightness, and her many interests; but Miss Bridge was too dependent upon her. They were like man and woman together, after all, and with the natural zest left out.

No, Cora thought, with a fiercely direct look at her face in the wide mirror, it wouldn’t do. Mrs. Graettinger’s “Indeed!” had brought back a resentful twinge of the old bitter pain. But now, she thought she accepted it. It was not so much worse, after all, than the things that happened to other people; and the rapture of those reckless hours in the Yellowstone, the brief, high happiness of the time in Denver—even the desolation, the time in the hospital, her disillusion—had added a ripeness to her. Beside Miss Bridge, thin and distressed, with her faded hair and her little hands, she felt herself a woman.

The doctor and Mrs. Graettinger came into the bedroom.

“Let me drive you home,” Mrs. Graettinger said.

Cora demurred, but she insisted; and Cora waited while she put on her large summer hat with the oddly curved brim. Between her and Cora, there was a kind of freemasonry of experience, and already a different intimacy than with the two other women, long as Mrs. Graettinger had known them. They sensed a likeness, through all the unlikeness, that pleased and intrigued them both.

As they drove home, Mrs. Graettinger handling her coupé easily, almost carelessly it seemed, Mrs. Graettinger broke suddenly into confidence.

“Do you know, I *am* a lazy thing. But I often want to go into business. I really have my moments of energy. A friend of mine in New York has a specialty shop for children. Do you think that’s a good thing?”

“I!”

“Why, yes, you’ve been in business. You’re good, too. I can see that.”

“Only——”

“What only?”

“Well, women who haven’t earned money don’t buy wisely, as a rule.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Yes, that’s the truth. Yes, I suppose I’d make a mess of it. Like the millionaire Folly Farms! . . . Do you like what you’re doing?” she demanded, suddenly.

“Not very well. It’s tiresome. Too easy.”

Mrs. Graettinger surveyed her with large bright eyes from which the lashes curled dramatically.

“Why stick at it then? You could do anything.”

“Oh, no!” Cora thought angrily of the long struggle of her life, which Mrs. Graettinger couldn’t comprehend. But she felt a sense of ease, a sense of having come to the surface, and it exhilarated her. She blurted, with a sudden cynical frankness, “I lost my decent job, because I thought it necessary to marry a certain man.”

Mrs. Graettinger, looking ahead at the road, accepted that, and murmured lightly, “Thus it goes!”

All of Cora’s tensity had loosened into relief.

The frame houses on her own street looked narrow and small. But it was where she lived. She made no pretenses with Mrs. Graettinger. She would make them with no one in the world.

“This house,” she said.

Mrs. Graettinger stopped. She murmured—and meant it—taking Cora’s hand:

“Let me call you some day when I’m going to lunch in town with the doctor.”

Cora thanked her. She was surprised. But there was no patronage about it. Mrs. Graettinger was abrupt and frank.

Josephine, in her little yellow rompers, was leaning with both hands against the screened door in the hall.

“Oh, is she yours? Lovely! I adore little girls with black hair. My boy’s at school. I’d love to have a girl.”

“I’d like to have a boy,” Cora told her with bitter emphasis.

“Oh, but it’s so interesting to see how a girl is going to turn out! Now, I know how Rolfe’s going to turn out. He’s obvious.”

She nodded her head for good-bye, and drove off with careless experience.

The neighbors watched the car curiously, as Cora, listening to Josephine’s excited greeting, went slowly into the house.

“Yes, but probably she’ll forget,” Cora thought, with a protective cynicism.

Yet she felt elated, restless, half irritated, still with the heightened social feeling of the room and the flowers, the tea and talk and cigarettes. Yes, material things *were* something in themselves. That old sense had returned to her, but heightened. And the new sense of widening ease was still with her. Well, look at Mrs. Graettinger—Rudy Graettinger’s wife!—hadn’t she gone through something, too? There were other possibilities of enjoyment, and other companionships, even if she had seemed once to lose everything.

Josephine was still crying, “Mommy, mommy!”

Cora looked down at her. She was so pretty in her yellow dress. Cora wanted things for her—things and things. In a heat of possession, she picked up the plump little body—and then, not letting it get too close to her own, holding it away, said, with careful coolness:

“Well, you’re not so bad!”

Chapter V

1

Cora waited impatiently for the car to stop. She was going out to dinner, and was in a hurry tonight. “Why don’t you leave early, if you want to?” Sophie always demanded. Her mother and Aunt Soph agreed. Certainly Cora had worked hard enough for that shop, and it was doing so well. All the Schwietert family firmly believed that the success of the shop was due entirely to Cora. They admired Marian, and were grateful to her, but they gave her credit for none of that. She was a society woman, they thought, and what would she have known about business if she hadn’t had Cora to help her? They couldn’t understand why Marian should be able to run about wherever she pleased, while Cora stuck grimly to her work. It was Marian who owned the business. She had put in the capital. Cora had contributed only her experience, her work, and her brains. That was how, coldly, Cora looked at it. Marian called her a partner, but Cora considered herself a kind of superior employee who was yet responsible for the success of the business.

Josephine was playing with one of her little neighbors. She came running.

“Mother, mother!”

She caught Cora’s hand and danced along beside her, tossing her head a little when she passed her mute, wide-eyed playmate. *She* had the prettiest mother. Janey’s mother just wore house dresses, and didn’t wave her hair. Josy’s mother was always dressed up! Josephine boasted of this, and of her mother’s shop that was full of lovely dresses, too expensive for the children on *this* street to buy. But she wept, hurt and yet not understanding, when sometimes the others retorted—that mean Howard Chippendale:

“Yeah, where’s your father, though?”

Josephine went as far as the steps, partly because it was an event each day when her mother came home, and partly to show off before Janey. Then she turned and went dancing off across the grass to take up her game again. It was a game with different kinds of flowers. She and Janey were playing that the big dahlia blossoms were men, and the petunias were ladies, and the little tiny marguerites were little girls in white dresses trimmed with gold. The dandelions were boys, and just now they were being spanked with grass

blades whenever they came near the flower house under the lilac bush, because Josephine and Janey were “mad” at Howard Chippendale.

Cora opened the screened door.

“Hello, there!” Aunt Soph called.

“Oh, you’re home, dear,” said her mother.

They were proud of Cora. She had come out of it, they thought, so splendidly, and had done so well with this business about which the whole family had been most dubious—not trusting “these society women.” Aunt Soph took an ingenuous pride, for Cora’s sake, in the fact that the shop drew what she called “high-up trade” and catered to the people with money. It seemed to justify her pride in her favorite niece, and her old staunch conviction, not really given up even during that reckless and disastrous marriage, that Cora was going to make something of herself. “Well, what customers did you have today?” she liked to ask. She enjoyed writing the relatives back in Ohio that Cora was in partnership with one of the wealthiest women in Onawa. This always amused Cora, though, because Aunt Soph, where she herself was concerned, would as soon talk to one person as another, and was a great friend of the iceman.

“What’d you bring home?” Aunt Soph demanded with interest. She loved seeing what was in the shop. It was just the kind of business she wished she could have had for herself, she always said.

“I brought a little dress for Josephine.”

“Let’s have a look at it.”

“All right. Call Josy, won’t you, Aunt Soph? I want her to try it on.”

“Oh, that’s lovely!” Mrs. Schwietert exclaimed. She held up the little yellow frock and fingered the appliqué. “What pretty things they have for children now! When I think of how I used to make those dresses for you girls, with the waists and skirts, and all the tucking and shirring . . .!”

“I don’t know that it’s what I want for her, though.”

Josephine, at first, did not want to come in. They were just getting the little daisy girls ready for Sunday School.

“Oh, you let them wait a while,” Aunt Soph was telling her. “Your Sunday School won’t run away. You come in and see what your mother brought home from the store for you.”

“I guess she brought me a new dress! Well, you go on getting the children ready, Janey,” Josephine ordered. “Because, you know, the first bell’s already rung.”

She was too restless to stand still while the dress was being fitted.

She demanded, “Is this my new frock?” Cora smiled. She had got that word from Marian. But Cora liked to have her use it.

“Isn’t it nice?” said Aunt Soph.

“Yes, it’s nice,” she agreed, with airy condescension.

Cora, sitting back on her heels and giving a little tug at the yellow dress, was not satisfied.

“I don’t know whether I like it,” she said.

“Why, Cora, I don’t see how you could find one any nicer!”

“I don’t think it’s the right shade of yellow for her. She ought to have more of an orange.”

“Isn’t this going to be my dress?” Josephine begged. And her face began to pucker, although largely as a matter of duty.

“No, mother’s going to have some others in soon. We’ll find one that will suit you better.”

Josephine’s face smoothed out immediately. She had the most sublime faith that the shop could supply any number of dresses for her. Mother would bring something else home. She danced with impatience while Aunt Soph took off the yellow dress and buttoned her pink one for her. Her dresses were such a source of admiration in the neighborhood that she was scarcely proud of them. The moment that she could slip from Aunt Soph’s hands, she was out of the screened door and crying:

“Here I come back! Mother’s going to get me a better shade of yellow! More of an orange. Oh, now, let’s hurry, Janey, because our family’s always being late. . . . Now, Harold, you don’t get to go to Sunday school, you’ve been too *wicked* a boy.”

“Well, she isn’t a bit vain,” her grandmother remarked proudly. “Not many children would give up a new dress like that.”

“They’re an old story to her,” Cora observed.

But she meant to dress Josephine well. Her maternal instinct seemed to have turned into an intense ambition to provide well for her child. She

would not let the child feel the lack of a father. Cora would do all for her that any man could. She should have as much as any little girl in the city. Josephine accepted this as a matter of course. It was to her grandmother and Aunt Soph that she turned for consolation, petting, and protection—and for bread and butter and sugar.

Cora folded up the dress carefully and tied up the package.

“Well, I must hasten,” she said.

“Where are you going?”

“Oh!” she laughed. “Out to dinner with Mr. Henry.”

“With *him* again?” Aunt Soph demanded. “Thought you were never going out with him again!”

“Oh, I like to see how big a fool he can be. He offered me a platinum wrist watch last time. Don’t know what I might get, this.”

“Well, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Cora Schwietert, if you take anything from that old fool!”

Cora laughed again.

“Why, Aunt Soph! One of the most respected citizens of our great city, who gets his picture in the paper!”

“Well, he oughtn’t to be respected. Running around with other women while his wife’s in California!”

“If you can call her his wife! She isn’t exactly dutiful.”

“And it’s not a very nice way for you, either, Cora Schwietert, running around with that old duffer and letting him buy you things——”

“Oh, I refused the wrist watch!”

“Well, letting him spend a lot of money on you, anyway. When you don’t care a rap for him. At least, I hope you don’t.” Aunt Soph gave her a sharp glance, that made Cora laugh again. “It’s not as smart as you think it is.”

“Oh, but how do you know I don’t care for him, Aunt Soph?”

Cora escaped and ran upstairs. She enjoyed these scoldings from Aunt Soph, and considered that they were good enough for her. They never made her stop this game that she had developed so skilfully the last few years; but perhaps they checked her. Aunt Soph’s goodness, her sturdy bluntness. It

was different when, once in a while, her mother spoke to her. Then Cora's mocking amusement dropped. She felt hurt and ashamed, like a little girl. Perhaps she was "not so smart." . . .

She knew that her mother and Aunt Soph thought that she had caught this careless, sophisticated attitude from Marian. And, perhaps she had, to some extent, as she had learned from Marian to dress to the best advantage. Cora's taste had always been good. But there used to be a certain chaste severity and conventionality in her clothes. She had looked like an extremely well-dressed business woman.

Now, she did not. When she dressed for dinner, as tonight, she looked what Clarence had, half admiringly and half disapprovingly, called her—"a charmer." Marian had taught her that she could wear daring colors.

"Remember that zinnias are your flowers, my dear! The hardy, but gay."

Tonight she put on a red-and-white figured crêpe and large red beads. Her hair was cut and waved. She had learned the use of rouge and lipstick. Her short skirt, silken ankles, and pretty slippers gave her an elusive girlishness. But she was not a girl. She was a full-blown, handsome woman. There were a few white hairs in her black shingle, but she was handsomer now than she had ever been. No longer severe—quite the reverse; yet, all the same, she had lost the warm, glowing bloom and softness that Gerald's love had brought out in her. This was a stunning, high-colored, obvious bloom, and really like that of the red zinnias she had admired.

The room was so full of Josy's things that Cora could scarcely step. It was time Josy was having a room of her own. Besides her little white bed, there was a doll bed in the corner, and a pile of magazines for cutting. If Mr. Walsh would ever take it into his head to die or marry——! Cora wanted that big front bedroom for herself. But he was a fixture. He was almost immortal. His life would be the life of the house itself. He was unchanged, except that he was more precise and shriveled, and added to his ailments from time to time. Perhaps a little room for Josephine might be made in the attic. Cora began to see it, with yellow curtains, painted white furniture. . . .

Even the dresser was crowded with Josy's knickknacks—twenty-five cent dolls in disarray, and minute doll furniture. And she had been up to her old tricks again, taking some of her mother's expensive French toilet water! She promised, but she could not let that bottle alone. The whole dresser top was needed, now, for Cora's array of toilet things.

The toilet water bottle had been pushed back, in Josy's transparent haste, against a photograph of Evelyn. Cora drew it out carefully. It was one of her college photographs, and looked as Evelyn had when she visited in Onawa—slim and eager, with her radiant eyes and her fuzz of fly-away hair; and somehow pathetic, with her slender girl's throat and the little ruffle around what, at that time, had been considered a low-necked gown. Cora held the picture up and looked intently at it. The Evelyn of that age, for long pushed out of her mind and only a dim dream to her—and the tragic Evelyn of later years dimmer still—was suddenly vivid and real again. In all her old eager brightness, she blotted out, for the moment, the bitter resignation that Cora had learned. Cora stared at the photograph with an ache of hunger.

This was her first friend—her own. The satisfaction that she had felt in her companionship with Marian seemed, all at once, superficial and awry. She had been thinking it a better thing—more tempered, more mature—made up of the hard things that last: comprehension, likeness of bitter experience, and material expediency. Oh, and of course, enjoyment too, and real liking, and fascination! Everything, but the inner sweet stir of love. She felt that again, as she stared at the bright eyes and the joyous curve of the girlish lips; but enveloped in an ache of loss.

Because she had lost Evelyn. What was the use of beating back the sense of loss with specious little arguments? Thrusting the thought of Evelyn aside, denying her the loveliness of her quality. . . . She had been scornful of Evelyn's eager trustfulness. The world was not like that! And she had been proud of her own determined hardness that had enabled her to get through a more difficult existence than Evelyn's. She had come through . . . yes, but to this! To what? The strength remained, but the sweetness was gone. Her thoughts went back suddenly, with a frightened craving, to Tommy Redding. That might have been sweetness. Was she never really beyond, then, any part of her past? It was true that the world did not merit Evelyn's naïve trust. But maybe that was the fault of the world.

Still, things were as they were. And she was still alive. The reality of the picture faded out before her staring eyes. Evelyn was only a little girl, with bright hair under a red tam-o'-shanter, running down a hillside under a blue sky in which the April clouds blotted out the April sun. So soon, after all, her radiance and her eagerness were gone. There were left her parents, saddened, dried and aging people, living on in their white house in Warwick, and waiting for visits from the little black-haired girl and black-haired boy who could never be their own.

Cora set back the photograph. What was the use of experiencing that pain? And she had the feeling of having gone a long way and got past her own boundaries. She was vital and warm, and her whole existence seemed, at the moment, full of interest. She felt a cynical amusement regarding Mr. Henry and the others of his tribe. Well, she needed men—why not admit it? But she had been thrown back upon herself and she would not lose herself again. She was not going to give herself away, even to Josy. She wondered sometimes, again, why she had married Gerald at all . . . why she had not snatched that rapture in a single, splendid hour . . . why the rapture must transform itself into the old firm and grounded need of stability. But she couldn't wish she had never had it. At least, she would never be an Ethel Bridge! She had pulled herself through. She could face, and outface, even Mr. Dutton. And she had learned—she thought she had learned—to contemplate whatever might come. Yes, she could even contemplate what they would do if her mother should die in one of her recurrent illnesses. They would take an apartment, get a nurse for Josy, and Aunt Soph could at last have work she liked—as a fitter in the shop. . . . Nevertheless, even at this clear moment of contemplation, blackness loomed up before her. The best and deepest thing left in her life would be gone when her mother was gone . . . the thing that had its roots down in that other, earlier, untouched life of intensity and passion and struggle. . . .

She heard Mr. Henry's car and heard the doorbell ring. But she took her time. When she went downstairs, with a thin red scarf over her shoulders, and her eyes very dark under a large flowered hat, she found him chatting with her mother. Aunt Soph, belligerently, stayed in the kitchen; but Mrs. Schwietert, although she disapproved, showed him her usual mild and dignified courtesy. He was really of the generation of the two older women, although his highly brushed gray-silvery hair and his ruddily massaged face seemed to deny it; but Mrs. Schwietert politely ignored this. He was being extremely attentive to Josephine—always a sign, Cora had discovered, that a man was getting really interested in her. She had a fleeting wonder about his own son and daughter—the daughter married, the son in business with the father. Imagine this not-too-young young man claiming Josy as his new sister!

Mr. Henry rose immediately when she came in.

“Ah! Ready? I haven't hurried you? I've been talking with your mother and this dear little girl.”

Cora smiled amiably.

She was amused by the puzzled questions of her mother and Aunt Soph concerning her elderly swain. Did she really *like* Mr. Henry, they wanted to know? And didn't she know she might get into trouble going about with a married man? A trifle maliciously, she gave them her reasons: his handsome blue car, his money, the flowers he gave her; enjoying their shocked faces, despising herself, and not really knowing how much she meant of what she said. But enough of her old concentrated determination was left so that, no matter what any one on earth thought, she was going to have what fun she could out of the rest of her life. She hadn't been treated so well herself that she need be too scrupulous with other people. . . .

“Shall we go?”

“Oh, certainly, certainly—any time!”

Cora dropped a little kiss on Josephine's smooth black head, caught her effective scarf about her, and gave her mother's hand a squeeze as she passed on the way to the door. Her mother looked at her, not wanting to ask when she was coming home, and Cora did not care to say. Neither of the older women attempted to interfere with her. She had more than regained her old position. But there was a slightly repentant promise in her smile.

Going down the walk in her high-heeled slippers, murmuring something in answer to Mr. Henry, she was thinking, with her old defiance, that—whatever they might think of her—she could take care of the two aging women again.

“Will you take the wheel?” Mr. Henry asked gallantly.

It pleased him to teach Cora to drive his car. He wanted—begged, in fact—to put it at her disposal. She refused, out of careless power. But she liked the feeling of elegance, as she stepped into the darkly shining interior and sat back against the velvet cushions. The summer evening was cool and clear, the city lawns were bright from assiduous sprinkling. She crossed her silken ankles and let her capable hands lie easily in her lap. The feeling of power assuaged an old, bitter ache. Here was a man she might bend to her purpose—a strong, successful man, in the minds of other people; it would be amusing to see to what lengths she could make him go. He hinted that he wanted to divorce his wife and marry her; but Cora had played with the situation to keep it exactly as it stood. It would be fun to tell Marian about this tomorrow—if Marian appeared at the shop; and her success would enable her to tell it in the slightly mocking way that she and Marian used in retailing to each other their experiences with men.

Then, as he started the motor and the car sped smoothly, even while the cool air flowed about her face and bare throat, Cora's enjoyment died away. Why was she going out with him? What assuagement was there in letting an elderly man make a fool of himself? This teaching herself to take things lightly worked both ways. She felt, under the bright surface pleasure, something too arid for any delight. The sense of something dwarfed and twisted was, for a moment, a physical pain. The old stir of genuine delight—that silent, glowing core of joy she used to feel deep within herself—came so seldom. Once in a while she felt a distant quiver of it when Josy leaned against her and fingered her bracelet with soft touches. Would it have been better to have kept that at all costs—to have died if that must be taken away, as Evelyn had died? While Mr. Henry talked to her, and she answered briefly, she was back in her remembrance of Gerald . . . for, after all, the thing was never ended: it had only changed from this to that, within her being. She was thinking of how it might have been if she had actually looked for Gerald, sought him out, given her strength to his weakness, yielded all the purpose of her life to him (like Sophie and Dave, in their despised fashion), and, through all the pain and failure, kept the softness of her love. . . . But she thought of it distantly. People really did get what they were after—only in such queer, unrealized ways, changed and unrecognizable, and, perhaps, at the price of everything else. She did not know that she would really change what she had. . . .

Meanwhile, through her enjoyment of the smooth motion of the car, her evening, with its implications of drama and melodrama, and of boredom even worse, stretched ahead of her.

The neighbors were watching curiously. Janey's mother was on Mrs. Rawlins's porch.

“I think it's funny she goes out with a married man—in her position!”

It hurt to have Janey tell about Josy's mother, what beautiful dresses she wore, what things she gave to Josy. She begged of Janey, “Yes, but you have mama all day to take care of you. Doesn't that count?” The little girl admitted, very kindly and patronizingly, that it did. But the mother could not rid herself of a sore envy.

And then (there were three of the women) they went over Cora's ever interesting history again—the complete disappearance of her husband, the rumor that he had made off with his employers' money, Cora's various jobs, how much the new business brought her in, Mrs. Graettinger, and now “this man.”

“Oh, of course, she’s had a lot to contend with, I know that.”

Mrs. Rawlins, although quite unnoted for tolerance, was the one who stuck up for Cora. Misfortune, and the possibility of patronage at the time, had added a gratifying appeal of human fallibility to her old admiration. It made Cora belong to her. And the long consistent kindness, the neighborliness, of Mrs. Schwietert and Aunt Soph, Mr. Schwietert’s quaint and cheerful sweetness, had had their effect even upon this meager soul. Cora’s friends and associates brought a certain eclat to the neighborhood. And then, it seemed to Mrs. Rawlins, that Cora was one woman who did as she pleased. She bought what she liked and no one had a word to say about it. She could not forget the long timidity in regard to even the tiniest material thing, that Mr. Rawlins’s “closeness” had ground into her being. All in all, Mrs. Rawlins admired in Cora things that she would never have forgiven in another woman.

“Well,” she said with defiance, “she’s got *some-where*, anyway!”

The other women, although they looked slightly reluctant, and had their reservations, did not dissent.

Ruth Suckow is a living answer to those critics who have damned the small town as a place where no artist can flourish. She was born in Hawarden, Iowa, and throughout her childhood moved from parish to parish with her father who was a Congregational minister, thus arriving at a thorough knowledge of her region. After attending Grinnell College and a dramatic school in Boston, she taught for a while at the University of Denver but during her stay in Colorado she learned to keep bees and sell honey which she proceeded to do very profitably at Earlville in Iowa. Her winters she devoted to writing, and soon her early stories were being published by H. L. Mencken in the Smart Set and the editors of other magazines were beating a path to her door. Since then she has written several novels and innumerable short stories all of which have served to place her among the foremost American writers—and it might be pointed out that though at present she lives in New York, and though she has ceased to write exclusively of farming people, she still claims a small town in Iowa as home.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Cora* by Ruth Suckow]