A QUESTION OF TIME

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BY

GERTRUDE FRANKLIN ATHERTON

AUTHOR OF

"WHAT DREAMS MAY COME," "HERMIA SUYDAM," "LOS CERRITOS,"
ETC., ETC.

"O God, we know not yet,
If bliss itself is not young misery,
With fangs swift growing."—GEORGE ELIOT.

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WITH APOLOGIES TO THE SHADE OF
OLIVER MADDOX-BROWN

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A QUESTION OF TIME

I.

She was the youngest woman in the room, and she was forty-six. Neither the word *passée*, nor yet that one of subtler insult, well-preserved, could be applied to her. She was young, as many women of her age are, because trouble had scarcely brushed her in passing, nor the world scorched her with its hot breath; because no illness had come to rift her perfect health, nor ill-placed passion to consume and wither. In a word, she had never lived, and a certain coquetry, too light for discontent, yet strong enough to guard and enhance her beauty, made her still look like a flower half bloomed, then passed by and forgotten of Time.

She rarely failed to take part in the social gatherings of her neighbors, and was never neglected for younger beauties. To-night she was surrounded by several men, and although she said little, and her fascination was not of the Circean order, yet by an unconscious art she was each man's second self as she listened to him. She was not brilliant, but she *understood*; that was her undying charm.

Her loveliness had never shone with a softer radiance. The silken hair of russet browns and gold curled about her oval face and lay in a shining coil at the base of her head. Here and there a silveren hair cut its stern way, but was worn with a grace which made it appear a jewel wrung from Time's unwilling hand. Her skin may not have been as purely white as when she had spoken her marriage vows, twenty-five years before, but the delicate color made it look fresh and fair. Her pink mouth was like a bursting azalea, but there was firmness and decision in the straight nose and finely moulded chin. In her clear blue eyes were little yellow specks: they were like lakes lying calmly above golden sand and covered with a thin layer of ice. Innocence looked out of them, almost ignorance of all worldly knowledge and of self; but a fine intelligence was there also, and at times the dreaming half-sad expression usually seen but in the eyes of young girls. Only a small square of her neck was visible, and her black gown was plain and cut by a master-hand.

"There is Mark Saltonstall," said the youngest of the men about her. "Considering that he is the guest of the evening he is rather late. It is a pity that genius cannot be at its best at an 'evening,' and that we must be content to merely look at him."

“He is ugly,” she said. But she looked again.

“He is not beautiful; certainly not. Even his unique imagination will never delude him that far.”

“He has what Joaquin Miller would call a warm tremendous mouth,” said another.

She gave him a swift smile. “But who is this young man?” she asked. “And why do you call him a genius? Mrs. Hopkins wrote asking me to meet Redfield’s friend, Mr. Mark Saltonstall; but as I only returned yesterday from a visit to my brother I know nothing more.”

“He is just out of college, has just graduated,” said the young man who had first spoken. “He was in my class, or perhaps I should say I was in his, as the rest of us cut a second figure. His speeches, essays, poems, were extraordinary. You felt blinded and dazzled—worst of all, insignificant. Then he published a poem that set all Boston talking. Surely you have read his ‘Restoration of Pindar’s lost Dithyrambics to Bacchus and Pæans to Apollo?’ ”

“Yes,” she said, slowly, “I have read it. It did not occur to me at the moment to connect it with this young man.”

“It was fearfully crude, of course; he made all sorts of breaks. But such instinctive knowledge of form; such vigor without erotism; such scholarship! Above all, such penetrative imagination and freedom from the influence of other writers—for even Pindar’s Remains, you know, give but a pallid suggestion of his greater works. The faculty sent for him personally and complimented him, something they never did before in the course of their didactic lives. I heard afterward that there was a good deal of dispute among them before they did it. Some said that it was nothing but a youthful fever of the imagination and would come to nothing; but the majority swore that he was a genius, and the majority ruled.”

“Was he a friend of yours?” she asked. Her curiosity was aroused and she looked intently at the newcomer.

“Oh, no. I barely knew him. None of us did, excepting perhaps Red Hopkins, who adored him, and whom he tolerated occasionally. He was not uppish, nor a prig, but he seemed to prefer himself to any one else. Perhaps he would have been disliked and made somewhat uncomfortable, but he was one of the best athletes in the class. But even on the base-ball ground, or when training for a boat race, he had little to say. He had ten cats, a peacock, an owl, five white rats, and a whole regiment of toads. They seemed to give him all the society he wanted—especially the cats.”

“He looks,” she said, slowly, “he looks like the Sphinx.”

Saltonstall was undergoing the ordeal of introduction to half the people in the room. If he had the shyness of youth he concealed it under an almost frigid dignity. In spite of his six feet, and lean strong limbs, he would always give the impression of ugliness at first glance. His mouth almost covered the lower part of his face, but the lips, in their grand firm curves, had the repose of stone; they belonged to the faces that lie beneath the pyramids. His straight hair was parted near the centre of a head large above the ears, of great width across the top, but, unlike many intellectual heads, full at the back. The lids of his eyes were so heavy that the lost secrets of Egypt seemed encrypted beneath. The depth of those extraordinary eyes was fathomless, baffling, appalling. Even their color, dark though it was, could not be determined. It gave one the impression of night, when color is not.

But the strangest feature in that face, with its strong, hard, bold square lines, was the nose. Although large it was delicate as a lancet, and so thin and flexible were the nostrils that when they were not quivering like the wings of a captured bird they lay limply against the septum. It was a face of remarkable contradictions, yet harmonized by a great individuality—the stern, inscrutable repose of a granite Pharaoh flaming with the soul of the Present.

He managed to get away from his tormentors at last, and stood apart with his hostess. She babbled pleasantly, and his eyes moved slowly about the room. They rested for a moment upon a beautiful woman whose chair was surrounded by men.

“Pretty,” he thought, “but like a million other American women.” Then he, too, looked again.

He turned abruptly to his hostess.

“Who is that?” he asked.

The monologue ceased, and Mrs. Hopkins looked up inquiringly.

“Who?”

“That young lady over there?”

Mrs. Hopkins smiled. “My dear Mr. Saltonstall, that young lady is exactly forty-six—forty-six on the ninth of last February.” She was not spiteful, merely statistical.

“What?” he stammered; “what?”

“It surprises you, does it not? Yes, she is remarkably young-looking, even

in a strong light. But she is two years older than I am—we went to school together. I, however," with a sigh, "have had trouble, and ten children, and many duties. She has had an eventless life. Soon after she left school she married a rich man, and he took her to a beautiful home. He was twenty years older than she, and very kind and indulgent, almost like a father. She would have liked to travel, but her husband was absorbed in business, and she has never been away from Danforth except for an occasional visit to Boston, and once she spent a winter in New York, and has got her clothes from there ever since. She is fond of dress and is very good-natured, and lets the girls copy her gowns. Four years ago her husband died, and she could do as she pleases, but she doesn't seem to care. She was always a little lazy and never very ambitious."

"What is her name?"

"Mrs. Trevor—Boradil Trevor. She was a Palmer, one of the oldest families in the State. Ah! she is going to sing. She has a lovely voice, as young as her face."

Mark watched her cross the room to the piano. Her movements had none of the quick litheness of girlhood, but she carried herself with dignity, and her round slender figure was perfect.

She sang a ballad, in a pure sweet voice with many delicate tones in it, and showed faithful study and much intelligent appreciation of music.

"Yes," thought Mark, "a lovely voice, but ice-bound like her eyes."

He watched her with growing interest. The first shock over, the anomaly appealed to his imagination. Moreover, he had a profound contempt for girls; when he gave them any thought at all it was to wonder why they were. He usually concluded that they were made to be useful at a later period when they should become wives and mothers. In fact he knew very little about women of any age. In spite of his tremendous vitality, imagination had claimed passion, and the beauty of women was faded and cold beside the creations of his brain. Of abstract love he had sung and dreamed, deified it, worshipped it. With human passion he had never even experimented.

When the song and its encore were over he turned to Mrs. Hopkins.

"I should like to know Mrs. Trevor," he said.

"Certainly," said his amiable hostess. "Certainly; I will introduce you."

She was detained for a moment, and Mark looked at her meditatively. She was matronly and stout. All the lines of her figure were stiff, in spite of the

flesh. Her face was careworn and lined, she parted her black and white hair and twisted it in a tight knot at the back of her head. But her expression was sweet and her manner indicated a nature full of patient kindness. He moved his eyes to Mrs. Trevor. Forty-six years of nothingness! Great God! what a tragedy. Then he looked again at his hostess. He hardly knew which to pity most. But there were problems of life he did not pretend to have grasped. Then he suddenly felt his youth as he had never felt it before. What if he had been endowed with genius? What if ideas and language rushed at his command? He was but a boy, inexperienced, ignorant—for of women and their eternal mystery he knew nothing.

He was presented to Mrs. Trevor and sat by her in silence for a moment. It occurred to him that he had never before given the beauty of a woman's arm the credit it deserved. Boradil's arm had been moulded that a sculptor might be the wiser. At first Mark looked at it with the rapt appreciation of the artist, as it lay along her black gown; but in a moment he felt a paramount desire to clasp it with his hand. He had no wish to kiss it, merely to feel its cool human roundness against the warmth of his palm. He felt as old as a few moments before he had felt young. He had squandered twenty-two years of life.

Mrs. Hopkins had ordered the other men to go and talk to a group of girls, and he and Mrs. Trevor were alone.

"I cannot talk," he said, abruptly, "I have no talent for small talk whatever."

She smiled sympathetically into his eyes. Were they brooding over the secrets of the ages, or had she the honor of being reflected therein? She changed her mind suddenly regarding what she had intended to say.

"I hope you do not think it necessary to pose and be eccentric because you are a poet," she remarked, coldly.

His dark face grew almost black. "I hope—I hope you will not think me such a fool," he burst out, deprecatingly. "Indeed you misjudge me. What I said is literally true. I have not the slightest idea how to make conversation. My mother died when I was born. I never had any sisters. My father brought me up, and until I went to college I had a tutor. My father never went into society, but he always had a lot of men at the house—awfully clever men; some of them lawyers, like himself; some writers; some artists—and I used to listen to them talk. They were very good to me, even when I was a little chap; and I could talk to them. But they talked of things that interested me and that I had read and thought about. That is a very different thing from talking to a woman the first time you meet her. Almost all the women I have known have

lived in books."

He delivered his speech with a boyish eagerness, unlike the frozen solemnity with which he had favored the other people in the room; and it was in strange contrast to the massive repose of his face. Boradil looked at him with genuine sympathy, and said what had been in her mind a few moments before:

"And I will confide to you that I cannot talk—cannot 'make conversation'—either. I never do. I only listen. I turn perfectly cold when a stranger is introduced to me and expects me to say something. It is constitutional. I shall never get over it if I live to be a hundred."

"I am so glad," he said with a smile which just touched his mouth and vanished. "If I come to a dead stop I shall know that you understand. Do you like society?"

"I neither like it nor dislike it—here. I spent a winter in New York once, and was very, very bored. Such a rush, and all for nothing in the end. I like to meet my friends and talk to them. Or perhaps it has become such a habit that I think I like it—just as we like our old furniture and think we like our relatives."

He looked at her with some curiousness. If she had not cared for society, with what had she filled the long years of her life? He wanted to ask her, but dared not. But he had not believed that a mere mortal could so rouse his interest. He felt it necessary to say something.

"You look extraordinarily young for forty-six," he remarked, felicitously.

She blushed, but not with displeasure; it had never occurred to her to deny her age. Then she laughed at his directness.

"One lives such a quiet life in a town like Danforth. What brought you here?"

"I have an aunt—Mrs. Brewster—who asked me to spend the summer with her. Do you know her?"

"Yes, indeed. I have known her for thirty years at least. When is Elnora Brewster coming home? She is said to have made quite a sensation abroad; has been presented at a lot of German and Scandinavian courts, and been travelling about with some very fine people. Danforth," she smiled a little satirically, "is very proud of her."

"Oh, yes," said Mark, indifferently, "so is my aunt. She thinks a lot of those things." His slow gaze roved about the room, then rested full on her once

more. “I did not want to come to-night,” he went on, with his startling frankness, “but I am glad now that I did. I like you—amazingly, and I do not care for these other people at all. Do you think I can see you again?”

Boradil had exactly that amount and quality of coquetry which makes a woman charming instead of cruel. There were times, however, when the exercise of this dainty feminine gift had proved quite as dangerous as the fiercer charms of the equatorial sisterhood.

“I will adopt you,” she said, softly; and her voice was like the minor chord of a violin. “You are quite young enough to be my son, and I shall like to spoil you.”

“It seems ridiculous,” he answered her; “you do look so awfully young. Yes; adopt me. I will be your son, and as filial as I know how. Only let me go to see you every day. When you get tired of me I will go back to Boston. Here is a man coming to talk to you. Please send him away.”

A tall, dignified man, of middle age, with kindness in his brown eyes, sternness on a mouth that trial had straightened, and intelligence on his broad lined forehead, came up to Mrs. Trevor and took a chair beside her. She blushed as he approached, and introduced him as “Mr. Irving.” Mark stood up at once, but bent to her ear.

“I am not looking for a father,” he muttered, and then left the room and the house.

A few hours later Boradil Trevor dismissed her handmaiden, after her hair had received its customary brushing, and stood long before the mirror. She raised the lamp above her head and scrutinized herself unflinchingly.

“There are a few lines about my eyes,” she said aloud, “but no wrinkles—not one. There is a little hollow, no, a faint depression, in my cheek, but the flesh is firm. I have not that loose look that many women get at forty. My eyes do not look tired, and my teeth are perfect, but my skin is no longer very white, although, thank heaven, it is not faded. My throat has just a tiny hollow, but is neither stringy nor soft, and I have not a round back.”

She looked at her hands. They were shapely and smooth; age had not touched them. Her rich abundant hair hung to her waist, her bust curved like pliant jade, the skin on her neck was fresh and smooth. Still she sighed. Her eyes looked far beyond the mirror. The future leaned forward and cast its shadow over her. She sighed again.

“I do not know why,” she thought, “but I feel old to-night.”

II.

Danforth-on-the-Sound had begun its uneventful existence as a fishing village, some two hundred years before; but of late years a town of pretensions had grown along the shore. In the natural course of things Society had crystallized on the surface of Progress, and the town even boasted the doubtful luxury of a summer hotel. But neither local society nor summer boarders beguiled the old families of Danforth from the proud tenor of their way. Through the town and beyond it, on the hills and by the salt marshes, were a dozen or more square brick houses, each crowned with a single tower; in them lived the descendants of the men who had routed the red-skins and farmed their acres weaponed from breast to boot. These simple yet haughty people visited and entertained one another generation after generation, and no comeling to the town had ever entered their doors. They clung to traditions, and were as conservative as people ever are whose experience has been narrow.

Trevor House was perched like an eagle on a rocky hill behind the town, and commanded a broad sweep of water, and miles of meadow, marsh, and wood. When Boradil came to it a bride she spent many an hour in the round tower watching the ships and boats go by. She was somewhat inclined to sentiment and romance in those days, and, like a girl, she had dreamed of vague futures, forgetting that she was already a wife. Years ago she had stopped dreaming, for the daily round of her pleasant, uneventful life had dulled the edge of imagination. The years slipped by so quickly! She had barely noticed them speed softly past her, so peacefully monotonous were their days. Her household duties occupied her morning hours, and her afternoons were varied with music, painting, and books. Every night, excepting when some gathering demanded her, she went to bed at nine o'clock, and slept ten hours. The latent sadness in her eyes was not the child of her intelligence, but of the unconscious tragedy of her life.

When Mark called, the day after Mrs. Hopkins's little party, he was shown into Mrs. Trevor's library, which adjoined the great room holding the tomes of Mr. Trevor and his forefathers. It was a bright room facing a wood, but the oaken walls and floor were black with age. The floor, however, was half covered with Oriental rugs, and the bindings of the books were fresh and gay. A piano, covered with music, stood in one corner, and an easel in another. On the edge of the wood, facing the window, was a magnificent clump of rose-bay laurel, the tall heads crowned by great bunches of pink blossoms, soft as dawn clouds.

Mark looked with some surprise at the well-filled shelves that ran about two sides of the room, then eagerly scanned the titles of the books.

"She has done some reading in her forty-six years, at all events," he thought. "Perhaps one may be able to tell something of a woman by the silent company she keeps."

All the American and English novelists of any note, past and present, were there; a good deal of poetry, and the essays and letters to which Posterity—that infallible filter, whose ways are past finding out—had affixed its seal. France was represented by Balzac, George Sand, Victor Hugo and Gautier's Travels.

Mrs. Trevor did not appear for twenty minutes, and Mark had time to meditate. The woman who had so roused his curiosity had the face of a girl, and the face is supposed to be the plastic medium of the soul. But a woman could not have read all these books and know nothing of life. Balzac alone would remove any doubts she may have entertained regarding the resemblance of Danforth to the World. Were living knowledge and written knowledge so widely different that the latter glided from the surface of a soul in which experience had cut no furrows? His insight guided him to the truth, where a mere man of the world would have arrived at a different and more cynical conclusion. Boradil read of the heights and depths of human passion, of the world in its glittering and sinful phases, but the artificially gathered lore dwelt in one wing of her brain, and her ego in another. Sometimes the passions of those brain-children touched her to responsive thrill, but its effect went with the moment. She had not a brooding mind, and each book displaced its predecessor.

Mark turned to the easel. A nearly finished water color was on it; an exquisite bit of landscape, with a certain depth of color and touch. He had a curious feeling that if he had time to study one of her pictures he would come to know the woman—know her better than she knew herself. A door behind him opened, and he turned to greet Mrs. Trevor. As she came toward him he noticed that her color deepened.

"You blushed like that for Mr. Irving last night," he said, unceremoniously; "do you always blush?"

She laughed amusedly; "Almost always. It means nothing with me."

"Are you going to marry Mr. Irving?"

She laughed outright this time, and the blush grew warmer. "No. Such an idea never occurred to me. How abrupt you are. Let us sit here by the window. It is so warm, and the woods make one feel cool."

He sat with her before the broad window and the light shone full on her face. The few retrogressions were carelessly, almost defiantly revealed; but she stood the test better than many girls after their second, season. And the light made her look like a splendid bit of color advantageously hung. She wore a white gown, with a band of heliotrope velvet clasping her throat, and another her small round waist.

“Do you know what I feel the greatest desire to do with your mouth?” demanded Mark, abruptly.

For the first time Boradil was somewhat taken aback, but he went on reflectively.

“I want to take the under lip between my thumb and finger and pull it open. I feel sure that more than half of it is on the inside. It looks like one of those laurel blossoms, half burst.”

The laurel blossom looked full blown for the moment. “You certainly say the most unconventional things. I had thought of correcting you as a mother should, but I believe I will not. I never knew anyone like you before, and your originality interests me. Why should I try to make you like other people?”

“Have all the people you have known been alike?”

“Mostly.”

“God! Forty-six years of the same people. I am only twenty-two, and I have known many—well, a good many, varieties of men.”

“Well, perhaps if I were to think about it I might find that each most insignificant person I have met had his individuality. And perhaps the men you have known, have not been so unlike after all. I do not imagine there is so very much difference between people; the difference lies in their opportunities. That is the reason why the people in novels are so much more interesting than those in real life. I do not find Mr. Irving particularly interesting, but I have often thought that a novelist could make him so.”

“Yes, arbitrarily. That is Taine’s definition of Art—to manufacture for a character the opportunities of development he may lack in real life.”

“I have never read Taine. I often have ideas that I come across later in literature. I suppose it is often so. The writers say it, and we do not. They become famous, and we remain obscure.”

“Yes; it is a mere matter of ambition.”

“With the merely clever writer, but surely not with genius.”

“No, I believe that genius will create because it must—even if it knew that the world would never stop to listen. At the same time the resemblance in this regard between genius and the writing epidemic of the present day is somewhat amusing. According to the ‘interviewers’ of the press every scribbling woman in the land, with a thousand words for each idea, ‘writes because she must,’ ‘because she can’t help herself.’ The average brain appears to be in the condition of a dynamited pumpkin. But let us talk of something else. I want to know how you have used up your life. You said last night that you had spent a winter in New York once, and did not like it. Why did you not like it?”

“I never cared for dancing, and the men talked society nonsense. When I did not feel dizzy I felt tired. There seemed nothing to it.”

“No; I suppose there is not. Once or twice I was forcibly taken out in Boston, and I thought I should go mad. The girls looked like pink and white and blue toy balloons that were just beginning to collapse, and the men looked like paper dolls.”

“Exactly. After two months of it I came home.”

“But are you never lonely?”

“Not very.”

“But sometimes? Tell me. You do not know how much I want to know everything about you.”

“Well, sometimes a little. One cannot paint and walk and read and sing and housekeep all the time, and I know every soul in this place by heart.”

“Why do you not travel, now that you can do as you please?”

“Well—there are several reasons. Business matters detained me for a time. Then I do not like the idea of travelling alone—I am afraid. I may as well own to the truth. And I know of no one whom I should like to travel with. Then—then I am so *used* to staying here. I have been so hap—well, so contented and comfortable in this old house. I almost shrink from change. You see—I am forty-six, and habit by that time has become a strong force——”

“You are twenty, thirty years younger,” interrupted Mark.

She shook her head. “I look young, and in many ways I feel young, but—the fact remains. The forty-six years *have gone by*; and, consciously or unconsciously to myself, have left their mark. I have lived forty-six years in this world, and to-day I am the result of those forty-six years. I am not *blasé* even of monotony, but I feel rather than know that I am indifferent to many

things which would have given me keen satisfaction twenty years ago."

"You talk as if you were three hundred," he said, angrily, although her age, as apart from herself, did seem great to his youthful bout with Time. He went on with unconscious and increasing eagerness. "What are forty-six years in themselves? What are they in comparison with Time? What a trivial figure does such a number of years cut in the history of the world! Why do they seem great to man and woman? Because man's allotted days are threescore years and ten, and toward the middle of the third decade the teeth begin to drop, the eyes to dim, the vigor to fail. That is the whole secret of what is known as old age. But—I had a friend in Boston, a newspaper man, who was mad on the subject of physical culture, and before I got rid of him I knew as much about it as he did. Although the subject bored me a good deal, I became convinced that with proper training, diet, and observation of every law of health, youth could be prolonged indefinitely; the god of old age would wither and die of disuse. Why," he added, laughing, "I have not the faintest doubt that a couple of centuries hence a woman will not be thought old enough to make her bow into society until she is fifty, and will lead the german at two hundred."

She too laughed, but a flash of passionate hope crossed her face. "Perhaps," she said; "but do you think the man will ever be born who will want to live two hundred years?"

"Certainly. Two centuries from now the world will be so rich with interest that it will take three hundred years to know and enjoy it all. Think of the monuments of their past added to ours. And their moral code will have changed. Men and women will live together, by law, a certain number of years —thirty, forty, sixty (or perhaps only ten)—and as the race will be two hundred years nearer perfection of beauty, intellect, and character, think of the tremendous happiness and variety a man will get out of his generous allotment of years. Think of the many deep and rich experiences. Why, he could be poet, artist, author, lover, scientist, discoverer, each in succession; for the mind will unfold many leaves in that long span, and a man could no more remain one unalterable personality than he to-day retains for more than seven years the same physical structure."

"Is that your idea of Utopia?" she asked; "you look like a prophet."

"Oh, I am a prophet of nothing," he said, gloom settling in his eyes. "Sometimes I think that my ideas are the veriest rot that was ever born in a man's brain. In the reaction which follows the exaltation of conceiving a poem I feel like an enthusiastic gushing fool, as if my brain were but full of the rubbish of youth. It is only when I am on the heights that I feel great. Between whiles I often am so depressed and discouraged that I want to kill myself."

She put out her hand and touched his kindly. “Remember only the moments of exaltation,” she said, in her sweet vibrating voice, “when you *are* great. Remember that poor common mortals never have such moments at all. When you feel that you have that power over all men—that you can make men’s brains suddenly empty of all but the song and the thoughts you are pouring there, then you have the right to embalm such a moment and keep it before your sight forever.”

She was leaning forward, her eyes soft with the earnestness of her sympathy, and he felt the subtle spell of her momentary identification with himself. He was a creature of imagination, and a kind of rapture, a completeness of being, stole over him. The material world faded. He vaguely remembered a tradition he had heard once of a race which, existing before flesh had raised its barriers, had possessed equal power of unity and duality: love had meant one shadowy blissful outline; duality, a floating, hand in hand. . . . He felt as if he had absorbed this woman. . . . Was her face before the eyes of his body, or down in his soul? . . .

She leaned back in her chair, and he shivered a little as she withdrew her hand.

“I often paint here,” she stammered vaguely, but he stood up.

“Good-by,” he said; “I do not want to stay any longer. Will you do something for me?”

“What is it?”

“Will you meet me in the wood up there at four o’clock to-morrow morning?”

“At four o’——”

“Yes. Does it seem so very early? Have you never been up at four? Then indeed you have wasted your life. Why it is the sublimest hour of day or night. Come. I will teach you something to-morrow morning that you have never known yet.”

“Well,” she said, “I will be there.”

III.

Boradil having set an alarm-clock to awaken her at three, went to bed that night at eight. She felt rather sleepy and confused as the clatter lifted her bolt upright; but a cold bath and a cup of coffee, brewed over a spirit-lamp, made her feel fresh, and interested in her adventure; she was learning the poignant sweetness of novelty. As the small hours were cool, even in that mid-summer season, she put on a dark woollen gown, and crossed a white mull handkerchief across her breast. On her head she tied a large poke bonnet of white straw, and smiled at her reflection in the glass. She looked a veritable Priscilla, and as demure a coquette as ever breathed. Then she gave a little sigh and started for her tryst.

She wandered far into the wood before Mark Saltonstall appeared; and then he came with a rush, like a wild animal flying through the forest. She watched him as he ran toward her, his nostrils quivering, his lids lifting. He looked youth and life epitomized. He reached her side with a leap, and catching her about the waist before she could divine his purpose, whirled her up and down the clearing. She made one desperate effort to free herself, then let him have his way. Round and round he swung her, in a dance as free and wild as if they had been faun and dryad flashed upward from forest tombs; then, suddenly, he swept her off the ground and seated her on the limb of a tree.

"Oh! is it not good to be alive?" he cried to her. "Is it not good—good? Do not you feel mad sometimes with the very joy of life? I should like to jump as high as that tree and shout like an Indian. I feel light as air. I could run ten miles. I feel as if I could divide myself into twenty different parts and give nineteen away to nineteen puny men and yet be stronger than any man alive ____"

"Will you please take me down?" interrupted Boradil. "I feel extremely undignified, and not having the strength of twenty men, somewhat breathless."

He swung her down and placed her carefully on a large moss-covered stone, then threw himself at her feet and said no more for several minutes.

A great clock, far down in the valley struck four, smiting the stillness like iron on iron. Mark raised himself to his knees and took her hand.

"Are you rested?"

"Yes."

"Have you forgotten that wild dance?"

“No—how could——”

“I mean is the impression indistinct enough to give way to another?”

“Possibly.”

“Then I will tell you what I meant by saying that this hour is the most sublime of the twenty-four. Listen.”

“I hear nothing.”

“That is it—only you do hear—you hear the silence.”

His voice ceased again, and this time she knew what he meant. In all the forty-six years of her life she had never known a silence like that. It was deep as space and vast as time. It became personified—it spoke. Its voice was like the speechless thunder of arrested waves crashing upon phantom rock. She turned to him with white face.

“Yes,” she whispered, “I feel it.”

“This is the moment,” he said, in the same awestruck tone, “when Nature holds her breath and writes the doom of man and nations, earth and sea. It is the hour of fate. Look up.”

She caught his mood and looked upward with a faint shudder. The sky was a dome of steel blue granite—hard, cold, inflexible. Pale lamps wavered here and there, as if the oil of life were low, as if they were trimmed for humanity’s wake.

She turned to him suddenly and they clung together. Then his mood changed again and he sprang to his feet, lifting her with him.

“Come,” he said.

He hurried her to the edge of the wood. Below them lay salt marshes and corn-fields covered with creeping mist. A narrow valley looked like a yawning chasm before whose blackness even the sun would pause affrighted. Far down slept the city, the trees clinging about the houses like hair about a drowned face. Afar, a little town clutched a steep hillside like wild mountain birds their gray, bare peaks. The streets were perpendicular, as if steps hewn from rock. The surface was broken here and there by cave-like hollows wherein man had crept and built his home: on high a spire shot upward, as if to pierce the stars and the golden ether of heaven’s floor. The river swept by marsh and town, the Sound lay cold and still between its peaceful banks. The same intense stillness was over all as in the heart of the wood. Not a wreath of smoke curled upward, not a note from the throat of a bird disturbed a wave of air. Then suddenly

Mark shouted.

“Asleep! asleep! The world is asleep, and we alone are awake. Does it not make you feel omnipotent? Do not you feel as if the world lay in your hand! That is the way I feel in this hour. As if nothing were impossible. As if the rest of humanity were dwarfed and I were almighty. Oh! what a sense of power; I awake, sentient, bursting with life and intelligence—they stupid, senseless, *sleeping*. I feel like Cæsar, like Jove, like God!”

He caught her hands. “I remember writing a poem once in which I embodied the idea that if ever I loved a woman—a flesh-and-blood woman—I would take her for my own at this hour—out in the forest—when Nature had forgotten us, and the great hateful commonplace world was asleep. But come—come—I suppose you think I am a fool or a lunatic. I assure you that these moods do not occur often. I am generally fairly sensible. Only it seems to me that certain hours of solitude must carry any man off his feet who has one seed of the artist in him. Let us take a walk!”

“You need not apologize,” she said, “I understand you.”

IV.

He came home to breakfast with her, and after he had gone she sat long in her library thinking of the past few hours. For the first time in her life she found herself vitally interested in a fellow-being. It was a new sensation, this being lifted out of herself into the actual life and thoughts of another—far different from the momentary interest born of a sympathetic nature. She felt as if her whole mental vision had been refocused, and that the object filling the camera was no longer herself, but a man electric with genius, ardent with hope, imperious with ambition—vital, magnificent, terrifying. She had never been a selfish woman as people go; many a man and woman turned to her naturally in hours of trouble; many a poor family found life easier because she had entered their little radius; but, lonely in the world, she had come to feel that she was the pivot on which that world revolved. It was a delightful sensation—that unique absorbing interest in the personating of another. It gave a piquant zest to life, unknown before; the taste of variety had entered her mouth and the flavor was delicious to the palate. The past years seemed, all in a moment, bald, pale, empty; and she had thought them so peaceful, so pleasant, herself so fortunate in being shielded from the storms and ills of life. She sighed to think that, sooner or later, he must go; but nothing could annihilate her interest; she could follow his career as she had been wont to follow the development of an engrossing record between the covers of a book.

Another thing surprised and pleased her. Until to-day she had never realized how much she had read, how much she knew. She had met men who possessed the subtle power of quickening her own egoism, but this boy was without art of any sort. His mind had touched hers, and struck fire again and again. She had been able to tell him of books he had not heard of, rare old volumes in her husband's moulded library, and he had nearly kissed her in his enthusiastic gratitude. It gave her a keen sense of exultation to be of use to a mind like that, to feel that so original and gifted a brain could owe even a trifle to her. But perhaps the subtlest pleasure of all lay in the new sense of companionship. What a lonely life had hers been! Her companions had been authors' marionettes. Life's interests, its incidents, had been manufactured for her, as for thousands of other solitary women; and she had been able to delude herself that they were real enough to fill her nature! She believed that she should never care to read a novel again.

She felt singularly young—youthful. As he whirled her back and forth in that mad dance up in the woods, twenty-five years slipped out of the century. Indifference fled, dignity vanished; her thoughts, interests, capacity for

pleasure were as vivid and keen, as fresh and eager, as if long years ago she had bound Time's eyes about with poppy wreaths and charmed him to eternal sleep.

She went up to the little tower after a time. For twenty years she had not climbed those dusty old stairs, and as she sat down on a tottering chair before the window a rat darted across her foot and scuttled out of danger. But she did not heed him. The Sound was the same; yachts might sail its waters, but white beach and hoary rocks were unaltered. Her eyes were as dreamy as of old, her thoughts as vague and confused. In mind and body was a certain languor—the languor of youth before life has set the nerves in action. She lifted the rotting window and the sweet hot air lay against her face. It had not been sweeter and warmer, more whispering and caressful twenty years ago. It was the same, the same; and in that hour she, too, was the same.

V.

When she went down-stairs a servant told her that Mr. Irving was in the library. Her first impulse was to refuse to see him; he was a component part of the old pointless existence; but the kindness of her nature triumphed and she went to the room where he awaited her. Her father and mother dying during her childhood she and her brother had been left to the guardianship of Mr. Irving's elder brother. She had seen little of James Irving during her early youth; he had been away at college; but during her husband's lifetime she had found him a devoted and valuable friend. Never by word or deed had he betrayed the existence of deeper feeling until two years after Mr. Trevor's death, when he had asked her to marry him. Ever since that day she had nervously dreaded a repetition of the proposal. She had refused a number of men with but passing regret at inflicting a wound, but she had a certain respect for Mr. Irving which made her somewhat diffident about disputing his wishes.

He was standing by the window when she entered, his face in stern silhouette. A smile transformed it as he saw her, flashing sweetness into the calm eyes and softening the determined mouth.

"You have not been to see me for a long time," she said, with a soft cordiality, natural to her, deceptive as it was. "Did you walk up the hill? Are you warm? Sit in that easy-chair by the window. It is the coolest spot in the house." Oh, tender hypocrisy! The wheels of life would rust and stop were cold-hearted frankness to crowd you from poor human nature's uneven garden.

Mr. Irving sank into the chair, and she rang the bell and ordered a glass of lemonade, then talked with him of the passing events of their little world. She had changed her thick gown hours before for one of white mull. It fell softly about her beautiful figure, and in her belt she had thrust a bunch of pink bay-laurel, which Mark had handed her when she came down to breakfast. The dust lay thick on the hem of her gown, but she had not noticed it. The dreaming light was still in her crystal eyes, and although she had half drawn the curtains to shut out the sun, a straggling ray of light enriched the autumnal tints of her hair.

Mr. Irving talked well; his facility of speech had given him the first position at the Danforth bar; but suddenly he came to an awkward pause, and after a moment he rose and took a chair beside her.

"Two years ago," he began slowly, "I asked you to marry me and you refused. I have no reason to think that you care any more for me to-day, but I am compelled to speak again because I love you so deeply that so long as you

are free I must strive to win you."

There was something prim and old-fashioned in his wooing, but his voice vibrated, and Boradil felt guilty and miserable. "You know my life so well," he went on, "that it is hardly worth while for me to tell you what a lonely man I am. I have never married because I have never loved any woman but you. I loved you when I was a penniless boy, when I came home and found they had married you to Mr. Trevor, and during all the long years since then—five and twenty, Boradil. I should still have loved you had the years left their stamp, as on so many women; but I am only a man, and perhaps I love you a little better because of your beauty. There are other things aside from my daily life, however, which you have never guessed. Shall I tell you—I have often wanted to—the sympathy of your nature is so exquisite—but I fear——"

"Tell me, tell me," she said, leaning forward eagerly. Her friendship for him was very deep, and the moment he appealed to her sympathies he existed in an unpeopled universe.

"It is not much," he said, looking into the sweet, cold eyes, "only a little of one man's inner life. I had great aspirations in my youth, Boradil. I wanted to travel, to go everywhere on the civilized globe; above all to know the world, to drink the cup and bite the dregs. I had the ardent temperament of youth in those days, and I wanted the varied, picturesque, romantic career of a *Childe Harold* and a *Don Juan*. You would never suspect that, would you, Boradil? Well, no human being ever did, so little do we know one another. Then I wished to be great in my career. At college I took high honors and I dreamed of being another Webster. The power was not in me, I know it now, but I could have had a wider reputation could I have lived in some great city where the pulse of the world throbbed in my ears and the friction of other ambitious minds forced mine to sharper edge. But it could not be, and you know why; for years poverty held me here, then my brother died and left my mother with no companion but myself. To have taken her from Danforth would have been like uprooting a garden flower and planting its roots in the crevice of a rock. I put the thought of it from me. A year ago she died. Much of my ambition is gone, much of my mind's elasticity and power to conquer obstacles; but with you—I could make the effort."

She had listened with a pang for every word. The tragedy of that starved, barren life appalled her. Mark, with his conquering genius, his splendid future, rose before her, and made the pathos of this man's portion deeper and more pitiful. And his story was the story of thousands and tens of thousands. She could have wept for the misery of the world. For the moment her pity for him was so profound that she wished to put her hands about his neck and give him

the help and comfort his tired heart implored. But even in that moment of turbulent sympathy a warning finger wrote on her brain that she would but make his misery and her own.

He watched her transfigured face with the keenest thrill of happiness he had ever known, and half raised his arms. Then a chill touched him and vaguely he heard her say:

"Remember, dear friend, you are not fifty yet; do not talk of vigor and spirit having left you. You are in the very prime of man's years—for enjoyment of life and victory of ambition. I—*cannot* marry you. I do not love you. Remember, I have known one loveless marriage. Go from here and love a younger woman. Think—*think* how many women there are in the world. It is impossible—it must be impossible that there is but one person on this broad earth who can give each of us happiness. My God! no tragedy could be greater than that. Love is so much a matter of conditions, of propinquity—I am sure that it is—I am sure you will love again—and far better than you have loved me."

"You speak from the standing-point of one who has never loved," he said, bitterly. "With all your instinctive knowledge of human kind, you do not realize that the love of a lifetime can no more be uprooted than the earth could be plucked from her orbit and flung into space without annihilation. If I had met you yesterday to leave you to-morrow, doubtless I could forget you in time, but I have loved you for thirty years, and so long as I have my faculties, here and elsewhere, I shall continue to love you."

His words had chilled her, why, she did not pause to define, and her sympathy had ebbed a little. He stood up and took her hand.

"Good-by," he said; "I shall never give you up—remember that. Not until I see you married to another man."

"That will never be," she said.

VI.

When Mark called the next afternoon Boradil was sitting before a fresh canvas nibbling the end of a brush.

"I am glad you have come; you will give me an inspiration perhaps," she exclaimed, and then stopped suddenly; Mark was attended by no less than six cats.

They had trooped in at his heels and arranged themselves in a semicircle before Boradil, regarding her suspiciously with twelve green gleaming eyes. Their bodies were black as a Plutonian council chamber, and they were superb specimens of their kind.

"Are not they beautiful?" demanded Mark, enthusiastically. "They are thoroughbreds, every one of them, and know more than lots of men. There isn't anything they can't do, except talk; and for the matter of that I can understand them when they jabber among themselves. Talk about the intelligence of a dog! He can't hold a candle to a first-class cat. Mine have good dispositions, too, all but that fellow over there. He has a temper! Well, his name is Hell. But he is the one I love best."

The cats, with the exception of Hell, evidently approved of Boradil, for they went about establishing themselves on her train and one jumped on to her lap. Hell, however, raised his back, gave a brief, contemptuous hiss, then walked over to the hearthrug and worked himself a comfortable bed in its fur.

"He hates women," said Mark, apologetically, "but he holds his temper unless he is teased, and he is invaluable for keeping the other cats in order. When they fight he wallops them all round, and they have more respect for him than they have for me."

He sat down on a low chair beside her.

"Tell me all your life," he said, "everything. I want to hear it."

"I have told you everything."

"Not everything. I want to know it all, chapter by chapter. Have you never suffered any? Is that the reason you look so young?"

"Of course I was sorry to lose my baby; but I only saw it once, you see—and that was many many years ago. I was going to say, before you were born; but I had been married five years before it came. A friend of mine who has suffered everything told me once that if no thinking woman married before she had known a touch of the anguish of which the human heart is capable, that not

another child would ever be brought into this world. I felt so strongly for her that I realized the truth of what she said and never wished for a child again. As for my parents, they died when I was three. I don't remember them."

"Now tell me all—your mental life at least."

Boradil began her unoriginal history to humor him; then the subtle sweetness of the confessional possessed her and she revealed herself more fully than she had ever done to mortal ears; hers had been the receptive not the confiding mind.

As she laid bare the simple details of her years and her half-unconscious mental evolution, Mark ceased to think her life a tragedy. It seemed to him beautiful that a nature could be at once so complete and so restful; so qualified for appreciating the broader interests, yet so lacking in ambition; so content with monotony, yet so far removed from the commonplace. Young as he was he had all the restlessness of the gifted mind, all the craving for recognition of the artist's nature. Behind his grand Sphinx-like face burned dreams of greatness, a hot desire to see the world at his feet. He felt as if he had stumbled upon an oasis where all was rest and peace. He found her unspeakably soothing. Although his brain was as big with ideas and ambitions as when he had entered her presence, they did not scorch so fiercely; it was as if she had laid a soft cool hand on a fevered spot. He looked at her with the sort of adoration an artist feels for his ideal.

"I have the greatest desire to work with you over something," he said when she had finished, "to feel my mind elbow with yours, as it were. Let us do some work in common. I have an idea! You paint a picture and I will write a story to fit it——I will begin when you are half way through. Do you catch the idea? Nothing serious; something altogether fanciful and romantic."

"Very well," she said, feeling that subtle desire for communion as keenly as himself. "I know just what to paint. When I was in Boston last I saw a little water color painted by an Englishman, Francis James, I think; and although it was only an interior, beautifully colored and exquisitely done, yet it always seemed to me to suggest a story—what I never could tell. I leave that to you."

He took the cat from her lap and she began painting with the broad strokes of the impressionist. At the end of an hour he commenced to write. He drove his pen along with the nervous rapidity of one whose brain is filled with a sudden swarm of images, and before the picture was finished flung the result on her lap. She dropped her brush and read eagerly the incoherent fragment he had called

A VAGARY.

Armor in ante-room, against dull red wall. SALVE in letters of gold sunk in broad tiles of black onyx. Multicolored, infinitesimal slabs of light flung from rose-window to drown in the pellucid floor. A spiral stair winding past tapestries on the landings' arches. A great curtain of blood-red velvet with a long rift of light. Beyond, a vast room, yellow as sunset; curtains like the sky on a clear night when nature has swept aside the lid of her jewel casket.

And yet—something more. Diamonds, powdered hair, and black patches . . . Spray of lace and billow of satin . . . Hands of steel under ruffs of lace . . . weary eyes closing in youth's magnetic atmosphere . . . music as of mermaids chanting Te Deum of uprisen souls . . . murmur of voices . . . voluptuous throb of laughter, hushed in the throat.

Gethaught, sensuously touched with the curtain's half-revealing mystery, sank upon a brawny chair, looking upward with heavy eyes to the light, waving behind the rose-window. A spirit beating against the pane for admittance? . . . A blue crescent, like a curving sword cuts a thin dark face. Lo! he is a visitor whose earthly way had lain through marble tombs. The light swings, a red blade smites. He is brewing hell poison in halls of flame. . . .

A palpitating hush in the room beyond, a mighty sound from brass and wood—fainting into a sea of fettered passion to toss aloft a woman's voice. Vaguely the soul of Gethaught leaped—not to give memory her claim—the echoes pealed back from the future.

The music surged out in resonant tumultuous waves. Full, throbbing, it rolled about him, an ocean of unrest. It rose in clanging chords of triumphant joy, it died in a sob of pain. Then, bursting forth in thunderous harmonies it hurled defiance at Time and the ravenous abyss of space. Gethaught breathed with exquisite tremor. Beat upon by that storm ocean, swept from its tottering throne, his Soul shuddered from its body and cast itself upon the mighty quiring waves. The waves rose higher, higher, in eager swell, in impatient bondage—then out into the night they rush to roll through space in eager flight. High on a crest they carried the Soul they had stolen, drowning his ears with riotous glory of sound . . . lapping his swimming senses with wavelets of melody . . . breaking in a sigh. They boomed, those hurrying waters, above vast choirs of mermaids, plaining for the loves of earth . . .

Over and above the long swell rose the Soul, like a cloud wrapped peplum-wise about the wind. Oh! the supernal beauty of that singing ocean out in shoreless night. The humming spheres held their breath. Whirling night-clouds, black with blinded sleep and big with storms, quivered to their hearts—then broke in harmless raindrops.

And now!—the waves grow longer, lower, calmer; their voices fainter, thinner, sweeter—yet ever with immortality in their farest echo——

And now!—at extremest marge those waves curl roaringly up. They rise in their might and sweep back to the Soul. Why do they look like a tidal wave of light as had the sun unpent its liquid fires? The great wave nears him . . . hovers above . . . in it are infinite currents . . . each current fine as thread of flame. . . .

It rolls softly about him . . . back whence it came . . . as if . . . far away . . . an imperious hand held the spring of those golden threads. . . .

Music no longer . . . a fragrance ineffable streaming from the clinging meshes of a woman's hair. . . . In deeps . . . on heights . . . roll the waves . . . deeper sinks the Soul fainting in that wondrous perfume . . . twist and twine and sting the golden serpents . . . biting with life's sweet venom. . . .

A shock. That harmonious motion ceases. Have the waves broken upon a rock? The Soul knows only sudden still. No! no rock has called to pause those perfumed waves. He is pressed closer . . . closer . . . arms strong, supple. . . . Where has he felt that long, lithe touch before? Where has he not? . . . Back through the ages . . . through the world's forgotten pages. . . .

Down through the golden haze burn two fires, their flames green and scorching. . . .

Shriek! Shriek! Shriek! The hideous discord! She has loosed her hold! She has flung him from her! She has hurled him down into an icy vortex! In his ears screech. . . .

Gethaught, blindly stumbling, stood in the great room beyond the curtain. The music had crashed to silence. Powdered men and courtly dames surged, trembling, to and fro. Sobs and cries smote the fading notes.

“She is dead!”

“She has only swooned!”

The music rolling through the halls of his soul, sharp fire on his mouth, Gethaught flung the crowd asunder and leaped to the stage. A woman lay prone. Her ice-white face was still as death. Through the gossamer lids shone the green of her eyes. About her fell billows of boiling gold. He caught her in his arms—close, hard! He fled through the startled throng, across the ante-chamber, up the spiral stair. The tapestry swept apart, a great key turned. High in the stone wall was a window, against it lay the moon. He placed the woman’s feet to the floor, holding her against him, crushing her with cries of fear. He wound her hair about him, pressing his lips to her pulsing face. As she awakened the warmth of her body filled the room. Angry hands beat the stout old door. The echoes whispered the Song of Songs.

VII.

The writing was nervously irregular, almost illegible in places, but Boradil deciphered it. As she laid down the pages she looked up to find Mark standing in front of her.

"That is nothing—a chaotic trifle," he said, rapidly. "But I want to write. For months I have had an idea in my mind. Will you let me write here? I do not know why, but I feel that I could write better if you were near me."

She rose and opened the door leading into the larger library.

"Go in there," she said. "No one will disturb you."

"And you will not leave this room? Promise me."

"I promise," she said, and for a moment she, too, felt a feverish exaltation.

As the door closed behind him the six cats made a wild dash at it, five of them mewing piteously, Hell leaving the marks of his claws on the dark oak panel. Boradil gave the shepherd of the flock a wide berth, but knelt among the others striving to coax them into resignation. But they sat limp and woe-begone, refusing to be comforted until she sent for some milk, when they gorged themselves, Hell included, and were shortly oblivious of affection's bonds.

Boradil ordered her supper brought to her and sat through the long evening with her dreaming eyes on the library door. She had never rebelled against her lot; but to-night she knew absolute contentment. The past was annihilated, the future a blank. She was touched with the exquisite sense of being necessary to another. She felt complete, perfected. It was as if Nature had suddenly lifted the curtain of her Holy of Holies and shown her the heart of the world shaking with all men's motives, passions, dreams, and high endeavor.

She moved her head from side to side. She felt intoxicated with her new knowledge, the new sphere into which she had been lifted. But two people dwelt therein, the air throbbed with their united purpose and victory.

She rose once and listened at the door, but the oak was thick and she heard no sound. She shook her head impatiently, then returned to her chair.

As the night wore on the cats awoke and sprang upon her lap. She pressed them closely, feeling the sudden necessity for living warmth. There is something wonderfully satisfying about a cat when one is but vaguely lonely, and no cats were ever more soft and yielding than these afflicted five. After a time, however, a succession of short emphatic hisses recalled them to the

hearthrug, and they deserted her once more.

Midnight had come and gone when Mark opened the library door and threw himself on his knees before Boradil, burying his face in her lap.

“I am tired,” he murmured, “tired. Let me stay here a moment.”

She clasped her hands across his head and bent over him, filled with a sort of maternal ecstasy. It came to her for the first time in her barren life. She had been too ill when her child was born to feel anything beyond the pangs of motherhood, but now the instinct flowered to its full. As if her firm warm fingers transmitted this new gift which had come to him, he raised his head, regarding her with adoration. His face was pale; all the light had gone out of it but what she had awakened.

“I want to stay with you,” he said, “to be something to you—I hardly know what. But promise me that I need never leave you. And I never wrote as I did to-night.”

“Why should you go?” she said.

She rose and led him to a table where supper had been spread, and after he had finished she made him lie on a divan, and watched him as he slept until the day was near its prime.

When he awoke she had disappeared, and he left the house at once and struck across the fields to his aunt’s home, followed by his devoted and hungry cats. His head felt emptied of ideas, and ambition for the moment was felled by exhaustion, but he had a light sense of exultation that a long torturing conception had forced its way to paper and left him free. For the time being his interest in the poem was gone, but he knew that when he began the revision, fire and energy would return. For the present he was divided between a profound sense of thankfulness, almost of obligation, to Mrs. Trevor, and an uneasy speculation regarding his aunt’s view of his prolonged absence.

VIII.

Mrs. Brewster was the acknowledged leader of the exclusive set in Danforth, partly because of her strong personality, partly owing to the fact that she had spent every winter of her life in Boston, and was the one woman-of-the-world the little circle boasted. She was a tall woman, matronly in appearance, but possessing extreme elegance and pride of carriage. Her iron gray hair was drawn high over a pompadour roll, and her low forehead was well-shaped. Ambition and life's annoyances had drawn lines on her face, and her mouth was little more than a straight line, but her fair skin was still clear. Her small gray eyes were cold and peculiarly capable of a round, hard, embarrassing stare. She was fifty and she looked her age, but she was an interesting woman still, partly owing to her indomitable will, partly to a certain suggestion of passion beneath the trained almost aggressive placidity of her face.

She had borne seven daughters and married six of them to men of family and wealth, scheming and managing to that end until, as a candid friend told her one day, each son-in-law had presented her with a new wrinkle. Power she worshipped, and to power and ambition she had sacrificed the love of her husband and children, and the springs of her youth. Whatever noble and spontaneous impulse had originally dwelt within her nature had been warped out of it long ago, and she ruled her family with a rod which bent their heads and cauterized their hearts. It was a cruel disappointment to her that she had not a fortune large enough to make her the same being of paramount importance in Boston that she was in Danforth, and the bitterest moment of her life had been when a great New York woman failed to recognize her the second time they met.

She had not been on cordial terms with her brother, John Saltonstall, for many years, an unpleasantness having resulted from the lady's desire to wave her rod over Mrs. Saltonstall's head. The young wife had resented her interference with no little spirit, and being upheld by a doting husband, a family breach had ensued. After Mrs. Saltonstall's death neither brother nor sister had made any attempt to close the wound, until the talk of Mark's genius had prompted Mrs. Brewster to drive out to Harvard and make much of her promising nephew. When she troubled herself to be fascinating she succeeded, and when she invited Mark to spend the summer with her, promising him an unused building for his brutes, he found the prospect attractive.

Mark stood somewhat in awe of his imperious aunt, and as after housing his cats, he mounted the verandah steps and faced the cold white glare of her

eyes, he felt the full force of her famous personality.

“Where have you been?” she demanded, with an ominous sharpness in her voice. “The servants have been out all night looking for you.”

He had intended to make a clear statement of facts, but unconventional as he was, it suddenly occurred to him that the truth would place Mrs. Trevor in an unpleasant position; he had spent the night in her house. A sense of her unselfishness thrilled him and brought with it the desire to protect her.

In the meantime his aunt was awaiting his answer.

He looked into her penetrating eyes from the baffling depths of his own.

“I took a boat and rowed up the Sound,” he said. “I wished to think out a poem, and the water always helps me.”

And then he drew a long breath and raised his head proudly, almost triumphantly. He felt ten years older. He had lied for a woman! The blood rushed through his veins faster for a moment, and he mentally kissed the white small hands which had clasped his head a few hours before.

“Your poem seems to have been a success,” remarked his aunt, dryly.

“Yes,” he said, looking calmly at her, “it was. But I am more sorry than I can say to have put you to so much worry and trouble. I was a brute not to have sent you word. Will—will it prevent my having any breakfast? I could eat an ox.”

“Go into the dining-room,” said Mrs. Brewster, severely, “breakfast is waiting for you.”

IX.

"Well, I never thought of it personally," said Mark, "but knowing the strength and solitariness of the artistic nature, I can safely assert that no artist worth the name could love a mere human being better than his art. He can love, of course, but it will occupy, say, one-third of his life."

Redfield Hopkins picked up a stone impatiently and threw it into the lake.

"A mere human being? You speak as if man were not the highest of God's achievements."

Mark lifted his shoulders. "God created man, and man created literature."

Hopkins laughed outright. "I admire your egoism, at least. It is sublime. Do you mean to say that that is all God had in view when He created man?"

"Perhaps not. I merely mean that since He has allowed man to create something better than himself, He has nothing to say if an occasional man prefers it to his own kind."

"You speak from the viewing-point of a man of genius, which is a narrow one, genius being rare. You are too young to have lived much, especially as you have been too absorbed with your imagination to dabble in facts. I am no older, it is true, but I have been in love several times, and have seen a fair share of the byways of life wherein the ladies of the lower ten thousand take their constitutionals. I can tell you that when the human element gets hold of you, you are no stronger than a beam in the middle of a burning house, and you go into love head foremost and remain with your heels kicking in the air. Oh, I have seen it a hundred times. My own case is nothing. Do you remember Ned Griswold? He was the brainiest man in his class. Talked like a book and graduated at seventeen. Drank himself to death because a woman wouldn't have him. Then there was Jack Latimer. We all predicted that Harvard would have the honor of giving to America the first artist of his day and generation. What did he do but go and study medicine because the girl he was in love with did not approve of poor artists and Bohemia generally. He is now flourishing in his father-in-law's practice, and is getting stout and has six brats to feed. But he looks quite happy, and I never heard him say that he regretted it."

"Probably he does not. He is not a case in point, for he was not a man of genius. He was a clever painter and tremendously popular. The combination does not make genius, although the world has pulled the wool over its eyes several times in that regard. Cleverness, the great American characteristic, he possessed to an unusual degree, but there was never anything in his work to

make you marvel, to lift you up; in a word, to suggest the unsuspected wonders revealed by a microscope. As for Griswold, he was stuffed full of other men's lore, and he redelivered it in ponderous and impressive sentences. He absorbed everything and gave out nothing. Genius is the faculty of creating something out of nothing, of seeing what does not show itself to common eyes, of giving the world a new figure clothed in a new garment. And the man who can do that can never be dominated by a weaker passion—beyond the moment. I may not have gone through the actual throes of love, but I understand it, respect it, and know my own capacity, or rather the capacity of my kind; I have not spent much time in self-analysis. I shall love, of course, with passion, affection, and friendship; I feel capable of all three, as well as of tenacity. And if I speak from my viewing-point only, I at least understand it quite as well as you do yours. It is always a mistake to generalize. Men are not all cut out with the same pair of scissors, except in superficial traits, and the unrecognition of this fact has been the stumbling block of many a would-be analyst. If I loved a woman I would have her, if I stood the Sound on end. Having her, I should continue to love her, if she were in sympathy with me; but she could never control me mentally nor sit on high with my work. As for giving it up one year of this short life to please her—I should hate her if she proposed such a thing. She *must* accept the second place, for I should be incapable of offering her the first. Art is as much a master as a slave. You are dominated by the spirit of it while you are pressing the soft clay between your hands. And then, when ambition grafts itself on success—my God! the combination is appalling. Just imagine a 'mere human being' trying to rival that. But there is no reason why a man of genius should not be a married man and happy, if his wife is sympathetic and knows when to let him alone. Clear out. I want to take a swim, and the lake is not big enough for two."

Redfield obediently went home. The lake lay in the midst of a thick chestnut wood on the edge of the Brewster estate, and was reserved for swimming. To-day Mark lay in the water longer than usual, floating idly. In addition to the mental supineness due to reaction, was a certain physical languor, which he did not understand. His health was too vigorous to resent a night's toil. Moreover, it was pleasant; so it could hardly be allied with illness; and he drifted contentedly with his face upturned to the heat-faded sky, his body moving gently in the warm luxurious water. Finally, he floated into a little wing of the lake where the water was cold, so thick were the embracing boughs above. Green were the low banks, green the slender trees, green the thousand leaves reflected in the pool. So quiet was the surface that serpent-stemmed vines seemed rising from the pebbled floor to twine about the long body lying motionless above them. So thick were the branches the pool

seemed but the floor of a cave, but through a rift in the crowding trees, a patch of sunlight quivered affrightedly in the gloom.

Mark found in this corner that absolute quiet which said so much more to him than the most magical of earth's sounds. Around the outer lake the birds sang, but the darkness repelled them here, and only the leaves made silent music. The chill touched him after a time and he shot out to the soft waters of the lake, darting back and forth until the blood in his veins was warm once more. Then he lay looking at the dense wood with the black shadows in its narrow aisles. The thick trees closed the vista, and the wood looked as if it might be infinite, primeval. His imagination half opened its eyes, and he saw a prehistoric self roaming amidst the trees, on the edge of chaos, the hills and forests, the valleys and plains of the convulsing earth as yet untangled, his echoless solitude unshared. Running up and down the aisles of the green wood, bounding in the air like a deer, leaping over fallen trees, throwing himself on the soft, green earth, and kissing it with the passion of a lover; once leaping far out into the lake, breaking the surface into swinging waves——

He came to himself with a gasp. His mouth was full of water.

X.

Mark Saltonstall, like all men of genius, was, as he had admitted, an egoist. Not vain or conceited, but born with a supreme consciousness of power, and a habit of focusing the world to his own large, but individual, vision. A natural phase of this self-consciousness was his proneness to morbid attacks of self-doubt, when he questioned whether his genius were not youthful efflorescence; his ambition, self-love; his enthusiasms, gush. At such times the world became a blank and he wanted to die. It was in one of these moods that he sought Boradil the next evening.

She was sitting on the verandah as he walked up the path. A white shawl was drawn about her head and bust, and she sat a little sidewise, leaning back. It was a graceful attitude, full of repose, and she looked very young. Mark threw himself heavily in a chair opposite; his face was sullen, and more like carven granite than usual. Boradil divined at once that the blues held him fast, and while talking of indifferent things, let him feel her sympathy in every inflection of her voice. He slid down at her feet after a time, and put his head on her lap like an indulged child.

"What is the trouble?" she asked. She did not put her hand to his head, but he was not repulsed.

"I have been wondering—I often do—if life as a whole is worth while as compared to the little we are allowed to get out of it. On Friday night I was mad with enthusiasm, bursting with fervor. I felt the equal of any man, living or dead. To-night I feel commonplace, empty, cold."

"I think Aunt Anne has something to do with it this time," he continued, after a moment; "that woman has the most blighting effect on me. I talked to her for two hours last evening, and she obtained that peculiar and strong, if temporary, control over me, that commonplace people always do—she made *me* feel commonplace. It is the same when I read a cleverly-trashy book; I feel for the moment that I do not know the difference between such stuff and high achievement. I never have this experience with a man who is my superior in knowledge, or when I read a great book. I am only stimulated and encouraged then, never depressed because someone else has splendid gifts. I do not mean that Aunt Anne is a nonentity. On the contrary, she has character and individuality of a strong, if conventional, sort. I mean that her 'thinker' and all her aims and ambitions are deadly commonplace, and, what is worse, that she has a secret contempt for literature and artistic ambition. I feel sure that she has far more respect for the leader of a german than for any author living or dead.

She never acknowledges this, but she conveys it; and as I hear her talk with lingering pride of ‘swells’ and ‘position,’ ‘social honors’ and ‘good form,’ I feel as if my head were slowly flattening, and I find myself wondering if I am not all wrong and she all right. I have felt this often—this tremendous psychological power of *atmosphere* (I do not know what other word to give it; but it is certainly foggy and nearly chokes me), but never so strongly as with her; probably because in her way she is such a clever woman, and delivers her narrow views with such calm belief in her infallibility. She exclaims with a burst of actual enthusiasm, ‘Margaret Hunt is the swellest woman in America,’ and I feel a snob myself and experience a contempt for literature. She dilates upon the polished elegance of her sons-in-law, and I feel like an awkward giant and aspire to be approved by my cousins, who would probably bore me to death in half an hour. Of course this is all of the moment, but while it lasts it has a bad effect on a sensitive nature. It gives one a listless disgust of life that is worse than fierce despair. What is the use of denying it—I need to be flattered, encouraged—and continually. It does not make me conceited. It merely keeps me out of the slough. The higher the pedestal I am put on, the better work I can do. Abuse, even stinging criticism, stimulates me, but the calm superiority of inferior minds simply demoralizes me.”

“Then you should get away from such people as quickly as possible. You owe a more peremptory duty to yourself than to your kinspeople.”

“I cannot go without leaving you, and I never wish to do that. If I leave my aunt’s house I must leave Danforth, for I have no excuse to go to an hotel.”

“I wish I could ask you here,” she said, regretfully, “but it would never do. I am all alone, you see, and young as you are, people are always waiting for something to gossip about, especially in a little place like this.”

“Do you know,” he exclaimed suddenly, “it was awfully good of you to let me stay here all night, and I was a brute to be so thoughtless.”

“Sometimes things cannot be helped. To have interrupted you would have been an unpardonable act of petty egotism, and later, immediate rest seemed to me imperative.”

“Your one instinct was to take care of me,” he said, triumphantly.

“Fortunately no one saw you,” she answered, evasively.

“You are an angel, all the same, or what is better, a perfect woman. I do not wish you were my mother—I cannot; it is too ridiculous. But I do wish you were something to me, and that I could live with you always. Your effect on me is the exact opposite of Aunt Anne Brewster’s. My blues have gone

already. You make me feel that I am equal to the achievement of my wildest ambitions. You say little; it is your mysterious power. It is because you understand and sympathize, respect, and above all *believe*. I feel sure you never doubt me, and that you place me one or two planes higher than the leader of a cotillion. With you I should never be blue or discouraged; or if moods came from reaction you would flatter them away, but so subtly that I should not recognize the art until I analyzed you in the solitude of my room—as I do every night. I understand you, but it only makes me like you the better. Ah! why cannot I live with you? Only commonplace people were made for conditions. For the matter of that I might get my father to come and live with us; then it would be all right. Or you might come and live with us in Boston."

A faint smile touched her mouth. "It is a sad day for a woman's vanity when the conventions no longer concern themselves with her. Perhaps that consoles me for being denied the pleasure of living with two delightful men—for I make sure your father is delightful. No; I must live here by myself and be content with flying visits from you. Perhaps, however, I may go to Boston next winter."

"Will you promise me that?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes; why not? I should like to spend a winter in Boston. I have not gone before because I dreaded being lonesome in a great city. I do not care for Anne Brewster and her family, and I know no one else there."

"I will show you every inch of Boston and introduce some splendid men to you—big men, big, I mean, with talent and brains."

"I like intellectual men. I never have pretended to be clever myself, but for some reason I can get along better with clever men than with mediocrities. I suppose it is because I hate to talk and like to listen."

"Clever men will always worship you, because you draw out the best that is in them and spur their desire to win your admiration. You have an air of being interested only in their best, and of being equally sure that it is there."

"Will you do something for me!" he added abruptly, after a moment.

"What?"

"Spend a whole night in the woods with me?"

"What!"

"It is a romantic fancy, but I always cherished a wish to walk about all night with an absolutely companionable woman, even before I believed that she existed outside of my imagination. I have often spent whole nights

tramping about with my father. But with you it would be like the painting of an ideal."

She mused for a moment. The risk and unconventionality appealed to her as they do to all women who have spent a goodly number of years in strict observance of the proprieties. No girl ever feels the subtle charm of committing an act open to misinterpretation as does a woman whose face is turned to the west.

And how often does an elderly woman fairly revel in being accused of the sins of youth, and bare her torso at a ball after a fashion to make a girl blush and gasp. Of this development Boradil was incapable, having too exquisite and dainty a womanliness; but she was still a woman.

"Yes," she said, "I will go."

"Then I will be here to-morrow night at ten."

And a little later he left her and whistled gayly all the way home. He was but a boy, after all.

XI.

The next afternoon Elnora Brewster returned home after six years abroad. Mark had quite forgotten her intended arrival when he made plans for her first night at home, and in truth he took little interest in her. He had privately made up his mind that if he found her a bore he would ask his aunt's permission to take up his quarters in the old building with his cats and toads.

Reminded of his duty, he went to the station to meet his cousin, and was impressed only by the fact that she looked older than Boradil, although she had not yet recorded her twenty-third birthday. Tall, slender, and perfectly poised, she had that air of absolute repose which a woman rarely acquires before thirty, and more rarely still before marriage. She looked as if nothing could startle her, nothing shake her still self-command. Her face was one of remarkable contradictions, almost incongruities. Will held the full red curves of her mouth in check. Beneath her turban was a great coil of ashen hair. Her eyes resembled nothing so much as the moon. They were a brilliant icy-gray, polaric, chilling. The sweeping brows and lashes were like the first shadowing of an eclipse upon a white-faced sky. It was a face both repellent and fascinating, the face of a woman who either had had, or would have, an unique history.

She turned her eyes, with their cold, frank gaze, upon Mark several times during the drive to the house, and found him the most satisfactory man she had seen; such a face and head could only belong to a man of remarkable mental endowment.

She did not attract Mark. He found her cold, somewhat washed-out, thoroughly unsympathetic, and he addressed most of his remarks to Mr. Brewster, who had been in Boston during his nephew's visit, awaiting the return of his daughter. Mark did not find him more interesting. The hobby of that amiable gentleman's life was gardening, and he rarely accompanied his wife to her native town.

Mrs. Brewster and her daughter greeted one another as calmly as if they had parted the day before, and Mark saw no more of his cousin until supper. When, just as the bell sounded, he went out to the verandah and saw her clad from throat to foot in cactus-red gauze, standing like a tongue of flame against the gray sky, he confessed that she was washed-out no longer, and looked the reverse of commonplace.

During supper the conversation was exclusively of the great people Elnora had met abroad and the court balls she had attended. Mark shut up like an

oyster, but lacked the bivalve's ear-fitting shell. Gloom sat upon his face, and once more he floundered abjectly in a shallow lake and forgot the existence of the ocean.

Elnora followed him to the verandah after supper, and began talking at once about art. She had done the galleries and studios of Europe with exactness and discrimination, and told Mark a great deal that he was eager to hear. Then she spoke of poetry, conveying much flattery with subtle art. She began to interest Mark. With the keen perception of the analyst he saw exactly how artificial she was in manner and sympathies. He found himself comparing every note of her voice, every clever manifestation of interest, every evidence of artistic tact with the divinely natural qualities of the woman whose personality seemed at times to lie in his own. Boradil Trevor rarely talked of herself. Elnora, more rarely still. But the former forgot her individuality, the latter suppressed hers. Only a man as close to nature as Mark Saltonstall could feel the difference.

She further interested him because there was something indefinably mysterious about her. Little as he knew of girls, he had his desultory ideals, and Boradil with her forty-six years was closer to them than Elnora Brewster. He startled her with a sudden question.

"Why are you as much a woman of the world as Aunt Anne?" he demanded. "You are only twenty-two."

"Think of the experience I have had during the last four years; ever since I finished school I have not been out of society for a month at a time, and thanks to our minister's wife and one or two great people who took a fancy to me, I have had a brilliant and unusual experience."

"But you give one the impression that life could teach you nothing more."

Miss Brewster glanced past him and down the dark perspective of the avenue.

"Your imagination will weave a highly romantic past for me yet, I have no doubt, whereas my heart would need a sharp knife to pry it open. I take naturally to the world. My nature is one to fashion very rapidly under the chisel of society, and being a fascinating woman I have had the experience of many men. That is all."

This speech, which would have been somewhat conceited between the lips of most women, was delivered with an air so matter-of-fact that it but carried conviction of its truth. Elnora had long ago learned that the world takes its children at their own valuation, and this fact mastered, she had studied the art

of presenting the valuation.

As the hall clock struck half-past nine Mark rose.

“I am going to prowl about the country to-night,” he said. “I often do; and probably will not be back until morning. Tell my aunt not to sit up for me and not to be alarmed.”

“I see you know the value of a reputation for eccentricity,” said his cousin.

“That is a good idea,” he replied, with a laugh. “Good-night.”

XII.

Before he had walked a quarter of a mile he had forgotten Elnora Brewster; he still felt unpoised and longed for Boradil Trevor's unique power of adjustment.

She was walking up and down the verandah, muffled in a white shawl, her full, soft gown of violet mull floating about her. She came down the steps as he appeared, and they went toward the wood together.

"You are sure you will not be tired—staying out all night?" he asked, with sudden compunction.

"Positive. I have a constitution of pure steel. That is the reason," with a little laugh, "why I look so young for an old woman."

They were on the edge of a brook, swollen and rocky. Mark put his hands about her waist and swung her across as if she were a child of ten.

"What is your age to my strength?" he said. "The balance is in my favor."

"You could do as much for your grandmother if she were a slender woman," said Boradil, dryly.

"My grandmother had she lived would, I am convinced, have been a large and portly dame like Aunt Anne Brewster. She would have been too much for even my muscle, and I should have regarded her with corresponding awe."

They reached the wood, and Boradil asked him if he had put any more work on his poem.

"Not yet. I shall wait a week or two and then go at it again in your delightful old library, if you will let me. I simply could not write a line in my aunt's house."

"When will you publish it?"

"Oh, God knows," he said, impatiently. "The moment I conceive an idea I am mad to put it on the world and hear people talking of it. It is the wisdom of the house-fly which asserts that all high genius is above ambition. Recognition and approbation are the very breath of life to it—except in isolated cases. I want to be acknowledged not only a master but the master, and yet I know that I must wait years; that no matter what my gifts, only years of hard work will perfect me as an artist—without which raw talent is worth nothing. One day I suppose life will seem short. Now it seems terribly long. I want to leap over the next ten years and hear myself called the greatest poet of modern times. Do

you think that I am a dreamer, mad with my own vanity?" he demanded, savagely; "but that is what I want, nothing less! I hate mediocrity as I hate commonplace people. If I did not think I could one day stand alone on the highest pinnacle, I would row out on the Sound some stormy night and turn my boat upside down."

"And when you are great—will you be content?—when you have nothing more to strive for? When you have distanced your rivals and silenced dispute, will not half the flavor be gone?"

"No; for then I shall try to be as great as those who are dead. There is no limit for ambition. Oh, if you knew what a blessed relief it is to say all this to you! I have never revealed one-tenth as much even to my father. Most people do not suspect my ambition; they think the delight of creating occupies me alone. But I am willing to lay bare my very soul to you. You not only understand—you have the power of flashing before me my dreams materialized."

A few moments later he burst out suddenly: "A dreadful thought comes to me at times. I have genius, but it is on the old lines. That is to say, that in spite of my individuality and even originality, I am but a poet as many others have been. Suppose that posterity decides that the poets who have gone before my generation are sufficient for literature, that it is weary of repetition. Suppose, maddening thought! that the man of my generation who will stand to posterity as the great and representative man of this age, will discover a new form of expression—a form that is neither poetry, novel, romance, history, biography, essay. And that has not fallen to my lot——"

"Hush," said Boradil. "Why do you torment yourself? And why should you not be the man? You are but twenty-two, and many men of genius have stumbled for years before finding the mine which made them discoverers. Wait until you are fifty before you begin to concern yourself with posterity or unborn rivals."

"Yes, you are right," he said, gratefully. "You always are."

They strolled up and down the dim wood, hearing the town clock clang the hours, and talking of many things. Mark, like all imaginative minds, embodied the people of history who had interested him, and he discussed them as eagerly with Boradil as his aunt and cousin discussed the midgets of their little world. They rambled through old Egypt and sat on the thrones of the Pharaohs; the stern barbaric beauty of the time hid the woodland. They danced at Versailles in ruffles and patches, and supped with the young Bonapartes in their Corsican home. Mark with his glittering power personified all, and Boradil thrilled with

a sense of having put her foot on the magnetic pole of a new world.

They turned into a little clearing and Boradil, leaning against a tree, looked up at Mark as he stood with the moon shining on his face. The white glare made him look more like a creature of antique granite than ever—hewn with a lost art. But the grand calm curves of his mouth were pulsing with the red torrents of youth, and under his lids the unmeasurable darkness of his eyes seemed crossed with flame, as when a torch flares suddenly in the gloom of a cave.

She raised her eyes to the gray-blue sky, thick with marching gold. Her pure profile lay like carven pearl against the dark leaves, and the beautiful line of her throat rose high above the fleecy shawl. Mark gazed at her enraptured—at first as he would stand breathless before an exquisite work of art. Then as he looked his artistic sense withdrew and he made a sudden overwhelming discovery. He realized that he was a man.

For a moment more he gazed in silence, his muscles rigid, his nostrils expanded, his eyelids flung upward as if scorched by the fires beneath, his breath coming in short gasps. So may the first man have looked when he beheld woman. An extraordinary languor seized him and he trembled violently, then that left him and he stamped his foot on the ground with a loud cry. It was the cry of a savage who feels the boundless freedom of an unpeopled world, realizes that it is his, that he is king, omnipotent. At that moment he was the living, quivering incarnation of elemental man, the personification of the world's youth and vital riches, a creator.

The woman turned quickly at the cry and looked for a moment into his blazing imperious eyes. Then she too gave a cry. She covered her face with her hands and cowered against the tree.

He approached hesitatingly, yet with eager step. She had suddenly become the representative of a new idea, almost another being. He hardly knew what he wished. He drew to her as to a magnet, yet with rapturous fear.

She threw out her hands, motioning him back, and they touched his. He clutched them fast, and the veil was rent that hid from him the great mystery of sex. He flung them from him and caught the woman in his embrace. He had no purpose nor desire beyond the moment; he was but a creature actuated by primeval instinct. Boradil lay passive in his arms. In her wide eyes was an expression of horror fighting with rapture; the knowledge of age and the knowledge of youth.

Then the first book of his life closed; he bent his head and kissed the woman.

His arms relaxed suddenly, and Boradil slipped from his embrace and ran through the wood. He made no attempt to follow her.

XIII.

Boradil sped down the hill to her home, keeping the road by instinct only, letting herself in mechanically at the side door, never pausing until locked in her room. Then she dropped upon a chair and pressed her hands to her face until the blood threatened to start from the nails.

Oh, mysterious heart of woman, locked and tepid for nearly two-score years and ten of woman's allotted time! What an awakening! What a travesty on the sentimental ardors of youth! What mockery in that narrowing end of the future's perspective! What a tragedy of youthful passion and relentless array of years! Age brings with it the more dignified affections of nature, oh, Boradil Trevor! The wider range of interests, the calm and peace of the long shadows on the hillside. You are forty-six! forty-six! forty-six! Boradil Trevor; the age of many a grandmother; yet here you are thrilling and quivering under the kiss of a boy, passionate as a girl in her first awakening. What have you to do with passion, O Boradil Trevor! Go to the daily drivel of your household needs and social obligations. Squeeze your heart into a tumbler and cast it upon the great river of life, where it belongs. What right have you to happiness, since the world, that omnipotent, infallible monarch, before whom even God hides his face abashed, has decreed that a woman of two-score years and ten shall eat of autumn leaves and turn from the scent of violets? True, God made you as you are. If you are shaken with passion at the dignified age of forty-six; if your heart is great with one grand unselfish single-purposed love; if you are possessed of every qualification for happiness, yielding and receiving; if your nature is but the richer, fuller, stronger for its unconscious sleep—why, what of that? The World, O Boradil Trevor! says thou shalt not transgress its holy commandments and mate your forty-six perfect, beautiful years with twenty-two groping revolutions of life's wheel—and complete the man. Why weep? Why beat your pretty little white hands against the bronze grinning mask of Fate? Surely you had your day—your youth. True, love did not come then. He played you a shabby trick, skulked in waiting for the serious dignity of your two-score years and ten. But what of that? A mere accident. One cares nothing for reasons in this world, O Boradil Trevor! Results alone concern us. There is no excuse for failure. You lost your youth without knowing its joys: that is the beginning and the end. You have no right to shame your sex and take them now.

Boradil's white rigid fingers curved upward, spreading apart. She looked through them as through the bars of a cage. Only the moon lit the room, but it shone athwart her haggard horrified eyes.

Every exquisite tumult of first love, every imperious desire for surrender, every supreme longing for mate and union she had felt to-night for the first time in her forty-six years. And felt them for a boy who might have been the youngest of many children. She gave a hoarse, angry cry. The sweet nature of the woman was gall and wormwood, bitter, rebellious, against the outrageous trick that fate had played her. For the first time in her life she felt that she had been cheated and defrauded; she felt the shameful waste of her best and richest years. Above all, alas! alas! she felt the weight of time, the meagreness of the future. But if that blank past had to be, and this strange intoxicating love-rose had to blow in the gray level of her years, why could not a man of her own age have stooped and plucked it with her? Why could not she have loved Mr. Irving? That would be a calm and decorous union, and the world would have pattered its approval.

Her eyes grew as rigid as the white bars they stared through. What use to ring the changes on the eternal unanswering Why? She loved Mark Saltonstall, and that was the question to face. In spite of the passion that had struck her own into life, she did not believe that he really loved her. No danger that he would wish to marry her! The enthrallment of the hour had given him that sudden knowledge of his manhood which is an episode in the lives of all men. She was the one woman near—that was all.

Her mouth had lost its pink. The lips curled inward against the set teeth. She was not a beautiful woman in that hour. In her breast tolled forty-six knells, slowly, loudly, with long vibration. Then again—and again. She wanted to scream, to shriek, to curse. But the tragedy was too deep for vocal expression. She sat stiff and speechless, feeling as if each passing moment were another year, adding fresh silver to her hair, etching lines, revolving her nearer the end, already so close.

She was an old woman—old woman—old woman. An owl hooting by the window seemed to intone the words of her soul's monody. And she loved a man of twenty-two. Oh! the hideous irony of it. How she would have ridiculed another woman discovered guilty of such a folly. In spite of the intense sympathy of her nature, this was a phase of human weakness for which she could have had only impatience and contempt. Now and again she doubted it of herself. To-morrow's sun must surely mock at the vapors of the night. Then she shuddered. She knew that she had loved Mark Saltonstall the night she had met him. Only its preposterousness had kept the knowledge from her until to-night.

Her hands suddenly dropped to her chest, showing the livid imprints they had made on her face. For a moment she clutched at her gown, striving to tear

it apart, then fell gropingly to the floor.

XIV.

At three the next day the maid brought up word that Mark Saltonstall was below. Boradil, who was lying on a lounge in her darkened room, told the girl so crossly to excuse her that the devoted servant stared in amazement. Boradil's nerves were taut. Even her inactive felinity had reared its graceful head and longed to scratch someone with its sharp thoroughbred claws. She scarcely recognized herself. Truly, her placid existence had given her but an occasional hint of the heights and depths of her woman's nature.

The maid went down-stairs and returned with a note.

"I must see you," it said. "I shall wait until you are better if it is not until to-morrow." Boradil hesitated a few minutes, then told the maid to say she would go down presently. When she was alone she threw apart the blinds and stood before the mirror. She looked haggard, but her hair was still brown and no wrinkles had come in the night. Her mouth, however, had a hard look, unusual to it, and bitterness was in her eyes. After some deliberation, vanity triumphed over the indifference born of disgust, and she covered the severe front of her black gown with a kerchief of white mull and lace, and twisted her hair into a softer knot, fluffing it about her face. She was almost herself again. Her toilet completed, she stood motionless for a few moments, her hands locked together, her face stinging with a sudden rush of blood. She turned sharply from the ordeal of meeting this man, this boy who must look upon her with wondering contempt—and who had doubtless come to apologize! Then an idea came to her aid. He must know, that is, if he had any coherent remembrance of those moments, that she had been helpless in his arms, that if she had made any attempt to free herself, he in his greater strength would not have noticed it. Still, the position had been a ridiculous one, and she twisted her hands in futile disgust; then summoned her pride and went below.

Mark was standing at the window with his arms folded. He was as white as a dark man can be, and his lids almost covered his eyes. In some inscrutable way he looked older. The semblance of boyishness, at least, had left him for the time.

Boradil greeted him with a cold dignity as unlike her usual manner as snow to the flower it crushes, and he flushed darkly, his lids lifting a little. It was a horribly awkward moment—a moment in which both would gladly have seen the world flash back to its original vapor.

She sat down in a high-backed chair, and crossed her hands on her lap. She noticed vaguely that they looked very white on the black gown. Mark shook

suddenly from head to foot, as if his will were knouting his nerves into subjection, then wheeled a chair directly in front of her and sat down.

"You are angry with me," he said, rapidly. "You look upon me as a ridiculous fool of a boy who lost his head, and dared—presumed to touch you. Tell me—tell me, is that what you think?"

Boradil looked hard at her hands. "I think it was unfortunate," she said, coldly. "Our friendship was a very pleasant one. It was a pity to end it."

"Don't say that it is ended," he cried, sharply. "Don't say that!" He covered her hands suddenly with his and thrust his face beneath her own.

"Do you not love me at all?" he whispered, hoarsely. "That—that—that could not be."

"Hush!" she said, trying to draw away her hands from him. "What are you talking about?"

"Boradil!" he cried, loudly. He swept his two hands about her face and forced her head back against the chair, looking into her eyes with terrified entreaty. "Boradil!" he cried, "you do love me. I felt it last night. Mad as I was, I felt that. But say it. Say it!"

She let her face sink down into his hands, turning it slowly from side to side as if grateful for their warmth.

"What do you mean?" she whispered. "It is not possible that you love me."

"Not possible? What do *you* mean? Why, I idolize you! I love you and love in one. Do you know what that means? Do you think every man feels that if he lives three lifetimes? Look at me."

She raised her head. Her eyes seemed swimming in their melted crystal. Her mouth was pink again, and parted. But only for a moment. She sprang suddenly to her feet, thrusting Mark from her. She tore the soft mull and lace from her neck, and flung it to the floor. She thrust her hands into her hair, parting it at the brow, and dragging it in hard strands down each side of her face. In that moment she touched the supremest pinnacle of woman's bitterness and despair.

"Look at me!" she screamed. "Look at me and see me for what I am—an old woman! A woman who might have been the mother of a family before you were born. A woman nearly half a century old. God! do you understand now how old I am? And you love me, *me*, you a boy hardly out of your teens, who will have barely begun to live when I am tottering about with a cane, trying to make people understand my toothless words! Lord! Lord! the irony of it! the

horror! the cruelty! And I have been happy in being alive! Happy! Why, I would not have lived a moment without cursing my birth if I could have foreseen the end. I tell you there is no tragedy of youth which can touch the horror of what I feel to-day." She turned upon him with blazing eyes, still holding the hair stiff and straight about her face. "Go!" she cried. "Go to some girl who can give you youth for youth. Go to some woman who is beginning life, not ending it. Go! Go! Go! and forget your grandmother."

Mark had watched her with a sort of rapture; passion was pushed aside for the moment by a new link in the evolution of his manhood. He saw a woman who loved him, but he saw also a terrible suffering and despair, and pity and a great desire to comfort and protect awoke within him.

He went to her and took both hands in one of his; with the other he pushed her hair back to its waves and curls. Then he picked up the mull and put it awkwardly about her. She made no resistance; vitality seemed suddenly to have left her. He put both arms about her and drew her down upon a sofa.

"Listen to me," he said. "Love has nothing to do with years. It is an instinct, not a thing of law and line. If you happened to be born first, that was an accident. Nothing can alter the fact that you are the only woman in this world for me. Our natures fit and we make a complete whole. We will never be able to remember where the one begins and the other ends. You have eternal youth in your heart; I was born at a moment when the divine rays of the ages were at focus, and they pierced my brain. You will never be old; I will never be young. You have never lived; I can never live except as part of you."

Boradil listened, half incredulously, but feeling the force of his deliberated words. When he had finished she put her head between her hands and burst into tears. With the tears passed the bitterness, and the sweetness of her nature resumed its sway.

Mark, with his sensitive nature, felt the meaning of those tears, and he held her close with a man's strong sympathy. In that moment he was older than she.

She dried her eyes after a time, and drawing down his face, kissed him gently, then withdrew from his arms.

"I am willing to grant all that you say," she said, "and I shall love you always and with thankfulness that I have felt love at last. But you must leave me, and at once. There is no other——"

"We will be married at once," he said.

"It is for me to decide that, and it can never be. You will rebel now, but one day you will understand. It would be well enough for a few years—then

you would hate me for having taken advantage of a boyish infatuation. Such a marriage would be preposterous. I should be little better than criminal to permit it. Think, Mark—when you are thirty, I will be sixty. When you are forty, I will be seventy——”

“I can do my own arithmetic, thank you. When you are seventy you will be no older than you are now. A woman like you remains young forever. Go to history and find out. As for the rest, I answered all your arguments a few moments ago. Do you want me to say it all over again?”

“Mark, you must listen to reason——”

“I listen most attentively to the voice of reason. Otherwise I should go and be miserable because it does not happen to be the custom for men to marry women older than themselves. My God! because the world wags one way, does it follow in logical sequence that that is the right way? Has it not admitted again and again that it was all wrong and faced to the right about? Once a woman would have been stoned from the stage. Now, when an actor wishes to make himself particularly ridiculous he dresses up in woman’s clothes. Once divorce was criminal. To-day it is fashionable. Once the Catholic was burned at the stake. Then the Catholic broiled the Protestant. Then the Protestant wanted to lay Science in ashes, and now Science has the Protestant on a gridiron. You and I are ahead of our times, that is all. The day will come when a man and woman will marry because their natures meet like the arcs of a circle and fit, and for no other reason whatever. Years will not be taken into account. Surely you can rise above this poor little world, which stumbles blindly into its conventions and gets out of them at the first decent opportunity.”

“And suppose I listened to you and acknowledged that you were right? Have you thought of the other consequences—the storms of ridicule, the fury of opposition? Our names would be town talk. Every woman I know would cut me. Every man you met would take care that you knew he thought you a reckless, ridiculous boy. Do you think you could stand that test?”

“Yes,” he said. “I have thought of all that. I have money of my own and we will go abroad at once. I cannot say what my father will think of it, but I believe and hope that he will consent. If he does not I shall be sorry, but it will make no difference. So there is no question of my courage. Have you enough? That is the question.”

“I can stand that,” she said. “It is only you I fear—ten years from now.”

“I absolutely refuse to argue that question any further. Will you marry me?”

“Let me think,” she said. “Let me think.”

She buried her face in her hands and the struggle, although brief, was sharp. Temptation never comes to the young with such force as to the woman whose most precious years are behind her. Youth has an endless vista of change and promise and mystery; it is easy to resist, picturesque to suffer. But when the terrible realization of life’s brevity has awakened, when but a few pictures remain to drift across this mortal diorama, when the past is tasteless and the last short opportunity has come—ah! does the woman live so wise, so foolish, so strong, so weak, so mad, so passionless, as to press the fruit to her nostrils and throw it down untasted?

At least she could make him happy for some years. A younger woman might make him miserable in less. When the time came wherein he looked at her with aversion, she could go and leave him to his own full life. She would have but few years left for suffering, and meanwhile she would know a happiness which she would willingly compress into a single year and know the bitterness of death for fifty. And passion, long unfelt, is a tremendous factor in deciding such questions as these.

She raised her head, leaning it back. Her eyes looked like blue ether flecked with stars.

“Yes,” she said, “I will marry you.”

XV.

That evening after supper Mark was sitting with his aunt and cousin on the verandah. Elnora had been talking in her cold brilliant fashion, but came after a time to a pause. Mark took advantage of it and deliberately announced his engagement.

The silence of the ensuing moment rivalled that of his favorite four in the morning. The light from the hall shone on his aunt's face and he saw it grow livid. Her cold gray eyes seemed to vent white flames as she clutched an arm of her chair with either hand and bent herself slowly forward.

"What did you say?" she demanded, in a harsh, cracked voice. "What—did—you—say?"

"I am going to marry Boradil Trevor," he replied, calmly, although his nerves felt like a net-work of electric wires.

Mrs. Brewster's straight mouth curved downward with an expression of disgust and contempt which made her nephew shudder.

"Perhaps," she said, with cutting emphasis, "perhaps it would be more becoming in a boy of your age to speak of Mrs. Trevor with more respect. She is just about my age, and is several years older than your mother would have been had she lived."

"I expect that sort of thing, of course," he said, but he would have given a great deal at that moment to go behind the house and knock a man down. "A philosopher, however, has said that a woman is as old as she looks, and Mrs. Trevor might pass for my younger sister."

It was Mrs. Brewster's turn to flush with anger. She hated many women, but none so cordially as Boradil Trevor. She resented her beauty, her popularity in Danforth, her charm for men, above all her perennial youth. Every human being selects one other for a rival, with or without reason, and Mrs. Brewster could not recall the time when the mention of Boradil Trevor's name or the sight of her lovely face had not kindled within her a dull jealous fire.

"If it is true that you contemplate such an act of—of—adolescent idiocy," she replied, savagely, "she will probably have the pleasure of hearing strangers allude to you as her son. But if she has actually consented to link her old life with your feather-headed youth, she is an unprincipled woman, a bad woman, and deserves legal treatment."

Mark rose. “That will do,” he said, furiously; “you will oblige me by never mentioning her name to me again. And if you will excuse me, I will leave your house to-night.”

Mrs. Brewster, trembling, sprang to her feet, nearly overturning her chair. It was rarely that passion mastered her cold repose, but when it did the devil that dwells in all of us made her little better than a fish-wife.

“You dare to tell me that this thing is true,” she screamed, barring his way. “You dare to tell me that you will disgrace your family and hold us all up to shame and ridicule? I will have your father put you in a mad-house. Do you think I will submit to be the laughing-stock of Boston? What man will marry Elnora? They will all be afraid that she is as big a fool as you are. You shall not, I say. You shall not!”

“I shall not dispute the matter further with you. My father is the only one to whom I am answerable, and we can settle this between ourselves.”

“But I tell you that you shall think of me,” cried the enraged woman, “you ridiculous little fool!” She could not spring, but she hurled herself suddenly upon him and caught him by the shoulder. When she found that she could not shake him, she gave a hoarse choking cry and slapped him violently on the face.

Mark took her hand, and holding it at arm’s length, dropped it gingerly.

“You have done honor to the blood of the Saltonstalls,” he said, with a coolness born of her abandonment. “And it is interesting to learn that the vulgarian is in us all, and that we have only progressed a step beyond barbarism in our centuries. But”—with a cutting emphasis equal to her best—“you make a favored few seem more charming, more refined, more exquisitely feminine by contrast.”

He put her aside, and entering the house, went quickly down the hall; but before he reached the stair a hand slipped through his arm.

“Mark,” said Elnora, softly, “I want to speak to you. Will you come to my room a moment?”

“Yes,” he said, shortly, “I will go if you wish it. But do not say too much; I have had enough for the present.”

“I will not scold you. But there are some things I wish greatly to say. I feel that it is my duty to say them, Mark, for they may prevent your hearing much worse.”

“All right. Fire away.”

She opened the door of her room at the head of the stair. It was a long apartment with two windows facing the south. She lit one of the lamps and drifted to and fro for a moment, her gray gauze gown and twilight hair making her look like a wreath of mist. Mark threw himself into an easy chair and stared moodily at the floor. His aunt's words were not agreeable to recall, and had given him an unpleasant foretaste of what would be said wherever the fame of his marriage should reach.

Elnora sat opposite him and leaned forward, laying her hand on his.

"Mark, dear," she said, "you will understand that what I say is prompted by my love for you, my interest in your great gifts, and by my desire to do my duty."

"You are very good. I do not mind your saying anything you like."

"Mark, have you really made up your mind to take this step?"

"Irrevocably."

"You have thought of all the consequences?"

"There is no argument *she* has not used to dissuade me. We have discussed every point. It was not so easy a matter to get her consent as you may imagine."

"Mark," said Elnora, turning upon him the pale splendor of her ashen eyes, and looking at him with solemn earnestness. "I know just how much you love this woman, I know what the full scorching power of first love means, and I know what an exquisite woman Boradil Trevor is. But, Mark, you have a higher duty to yourself than the gratification of love—the duty to your genius and your future. Think of that future—the intoxication of its successes, the stimulus of rivals and enemies, the most delicious possessions of all—fame and power. I suppose you would argue that so lovely a woman as Boradil would but aid and inspire you, and so she would—if you could but have the divine wisdom to foresee that she is the only woman you could ever love, and that ten, perhaps five, years from now, with ripening character and experience, new ideals and other wants would not come which the woman you loved with your first boy's passion could not satisfy. You have the gift of insight, of prophecy, which goes with the creative mind; cannot your imagination conceive such a moment?"

"No," he said, "it cannot. I shall never love another woman. She satisfies every want of my nature, and no woman does that twice. She goes with me into my world of ideals and is as much at home there as myself. In some mysterious way she possesses what I lack, and conveys it to me without word

or look. I have gone to her despairing because thoughts I searched for would not come, and when with her found them arranging themselves in my mind. Do you think that two women could possess that power over me?"

"But, Mark, that might be coincidence, you know. And in your great love for her you may have idealized her. You may be loving love with the first ardor of your manhood, not Boradil. And it is for both your sakes—for you must know that she could be even more miserable than you—that I ask you to listen to the plan I have to propose."

"Well, what is it?"

"Mark, I repeat that with a man or woman of your years love is only passion. That gratified, the love goes. Do not marry this woman. Learn—without taking the world into your confidence—whether you love her lastingly or not. If at the end of a year you still love her, you may believe in yourself and it will be safe to marry her. If you find that you have made a mistake, no harm will have been done and everything be gained."

He had flung her hand from him as if its soft skin had turned to scales.

"How dare you insult such a woman?" he gasped, purple with rage. "How dare you?"

She smiled. "My dear boy, if you were ten years older you would speak of wisdom, not of insult."

He put his face close to hers, his wrath drowned in sudden curiosity.

"How is it that you know so much?" he demanded with his crude abruptness.

The pink color rose to her hair. Then she crossed the room and unlocked a drawer in a quaint old chest. She lifted out a large portfolio like those used for photographs of famous pictures and laid it on a table.

"Come here," she said.

Mark, much mystified, went to her side, and she opened the portfolio, displaying three large squares of cardboard. The surface of but one was visible, and on it was mounted a pen and ink drawing as fine and skilful as an etching.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"I see what I suppose is a court ball. That looks like royalty over there, and there are enough diplomats hanging about to boil Europe alive. All these men and women look like Germans or—ah! that is you!"

He lifted the picture, holding it nearer the lamp. Elnora was evidently

resting from the dance, and over her was bending a man whose face Mark could not see. But although his head was turned, the great star on his breast and the white ribbon on his shoulder proclaimed his rank.

He put down the sketch and took up the next. The bold outlines and battlements of a mediæval castle towered in the background. A few stars lit a park, a wilderness in the night, bleak and mysterious. Half-hidden by the shadows were two figures clasped in close embrace. Elnora's white profile was cut against the dark like the new moon on night, but again the face of the man was unseen, although his figure was unmistakably that of the man whose devotion had been indicated in the other picture. Passion was in his straining arms, and in the sudden eager downward sweep of his head.

Mark hastily sent the sketch after the first, interested to the core of his romantic nature. The third scene was a chapel, and again it was night. The shadows thronged like the buried dead in every part save by the altar. Behind the chancel rail stood a priest with more fear than holiness on his face. Before him stood a man and a woman. The woman's back was also turned this time, but there was no mistaking the proud repose of head and the splendid poise of shoulders. Near them stood two men in full uniform, one of them glancing furtively about the chapel. The carved beams, the stately altar, the rich pictures, the pointed windows, all were indicated with startling effect; the very shadows seemed to move.

Mark laid the picture down and looked at Elnora. He was deeply interested in her for the first time. She was no longer the conventional young woman.

"This is a real live romance," he said, "and you are a——"

"You must ask me no questions. It is enough to say that that episode in my life is sealed and sepulchred. I have shown you these pictures for an object—in the hope that my experience might be useful to you now. I loved that man with all the passion, all the self-abnegation, all the reckless disregard of consequences of first love. He was intellectual, witty, fascinating. At the end of a year I was so tired of him that I grew to anticipate every inflection of his voice and to speculate which would give me the profoundest feeling of ennui. Now, have my words any weight with you?"

He had watched her with the keen delight of the born analyst, his own affairs for the moment forgotten.

"And what are you going to do with yourself now?" he asked, curiously.

"I wish to marry you!"

Mark actually blushed, but he felt the flattery of being the choice of a

woman with such beauty and such a history.

"I shall never love again," she continued, calmly, "but I wish to marry you because you are a man of genius, and through you I can become famous myself. I wish to have a salon, to have great men at my feet, to be a second Madame Récamier. Men of genius are apt to be low-born, but there is no better blood in America than the Saltonstall's, and you are one of the few men I could endure as a husband."

"Upon my word, Elnora, if I did not love another woman with every drop of blood in my body and every cell in my brain, I believe I would accept your proposal, for you are a stunning woman. But if you are so ambitious, why did you not cling to your——"

"I told you that you must ask no questions," interrupted his cousin. She came close to him and laid her hand on his arm. In the half-light she looked like a dim cloud queen, as softly cold, as subtly enveloping.

"Have I not moved you?" she murmured. "You still persist in your mad determination?"

"You have not moved me," he said, "because you have no argument. You were dazzled by the romance, the adventure, the danger. You loved the man for his rank, his shallow attractions. You will not admit it, but mentally he was your inferior. If he had been the prince of a Boston drawing-room you would have accepted him with no illusions, and a public wedding. You would probably have tired of him during the engagement and foregone the honeymoon. I know that man's mental capacity by the shape of his head."

She had turned her face from the light. "I give you up," she replied, and her even tones betrayed nothing. "But perhaps some day you will remember my advice, cold-blooded though it may be. Well, gang your own gait. I will stand by you."

He gave her hand a grateful pressure. "Thank you for that," he said. "And now good-night. I shall go down to one of the hotels, for I do not care to meet Aunt Anne again. To-morrow morning I shall see Red Hopkins and ask him to circulate the story of my engagement at once. I do this that Mrs. Trevor shall have no chance to retract through any mistaken idea of duty."

"Good-night," she said. "I await the dénouement. And remember"—pointing to the pictures—"no one in America knows of this but you."

"And no one will," he said.

XVI.

Boradil went about for a few days in an atmosphere of half-tones. The step taken, she gave no more regret to the past, shot no more terrifying glances down the future. Her youth had never left her, therefore the first mental shock having passed, the love she felt and received, the profound stirring of her emotions, seemed natural enough. If possible, she looked younger than before. Her face was more mobile, her eyes more luminous, her mouth fuller. Mark spent almost every hour of the day with her, and the sense of fellowship deepened, although they were a little shy about outward demonstrations; it was too new an experience to both.

Mark had written at once to his father, and three days later he went to the station to meet him. Boradil was sitting alone when Mrs. Hopkins's name was brought in. She felt much like sending an excuse, knowing what her friend had come to say, but on second thoughts concluded to have it over at once. So Mrs. Hopkins was shown in.

She greeted Boradil a little stiffly, although her hands were trembling. Then as she seated herself, she blurted out:

"Tell me, Boradil Trevor, is this terrible thing I hear about you true?"

"That I am going to marry Mark Saltonstall? Yes." She spoke calmly, but blushed a little.

Mrs. Hopkins put her handkerchief to her face and burst into tears. "Oh, Boradil! Boradil!" she sobbed, "I never, never would have believed it of you."

Mrs. Trevor made no reply, and in a moment the good lady put down her handkerchief and resumed.

"We were at school together, dear, in the same class, and you know that I love you, and what I feel is only for you. Nothing could ever make me love you less, but I cannot understand this or sympathize with it. I feel so old, so matronly, that such rashness, such youthful folly in a woman my own age is incomprehensible to me. I look at my grown daughters, at my grandchildren, and I marvel that a woman of my age can act like a girl of sixteen. Do you realize, Boradil, that you *might* be like me—stout, careworn?—that you *might* have grandchildren? That it is only an accident—that—that—you—are—not?"

"If I were like you, Hetty," said Boradil, gently, "with a husband I had loved from youth, I should not love any other man, old or young, at any age. But you must remember that I have lived an almost solitary and loveless life; and now that love has come to me at the last moment—I have not the strength

to resist it."

"But such a young man—such a boy, Boradil. How can you love one who might be your son? If it were an older man—Mr. Irving, for instance—I should not say a word. Indeed, no one could blame you, so young-looking and pretty, for marrying again. But that young boy. I cannot understand it."

"Hetty, can you explain to me why you love Mr. Hopkins?"

"I suppose—no; how can we explain those things?"

"Then I can no better explain why I love Mark Saltonstall. I love him absolutely, and if you did not make a mistake in your inexperienced youth, is it likely that I shall make one with my mature judgment?"

"But, Boradil, you know it is an understood fact—everybody says so—that these marriages always turn out badly. Oh, you don't know what people are saying! Everybody is perfectly wild. I hear that even the town and the summer hotel talk of nothing else. And when they are not ridiculing you, dear, and making the most dreadful jokes, they say that his life is ruined, that it is always the case when a young man marries an old—a woman much older than himself. And they say that you will be the most wretched woman in existence two years from now. He will get tired of you and fall in love with some girl. Then he will suffer and make you suffer. Oh, Boradil! I cannot bear to think of it."

"Did not you tell me once, Hetty, that the first two years of your married life—before your children came and cares began—were ideally happy?"

"They were, indeed, Boradil. They were!"

"And would you not willingly bear again all the care and suffering, and petty and heavy trials of the later years, for the sake of having had those two?"

"Gladly, Boradil."

"Then know that for two years of a like happiness I would be willing to drag out the rest of my life in such wretchedness as you have never dreamed of. Such is the imperious demand of my woman's nature for its rights."

"Oh, Boradil, I sympathize with you, I do, I do. And you have made me see just how you feel and are impelled to act. But dear, dear, think of the scandal. How can you face it? You cannot imagine how people are talking. You will be in the papers. I am sure you will."

"I shall not read them."

"And—dearest—I am afraid people will cut you!"

“If in the forty-six years of my life I have not made friends strong enough to stand by me now, they will be well exchanged for what I have found. As I look back it does not seem to me that these same old friends have troubled themselves much about me. They have been absorbed in their own full domestic lives, and have not gone out of their way to make my life less lonely. It does not seem to me that they should weigh very heavily against the dearest wish of my life.”

“I have loved you, Boradil!”

Mrs. Trevor bent forward and laying her two hands about Mrs. Hopkins’s tear-stained face, kissed her affectionately.

“I know you have, and you love me still. You will never desert me, no matter how much you may scold.”

It was impossible to resist Boradil when she chose to be winning, and Mrs. Hopkins straightway put both arms about her, and vowed that she would love her until death, and defend her while breath was in her own body.

She drank the cup of peace and went away soon after, much to Boradil’s relief. She had hardly gone, however, when Mr. Irving was announced. Boradil groaned in spirit, but told the maid to show him in.

He took a chair where he could command a good view of her face, and what he saw in it smote him sorely. It was an acuter pang than he had felt when he heard of her engagement.

“Is this true, Boradil?” he asked, lamely.

“Yes.”

“And you love a boy, although you could not love me!” he burst out, bitterly.

“Yes.”

The monosyllables seemed cruel, but she could think of nothing else to say.

“Do you—do you love him very much, Boradil?”

“Do you think anything else could give me the courage to do such a thing?”

“By heaven, you have got courage! I admire you for that if for nothing else. It is an heroic act, mad and reprehensible as it is.”

“Are you conventional, like the rest of the world?”

“Such a thing is counter to the very laws of nature, assuredly to those of society.”

“I said you were conventional.”

“If one lives in the world and avails himself of the enjoyments of civilization, it is only just to conform to the laws laid down in it. Conventionality is not as ugly a word as many that will be applied to you.”

“You have said that you love me. If you met me now for the first time, and I were but twenty-two, would you love me?”

“You know that I could love no other woman——”

“Would not you wish to marry me?”

“Certainly. I see your drift. But I am a man; it would be an entirely different matter.”

“Why?”

“Because it is always fitting that a man should be older than his wife.”

“You mean it is the custom, an ancient habit. It seems to me no more fitting that a man should marry a woman thirty years his junior, than that a woman should take a husband as many years younger than herself. The one is done every day, and hardly a word is said; the other is a signal for censure and abuse. The world hates to get out of its rut; it resents being taken by surprise. When all women who happen to love men younger than themselves have the courage to marry them, the world will cease to be surprised, and then it will cease to censure. Custom is the only standard we have of right and wrong.” She half smiled as she found herself using Mark’s arguments to herself.

“You have always had a clear head, Boradil, in spite of the fact that you are the most exquisitely feminine woman on earth. But you surely know how disastrous such a marriage must be in the end.”

“Have you never heard of other marriages where age was all that it should be and yet which ended in disaster? Among the thousands of divorces that are granted every year does the rule show that the woman is older than the man, or that they are of nearly equal years? Do you know of so many people who are happy and well-mated? Has your experience taught you—and you a lawyer!—that the conventional difference of years insures a happy union?”

“There are as many happy as unhappy marriages in the world.”

“True; and age has nothing to do with it, else would they all be happy. Happiness grows out of true sympathy and companionship. Love averts the

disasters which are born of the trials of matrimony, not a decorous difference of years. I believe that my chances of happiness are far greater than those of a callow girl who marries the first boy who flatters her."

"Perhaps, Boradil, perhaps." He was not in the mood for arguing. The bitter truth that she loved another man with all the sweet strength of her nature was becoming harder to endure with each word she uttered.

"One thing does not seem to have occurred to you," continued Boradil. "Before I was twenty they married me to a man double my age, and no one seemed to think there was anything incongruous in the match. In fact I was considered very lucky, for he was rich and I was poor. I made no protest, for I was a child, and it seemed a charming thing to have a big house of my own and to be a married woman. I developed so slowly that not until this past week has it ever occurred to me that to be married for twenty-one years to an unloved man was a horror the greater that in my dreaming existence I never suspected it. But no one else seemed to think of it either, or of the wrong of marrying a young girl to a dry and prosaic man of business. And yet now when I wish to be happy and to marry the man of my choice, the world turns upon me and cries, 'Thou fool!' "

Her voice had grown passionate, almost angry, and Mr. Irving stood up as she finished. His face was very white.

"Good-by, Boradil," he said, "I would rather not hear you say any more. Marry this man if you will, and I hope and pray that you may be happy. You have only my good wishes. You deserve nothing but the best that the world can give you."

XVII.

He drove over to Mrs. Brewster's because he wished to get away from his own thoughts, and because he had been bidden there in common with the rest of his circle to meet Elnora Brewster.

Many women and several men were seated on the broad veranda, and it took but a few moments to learn that Boradil Trevor was the sole topic of conversation. Elnora, non-committal, clad in diaphanous black, looked like a placid moon resting on a storm-cloud. Mrs. Brewster was sitting in a straight-backed chair, her cold eyes aflame, her mouth hard. All had appealed to her to make up their minds for them. What would she do? How would she treat Boradil Trevor? What did she think? What had she said to her nephew?

"This is what I will do," said Mrs. Brewster, "I will never speak to either my nephew or Boradil Trevor again. He is a young fool and she is a bad woman." There were several "Oh! Oh's," but Mrs. Brewster went on with the same cold heat. "She is a bad woman because she is nearly fifty years old, and she takes advantage of the foolish passion of a boy of twenty. She deliberately ruins his life, and disgraces his family and her own. I should never respect myself if I spoke to her again. You, of course, can do as you please."

It was evident that most of the company would do as their leader pleased, but a few looked rebellious and disposed to stand by Boradil Trevor. The girls were tittering and sneering; they had all the contempt of inexperience for the weaknesses of their sex; but an occasional woman of maturer years felt a vague sympathy, perhaps envy, for the passion which impelled such reckless defiance of the World—and respected it.

"I wish to say," continued Mrs. Brewster, "that I should be glad to have those who intend to continue their acquaintance with this woman let me know of the fact, as I shall not care to run the risk of meeting her at their houses."

Manifest disturbance followed this declaration of war. Disruption of Danforth's exclusive forty was threatening. People gave each other little apprehensive side-glances; no one seemed to yearn for the honor of speaking first. Before the silence could become awkward Elnora's voice, as silveren as her eyes, made itself heard.

"I would not bother any more just now, mamma," she said; "I hear that Mrs. Trevor intends leaving Danforth at once and for good. That will settle matters."

A sigh of relief swept softly down the veranda, and Mrs. Brewster's guests

began talking with unwonted animation for so warm a day upon a variety of topics in which Boradil Trevor had no place. Mr. Irving made his way over to Elnora. Her tact reminded him of Boradil, and as he talked with her the resemblance deepened. He had not Mark's insight to teach him the spurious from the real, and he paid all a man's tribute to Elnora's manufactured charm.

XVIII.

At eight that evening, as Mrs. Brewster and her daughter were sitting on the veranda, one of the town hacks drove up and Mr. Saltonstall alighted. He was a tall slender man, distinguished and intellectual looking, and bore that fleeting resemblance to his son which a photograph of the wrong side of a face does to the subject.

Mrs. Brewster received him stiffly, but curiosity made her less cold than if she had been already acquainted with the result of his visit. Elnora gave him a soft earnest welcome, patting his hand sympathetically, and he kissed her and told her that she looked like his grandmother, who had been the handsomest of the Saltonstalls. He sat down by her, facing his sister.

"Well?" demanded Mrs. Brewster. "What do you think of this unfortunate and ridiculous business?"

"It is very interesting," said Mr. Saltonstall with a slight, somewhat cynical, smile.

"Very what?"

"Interesting. You know that I loved my wife very deeply, and that since her death I have taken little personal interest in life. But, as I am compelled to live, I find deep and constant amusement in the ever-varying phenomena of human nature. Its problems—like the one which concerns us—are intensely fascinating to me. Think of a woman of forty-six having the mental youthfulness to love a man of twenty-two! What more interesting? And Mark, although I have all a father's affection for him, is far more interesting to me as the genius than as the man, and I have kept a sort of mental diary of each of his successive developments. This is the most significant and entertaining of all."

"Oh, I know of old your cold-blooded way of looking at things," interrupted his sister, impatiently, "and I cannot say that I am at all interested in your peculiar method of taking life. What I wish to know is—what steps are you going to take to prevent your son disgracing himself and his whole family?"

"Oh, I shall let him marry Mrs. Trevor."

"John Saltonstall!"

"Yes; I will give you my reasons if you care to hear them."

Mrs. Brewster was shaking from head to foot, but she wished to keep her self-control before her brother. As she was speechless Mr. Saltonstall

continued.

“I spent an hour with Mrs. Trevor this afternoon, and I am convinced that she is the wife for my son, the woman who will most further his advancement. It is my matured opinion that men of genius should marry women older than themselves. For this reason: when a man has genius his character rarely develops beyond boyhood. He is always more or less of a child, impulsive, irrational, irresponsible. He is like a double flower, growing with a fair show of equality for a while. Then one side begins to draw to it all the sunshine and moisture, leaving the other perfect as far as it goes, perhaps, but stunted for the rest of its time. Therefore when a man of that order marries an undisciplined girl it means the ruin of both. It would not make so much difference about the girl if she were commonplace, which she probably would be, but it would leave him rudderless and incomplete to the end of his days. Now, if he marries a woman more than his age, a woman who possesses the self-control, the patience, the calm, the deliberation, which years alone can bring, a woman who has absorbed experience and knowledge from time as it passes, even if practically little has come to her, such a woman will supply what the man of intellectual endowment lacks, and together they make the perfect whole. Of course she should be intelligent without being intellectual and ambitious; she should have tact and cleverness without genius or even talent. Intellectual women are mentally polygamous——”

At this point Mrs. Brewster rose and looked at her brother with white lips and eyes.

“You are a fool,” she said, and swept into the house.

Elnora leaned forward and fixed her ice-like magnetic eyes on her uncle’s face.

“You make this strange affair very interesting,” she said, “and I want to hear all you have to say about it. You have an extraordinary faculty of putting things in a new light—of changing one’s whole point of view. But there is one thing—surely you do not mean to tell me that you are an advocate of young men marrying women twice their age?”

“Not under all circumstances, no,” he said, warmed to new interest, and stroking her hand as it lay white and cool as a moonbeam on her black gown, “only when a man is over-intellectual—even when not a genius. Then, always. I believe it to be the only possible balance. There must be absolute respect and fellowship in married life and no woman of mature age will respect a young fool or fail to be bored by him after a short period, no matter how his youth and beauty may have conquered her senses. He must counterbalance her

acquired wisdom by superior intellect."

"But, uncle, men of genius are usually passionate to sensuality, and after a time an old woman must cease to have any charm for them."

"I see that you have studied men and done some thinking even if you are a girl; but being a young woman, your knowledge of your sex is naturally limited. A woman of fifty, whose health is perfect, is as young as you are and likely to remain so. Physical youth is not a matter of years, but of good constitution and careful life. Age means loss of heart, and allowing the health, —the body—to run to seed. Neglect one rose-bush and water another of the same age and you will see what I mean. Boradil Trevor, slender and dainty as she is, is wrought of supple steel. The simplicity of her character will preserve her youthful expression, and her woman's vanity and cleverness will look after her complexion and figure. I don't believe Mrs. Trevor ever lost a night's sleep or felt a pang of dyspepsia in her life."

"Well, uncle, you convince me that Mrs. Trevor is the wife for Mark, if he must have one," assented this delectable young diplomat; "but I confess I do not agree with you in thinking that it is necessary for him to marry at all. If he has genius is not that enough? What does he want with personal happiness?"

"My dear Elnora, to say nothing of the fact, already dwelt upon, that he needs ballast, sympathy, and encouragement, love gratified will develop his genius and give him deeper insight. Balked, he would spend a half dozen years eating his heart out and inflicting the public with the false and morbid wails of a blighted life. It would take him many to readjust himself and comprehend life broadly and impersonally. The narrowing and contracting of the ego by early disappointment has taken the best years out of many an artist. Real genius—intuitive wisdom, creative power—can dispense with worldly experience but cannot pass through an unfortunate one of the heart unwarped or unscathed. Human nature is at once too strong and too weak."

He rose and walked up and down the porch, then spoke again:

"I am minded to make you a confession, my charming niece. It is this: Everything that my son is I wished to be. I had the ambition without the gift; I used to lie awake at night, even when I was a college boy, trying to string grandly sounding phrases together and make them rhyme. I used to construct air worlds which I shook like Byron or wherein I preached upon a mount like Shelley. By one of those mysterious evolutions of soul and of mind my offspring combines the desire and the power, the ambition and the genius. Not to call one of those planets up there my own would I lay the slightest blight upon him, put a stone in his path, warp a corner of his brain. I should feel both

a murderer and a suicide. I should feel that I had entered his brain like an assassin and maimed the god who sat there enthroned. If I found this woman unworthy, my power over him is strong enough to enable me to convince him of the fact, and he would recover from a little heartburning none the worse; but as it is—Well, here comes the hack. I told the man to return in an hour. Good-night. There is nothing commonplace about you, by the way; you are as charming a listener as Mrs. Trevor, and you have a face for history. You ought to marry a big man."

"I shall," she said.

Her uncle laughed, and bidding her good-night drove away.

XIX.

Boradil sat alone again the next night. Mr. Saltonstall had asked Mark to ride out into the country with him to visit an old friend, and, all things considered, his son could hardly refuse. He had made Boradil promise, however, to walk with him in the wood at four, and not feeling sleepy she had determined to sit up.

She had been surprised and elated at Mr. Saltonstall's sanction of her marriage, but to-night she was depressed. The late mail had brought her a stinging letter from her brother, who knew how to season his ink with acid and gall. Some one also, had kindly sent her a marked copy of a New York paper containing a letter from a Danforth correspondent. In this letter she was placed in a ridiculous and humiliating light, described by a person who had never seen her, as passée and "made up." A cartoon portrayed a large fleshy prancing woman dragging along an unwilling-looking youngster by a hand soiled with mud pies. Being unused to the sensational world, she was disgusted and indignant that her private life should be unrespected, her most sacred feelings held up to comment and ridicule. It made her feel trivial and vulgar; her delicate pride seemed slipping from her; she ceased for the moment to believe that she was really a gentlewoman; she felt, rather, like a third-rate actress. Her woman's vanity had also received an ugly thrust. She cared nothing for the world, but she did not find it pleasant to learn that it believed her to be faded and common. Of course she had anticipated some notoriety and made a resolution not to look at the papers; but when the marked copy came curiosity had triumphed.

She tore it suddenly into strips and flung it on the hearth. Its vulgarizing influence withdrew after a time, but left discouragement in its wake, and fears began to assail her once more. Mr. Saltonstall had told her that her splendid health made her as young as his son. What if that should give way? What had she left but that? The sympathy of an invalid wife soon ceases to be appreciated by a husband full of impatient vitality. And suppose the sneers of the world should have their effect on Mark at last—after the enthusiasm of his love had begun to temper? She had not thought of this before and the idea filled her with terror. The sensation caused by her marriage would soon die, but never the contemptuous feeling in regard to it? True, neither she nor Mark cared for or intended to be of the world, but they could not live like hermits and they expected to travel. Could he stand that ever-recurring smile? She had no fear for her own steadfastness, but she knew the power of ridicule over men. She put her hands to her face and burst into tears. She was unanchored

again. The bliss of the past few days plunged into the fog-banks of memory. She wondered at her content, the downfall of her reason, the girl-like folly of merging the future into the present. She remembered her doubts of the night she had realized her love. They had been swept aside by Mark Saltonstall's dominant personality and her own passion, but they returned now. What right had she, a weak, insignificant woman, to set at defiance the laws laid down by the world? She felt wretched, forlorn, conventional. What was she but a natural product of these despised conventions? Her brother's letter and that vulgar paper had flung her out of her fool's paradise and made her feel the everyday creature she was. She was not a genius like Mark. There was nothing in her to warrant the committing of such an extraordinary act. What had blinded her to her folly but a passion which was ridiculous in a woman of her age? It was true that Mr. Saltonstall championed her, but might not he be a dreamer, an illogical theorizer? Might not she really be ruining this young man's life as people said? preparing a hell for his later years? Might not such a marriage affect his prospects? If the world was going to laugh at him would it consent to take him seriously as a man of letters? Would not every mention of his name in those loathsome newspapers be coupled with a satire or a joke which would rob him of all dignity, forbid all respect? She dropped her hands with a faint cry. This thought, most appalling of all, had not occurred to her before. She sprang to her feet, hardly knowing where she was bound, what her purpose. She ran down the hall and up the old stair to the tower. Her breath came in little sobs, the hot tears blurred her sight. She felt her way up to the door and stumbled into the little room. The tears lay like blisters on her eyes, but she brushed them away and looked about her. She saw the dirt to-night, the dilapidated chair, stooping like an aged woman, the rotting casement, the broken pane. The moon was high and flooded the dusty cobwebbed room. It looked like the rickety skeleton of a memory's ghost.

She sprang to the window and pushed it up. She saw the populous town, the yachts on the sound. Wild and waste had it all been twenty-five years before! Age had come to it as to her, but age had brought it strength, and peopled its churchyards.

She tugged the neck-band of her gown apart, choking and reeling a little. For the moment her reason left her, and she screamed hoarsely again and again. Every nerve in her body seemed an imp, stabbing and stinging. Every year in her past seemed crowding into the little room with scorching breath and derisive laughter. They rent themselves asunder and became months, then weeks, then days, hours! minutes! seconds! She gasped and struggled for breath. Again she screamed, and again——

At that moment Mark Saltonstall flung open the door, and caught her in his arms.

“For God’s sake what is the matter?” he said. “I heard you scream, and saw you from the road. I thought it was your ghost. What—what—is the matter?”

Her brain swung back to its balance, but she pushed him from her, fearing his touch.

“Go,” she said, “go. I will never marry you. I have seen the whole terrible truth to-night. I could almost say that I am grateful. So help me God, I will never see you again. I am strong at last. I command you to go from me.”

She had retreated to the wall, holding her hands before her. Her hair had escaped its pins, and fell over her white gown. Her face was flushed, her eyes blazing.

“I had expected this,” said Mark. “Come.”

Before she could pass him, he had lifted her in his arms. He went down the stairs and out of the house, and up the hill to the wood. When they neared the clearing, he put her on her feet.

“Twist up your hair,” he said.

She obeyed him. He led her to the clearing. Three men awaited them, Mr. Saltonstall, Redfield Hopkins, and a clergyman of the Church of England.

Far down in the valley the gong of the great town clock smote the air four times.

A GLANCE AT THE QUESTION.

One of the first sentiments born to a woman reciprocally loved by a man younger than herself is gratitude. A young woman accepts love carelessly, as her birthright; the violets blooming in the hedge, the petalous beauty of roses damasking spring, expect to be plucked; for that they were made; but the autumn leaves fall softly, lie untouched until the rain comes to wash them down into the earth, enriching it. The fullblown rose is very beautiful, but the vigor of youth has spent itself in the expanding leaves; the scent of death is in the heavy perfume. Even though a woman may have filed a record of continuous conquest, the love of a man inferior in years touches her first with surprise, then doubt, then profoundest gratitude. Of course the sentiment wears away with possession, all sentiments do, but in its fleeting existence does her most abiding danger inhere. Man as a lover cannot survive gratitude. Pride puffeth him; he floats upward and reclines upon rarefied heights, gazes abstractedly, indulgently, upon the woman below—and eventually his gaze doth wander. It smites his self-respect to adore that which admits itself unworthy. And a woman in gratitude further endangers her peace of heart because coquetry, feminine caprice, and power, go with that loss of self-confidence which follows the upward gaze, enwrapt and fixt. She begs for small favors instead of refusing greater, she scatters tears upon a man's indifferent moods; she loses her head instead of skilling herself in the game of chess. As a man to be beloved of women should be virile and in all things protective and reliant, so should he ever be the one to sue. Deep in him abides the instinct and the desire. Let a woman usurp his prerogative and he rises from his knees nor cares to kneel again. Every woman in love should have still another man in love with her. It feeds the hesitant flame of her vanity, prevents her knees from giving way. If the understudy is not to be had, let her etch one in her brain. It answers almost as well; if life does not yield us all we long for, sometimes imagination gives us the bright resemblance of it.

Conversely, the woman who loves without a modicum of gratitude neither feels nor conveys such lasting and quietly satisfying happiness, as does the woman upon whom the sadness of years has fallen or who has not been given the large gift of sexual fascination. Let the woman in gratitude keep her head, and she flowers to a high degree of womanliness unattainable to one sated with easy conquest. She sees and draws the noblest in the man she has mated, she looks to herself sharply lest she deflower, be less desirable to the man who has chosen her in spite of time or unadornment. The fascinating woman has somewhat of contempt for passion, and not valuing love, does not respect it, hence is more apt to see and draw a man's worst than his best. She is more

bored by constancy than appreciative of it. Love with her is either a caprice or an unconscious selection of the man who can give her greatest pleasure.

I am prepared to hear the readers of this book call Boradil Trevor a fool, and let her go to her fate without sympathy. But here and there a philosopher may commend her wisdom. The heart is stabbed often along the path of life; the brain is pierced by many doubts, allured by many ambitions, stunned by many disappointments; the passions are troubled, stung, quicked, finished when only ashes remain to burn. Then Death, standing at the end of the path, or hovering obeisantly at our side, lifts the curtain and all is over as we wonder why it was and cross ourselves regretfully or triumphantly to the religion of pleasure. Whether we cast our eyes on earth or on heaven, suffering is the common lot; but earth has its pleasures, brief though they may be—let us take them. Nirvana at the end, grants the one desire left in us. Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die.

MRS. PENDLETON'S FOUR-IN-HAND

I.

Jessica, her hands clinched and teeth set, stood looking with hard eyes at a small heap of letters lying on the floor. The sun, blazing through the open window, made her blink unconsciously, and the ocean's deep voice rising to the Newport sands seemed to reiterate:

"Contempt! Contempt!"

Tall, slight, with the indescribable air and style of the New York woman, she did not suggest intimate knowledge of the word the ocean hurled to her. In that moss-green room, with her haughty face and white pure skin, her severe faultless gown following classic outlines, she rather suggested the type to whom poets a century hence would indite their sonnets—when she and her kind had been set in the frame of the past. And if her dress was conventional she had let imagination play with her hair. The clear evasive color of flame, it was brushed down to her neck and parted, crossed and brought tightly up each side of her head, just behind her ears. Meeting above her bang, the curling ends allowed to fly loose, it vaguely resembled Medusa's wreath. Her eyes were gray, the color of mid-ocean, calm, beneath a gray sky. Not twenty-four, she had the repose of one whose cradle had been rocked by Society's foot, and although at this moment her pride was in the dust, there was more anger than shame in her face.

The door opened and her hostess entered. As Mrs. Pendleton turned slowly and looked at her, Miss Decker gave a little cry.

"Jessica!" she said, "what is the matter?"

"I have been insulted," said Mrs. Pendleton, deliberately. She felt a savage pleasure in further humiliating herself.

"Insulted! You!" Miss Decker's correct voice and calm brown eyes could not have expressed more surprise and horror if a foreign diplomatist had snapped his fingers in the face of the President's wife. Even her sleek brown hair almost quivered.

"Yes," Mrs. Pendleton went on in the same measured tones, "four men have told me how much they despise me." She walked slowly up and down the room. Miss Decker sank upon the divan, incredulity, curiosity, expectation,

feminine satisfaction marching across her face in rapid procession.

“I have always maintained that a married woman has a perfect right to flirt,” continued Mrs. Pendleton. “The more especially if she has married an old man and life is somewhat of a bore in consequence. ‘Why do you marry an old man?’ snaps the virtuous world. ‘What a contemptible creature you are to marry for anything but love,’ it cries, as it eats the dust at Mammon’s feet. I married an old man because, with the wisdom of twenty, I had made up my mind that I could never love and that position and wealth alone made up the sum of existence. I had more excuse than a girl who has been always poor, for I had never known the arithmetic of money until my father failed, a year before I married. People who have never known wealth do not realize the purely physical suffering of those inured to luxury and suddenly bereft of it, it makes no difference what one’s will or strength of character is. So—I married Mr. Pendleton. So—I amused myself with other men. Mr. Pendleton gave me my head, because I kept clear of scandal; he knew my pride. Now, if I had spent my life demoralizing myself and the society that received me, I could not be more bitterly punished. I suppose I deserve it. I suppose that the married flirt is just as poor and paltry and contemptible a creature as the moralist and the minister depict her. We measure morals by results. Therefore I hold to-day that it is the business of a lifetime to throw stones at the married flirt.”

“For Heaven’s sake,” cried Miss Decker, in a tone of exasperation, “stop moralizing and tell me what has happened!”

“Do you remember Clarence Trent, Edward Dedham, John Severance, Norton Boswell?”

“Do I? Poor moths!”

“They were apparently devoted to me.”

Dryly: “Apparently.”

“How long is it since Mr. Pendleton’s death?”

“About—he died on the sixteenth—why, yes, it was six months yesterday since he died.”

“Exactly. You see these four notes on the floor? They are four proposals—four proposals”—and she gave a short hard laugh through lips whose red had suddenly faded—“from the four men I have just mentioned.”

Miss Decker gasped. “Four proposals! Then what on earth are you angry about?”

Mrs. Pendleton’s lip curled scornfully. She did not condescend to answer at

once. “You are clever enough at times,” she said, coldly, after a moment. “It is odd you cannot grasp the very palpable fact that four proposals received on the same day, by the same mail, from four men who are each other’s most intimate friends, can mean but one thing—a practical joke. Oh!” she cried, the jealously mastered passion springing into her voice, “that is what infuriates me—more even than the insult—that they should think me such a fool as to be so easily deceived. Oh!”

“If I remember aright,” ventured Miss Decker, feebly, “the intimacy to which you allude was a thing of the past some time before you disappeared from the world. In fact, they were not on speaking terms.”

“Oh, they have made it up long ago! Don’t make any weak explanations, but tell me how to turn the tables on them. I would give my hair and wear a gray wig, my complexion and paint to get even with them. And I will. But how? How?”

The stateliness left her walk and she paced up and down the room with nervous steps, glancing for inspiration from the delicate etchings on the walls to the divan that was like a moss-bank, to the carpet that might have been a patch of forest green, and from thence to the sparkling ocean. Miss Decker offered no suggestions. She had perfect faith in the genius of her friend.

Suddenly Mrs. Pendleton paused and turned to her hostess. The red had come back to her thin curled sensuous mouth. Her eyes were luminous, as when the sun breaks through the gray sky and falls, dazzling, on the waters.

“I have it!” she said. “And a week from to-day—I will keep them in suspense that long—New York will have no corner small enough to hold them.”

II.

The hot September day was ten hours old. The office of the St. Christopher Club was still deserted but for a clerk who looked warm and sleepy. The postman had just left a heap of letters on his desk and he was sorting them for their various pigeonholes. A young man entered and the clerk began to turn over the letters more rapidly. The newcomer, tall, thin, with sharp features and shrewd American face, had an extremely nervous manner. As he passed through the vestibule a clerk at a table put a mark opposite the name "Mr. Clarence Trent," to indicate that he was in the club.

"Any letters?" he demanded of the office clerk.

The man handed him two and he darted into the morning room and tore one open, letting the other fall to the floor. He read as follows:

> "MY DEAR FRIEND: I have but this moment received your letter, which seems to have been delayed. ["Of course! Why did I not think of that?"] I say nothing here of the happiness which its contents have given me. Come at once.
>
> "JESSICA PENDLETON.
>
> "Our engagement must be a profound secret until the year of my mourning is over."

Trent's drab and scanty whiskers seemed to curl into hard knots over the nervous facial contortion in which he indulged. Nature being out of material when at work upon him had apparently constructed his muscles from stout twine. An inch of it joining his nose to the upper lip, the former's pointed tip was wont to punctuate his conversation and emotions with the direct downward movement of a machine needle puncturing cloth. He crumpled the letter in his bony nervous fingers, and his pale, sharp gray eyes opened and shut with sudden rapidity.

"I knew I could not be mistaken," he thought, triumphantly. "She is mine!"

In the vestibule another name was checked off—"Mr. Norton Boswell," and its owner made eagerly for the desk. His dark intellectual face was flushed and his sensitive mouth twitched suddenly as the clerk handed him a roll of MSS.

"Never mind that," he said, hastily. "Give me my letters."

The clerk handed him several, and whisking them from left to right through

his impatient hands he thrust all but one into his pocket and walked rapidly to the morning room. Seating himself before a table he looked at the envelope as if not daring to solve its mystery, then hastily tore it apart.

> "My dear Friend," it began, and Boswell, despite his ardor, threw a glance down a certain corridor in his memory and thought, with kindling eyes: "Oh! with what divine sweetness did she use to utter that word 'friend.' " Then he fixed his eyes greedily on the page once more. "I have but this moment received your letter, which seems to have been delayed. ["Ah!" rapturously, the paper dancing before his eyes, "that accounts for it. I knew she was the most tender-hearted woman on earth."] I say nothing here of the happiness which its contents have given me. Come at once.
>
> "Jessica Pendleton.
>
> "Our engagement must be a profound secret, until the year of my mourning is over."

Boswell plunged a pen into the ink-well with quivering nostrils, and in that quiet room two hearts thumped so loudly that only passion and scratching pens averted mutual and withering contempt.

As Boswell left the office a very young man entered it. He possessed that nondescript blond complexion which seems to be the uniform of the New York youth of fashion. It is said that Englishmen are the cleanest looking men on this planet Earth, whether scaling the Matterhorn or taking a duchess in to dinner; but the ciphers of the Four Hundred have achieved the well-scrubbed appearance of the Anglo-Saxon more successfully than his accent. Mr. Dedham might have been put through a clothes wringer. Even his minute and recent mustache looked as if each hair had its particular nurse, and his pink and chubby face defied conscientious dissipation. He sauntered up to the clerk's desk with an elaborate affectation of indifference, and drawled a demand for his mail.

The clerk handed him a dainty note sealed with a crest. He accepted it with an absent air, although a look of genuine boyish delight thrust its way through the fishy inertness of his average expression.

It took him just a minute and a half to get into the morning room and read these fateful lines:

> "My dear Friend: ["Enchanting phrase! I can hear her say it."] I have but this moment received your letter, which seems to have been

delayed. [“Ah! this perfume! this perfume!”] I say nothing here of the happiness which its contents have given me. Come at once.

“JESSICA PENDLETON.

“Our engagement must be a profound secret until the year of my mourning is over.”

A rosy tide wandered to the roots of Mr. Dedham’s cendré locks and he made a wild, uncertain dab at his upper lip. Again there was no sound in the morning room of the St. Christopher Club but the furious dashing of pens, the rending of parchment paper, or the sudden scraping of a nervous foot.

A tall broad-shouldered young man, with much repose of face and manner, entered the office from the avenue, glanced at the pigeonholes above the clerk’s desk, then sauntered deliberately into the morning room and looked out of the window. A slight rigidity of the nostrils alone betokened the impatience within, and his uneasy thoughts ran somewhat as follows:

“What a fool I have been! After all my experience with women to make such an ass of myself over the veriest coquette that ever breathed; but her preference for me last winter was so pointed—oh, damnation!”

He stood gnawing his under lip at the lumbering ’bus, but turned suddenly as a man approached from behind and presented several letters on a tray. The first and only one he opened ran thus:

“MY DEAR FRIEND: I have but this moment received your letter, which seems to have been delayed. I say nothing here of the happiness which its contents have given me. Come at once.

“JESSICA PENDLETON.

“Our engagement must be a profound secret until the year of my mourning is over.”

Severance folded the note, his face paling a little.

“Well, well, she is true after all. What a brute I was to misjudge her.” He strolled back to the office. “I will go home and write to her, and to-morrow I shall see her! Great heaven! were six months ever so long before?”

As he turned from the coat-room Boswell entered the office by the opposite door.

“The fellow looks as gay as a lark,” he thought. “He hasn’t looked like that for six months. I believe I’ll make it up with him—particularly as I’ve come

out ahead!”

“Give me that package,” demanded Boswell dreamily of the clerk. Then he caught sight of Severance. “Why, Jack, old fellow!” he cried, “how are you? Haven’t seen you looking so well for an age. Don’t go out. It’s too hot.”

“Oh, hang it! I’ve got to. I’m off for Newport to-morrow. It’s so infernally dull in town.”

“Going to Newport to-morrow! So am I. My aunt is quite ill and has sent for me. I’m her heir, you know.”

“No? Didn’t know you had an aunt. I congratulate you. Hope she’ll go off, I’m sure.”

“Hope so. Here comes Teddy; he looks like an elongated rubber ball. It’s some time since I’ve seen him so buoyant. How are you, Teddy?”

“How are you, Norton, old boy?” exclaimed Dedham, rapturously. “How glad I am to hear the old name once more. You’ve given me the cold shoulder of late.”

“Oh, well, my boy, you know men will be fools occasionally. But give bygones the go-by. I’m going to Newport to-morrow. Can I take any messages to your numerous——”

“Dear boy! I’m going to Newport to-morrow. Sea bathing ordered by my physician.”

“By Jove, I am in luck. Severance is going over too. We’ll have a jolly time of it.”

“I should say so!” murmured Teddy. “Heaven! Hello, Sev, how are you? Didn’t see you. For the matter of that you’ve been trying to make me forget the shape of that stern profile of yours of late. But as long as we are all going the same way we might as well bury our hatchet. What do you say, dear boy?”

“Only too happy,” said Severance, heartily. “And may we never unearth it again. Here comes Trent. He looks as if he had just been returned for the senate.”

“How are you?” demanded Trent, peremptorily. “You have made it up? Don’t leave me out in the cold.”

Dedham made a final lunge for his deserting dignity, then sent it on its way. “I should think not,” he cried with dancing eyes. “Give me your fist.”

In a moment they were all shaking each other’s hands off, and good-fellowship was streaming from every eye.

“Come over to my rooms, all of you,” gurgled Teddy, “and have a drink.”

“With pleasure, my boy,” said Trent. “But native rudeness will compel me to drink and run. I am off for Newport——”

“Newport!” cried three voices.

“Yes; anything strange in that? I’m going on vital business connected with the coming election.”

“This is a coincidence,” exclaimed Boswell, with the appreciation of the romanticist. “Why, we are all going to Newport. Dedham in search of health, Severance of pleasure, and I of a fortune—only the old mummy is always making out her checks, but never passes them in. Well, I hope we’ll see a lot of each other when we get there.”

“Oh, of course,” said Severance, hastily. “We will have many another game of polo together.”

“Well,” said Dedham, “come over to my rooms now, and drink to the success of our separate quests.”

III.

Miss Decker paced restlessly up and down the sea-room waiting for the mail. Mrs. Pendleton, more composed but equally nervous, lay in a long chair with expectation in her eyes and triumph on her lips.

“Will they answer or will they not?” exclaimed Miss Decker. “If the mail would only come! Will they be crushed?—furious?—or—will they apologize?”

“I care nothing what they do,” said Mrs. Pendleton, languidly. “All I wanted was to see them when they received my notes, and later, when they met to compare them. I hold that my revenge is worthy of a page in Machiavelli’s Prince. To turn the joke on them and to let them see that they could not make a fool of me at the same time! Oh! how dared they?”

“Well, they’ll never perpetrate another practical joke, my dear. You have your revenge, Jessica; you have blunted their sense of humor for life. I doubt if they ever even read the funny page of a newspaper again. Here comes the postman. There! the bell has rung. Why doesn’t Bell go? I’ll go myself in a minute.”

Mrs. Pendleton’s nostrils dilated a little, but she did not turn her head even when the man-servant entered and held a silver tray before her.

Four letters lay thereon. She placed them on her lap, but did not speak until the man had left the room. Then she looked at Miss Decker and gave the letters a little sweep with the tips of her fingers.

“They have answered,” she said.

“Oh, Jessica, for Heaven’s sake don’t be so iron-bound!” cried her friend. “Read them.”

“You can read them if you choose. I have no interest beyond knowing that they received mine.”

Miss Decker needed no second invitation. She caught the letters from Mrs. Pendleton’s lap and tore one of them open. She read a few lines, then dropped limply on a chair.

“Jessica!” she whispered, with a little agonized gasp, “listen to this.”

Mrs. Pendleton turned her eyes inquiringly, but would not stoop to curiosity. “Well,” she said, “I am listening.”

“It is from Mr. Trent. And—listen: ‘Angel! I think if you had kept me

waiting one day longer you would have met a lunatic wandering on the Newport cliffs. Last night I attended a primary and made such an egregious idiot of myself (although I was complimented later upon my speech) that I shall never understand why I was not hissed. But hereafter I shall be inspired. And how you will shine in Washington! That is the place for our talents, not mercantile New York. After reading your reserved yet impassioned note, I do not feel that I can talk more rationally upon politics than while in suspense. What do you think I did? I made it all up with Severance, Dedham, and Boswell, whom I met just after receiving it. I could afford to forgive them! They, by the way, go to Newport to-morrow. Farewell, most brilliant of women, destined by Heaven to be the wife of a diplomatist (for I will confide to you that that is my ultimate ambition). Until to-morrow,

'CLARENCE TRENT.'

"Well! What do you think of that?"

A pink wave had risen to Mrs. Pendleton's hair, then receded and broken upon the haughty curve of her mouth.

"Read the others," she said, briefly.

"Oh! how can you be so cool?" and Miss Decker opened another note with trembling fingers.

"It is from Norton Boswell. 'You once chided me for looking at the world through gray spectacles, and bade me always hope for the best until the worst was decided. When you were near to encourage me the sky was often pink, but even the memory of the last six months has faded before the agonized suspense of the last seven days. Oh! I shall be an author now, if suffering is the final lesson. But what incoherent stuff I am writing. Loneliness and despair are alike forgotten. I can write no more! To-morrow! To-morrow!

" 'BOSWELL.' "

"Read Severance's," said Jessica, quickly.

"I believe you like that man," exclaimed Miss Decker. "I think he's a brute. But you're in a scrape! This is from the lordly Severance:

> " 'An Englishman once said of you with a drawl which wound the words about my memory—"Y-a-a-s; she flirts on ice, so to speak." Coldest and most subtle of women, why did you keep me in suspense for seven long days? Do you think I believe that fiction of the delayed letter? You forget that we have met before. But why torment me? Did I not in common decency have to wait six months

before I dared put my fate to the test? How I counted those days. I had a calendar and a pencil—in short I made a fool of myself. Now the chessboard is between us once more; we start on even ground; we will play a keen and close game to the end of our natural lives. I love you; but I know you. I will kiss the rod—until we marry; after that—we shall play chess. I shall see you to-morrow.

" 'S.'

"Well, that's what I call a beast of a man," said Miss Decker.

"I hate him," said Jessica, between her teeth.

She looked hard at the ocean. Under its gray sky to-day it was the color of her eyes, as cold and as unfathomable. The glittering Medusa-like ends of her hair seemed to flame upward and writhe at each other.

"I should think you would hate him," said Miss Decker, "he is the only living man who ever got the best of you. But listen to what your devoted infant has to say. Nice little boy, Teddy.

" 'Dearest! Sweetest! Do you know that I am almost dancing for joy at this moment? Indeed, my feet are going faster than my pen. To think! To think!—you really do love me after all. But I always said you were not a flirt. I knocked a man down once and challenged him to a duel because he said you were. He wouldn't fight, but I had the satisfaction of letting him know what I thought of him. And now I can prove it to all the world! But I can't write any more. There are three blots on this now, the pen is jumping so, and you know I never was much at writing letters. But I can talk, and to-morrow I will tell you all.

" 'YOUR OWN TEDDY.

" 'P.S.—Is it not queer—quite a coincidence—Severance, Trent, and Boswell are going to Newport to-morrow too. How proud I shall be—but no, I take that back; I only pity them, poor devils, from the bottom of my heart; or I would if it wasn't filled up with you.

" 'T.'

"Well, madam—coquette, diplomatist, inspiration and queen of veracity, you're in a scrape and I don't envy you. "What will you do?"

Mrs. Pendleton pressed her head against the back of the chair, straining her chin upward as if she wanted the salt breeze to rasp her throat.

“I have been so bored for six months,” she said, slowly. “Let them come. I will see each of them alone, and keep the farce going for a week or so. It will be amusing—to be engaged to four men at once. You will command the forces and see that they do not meet. Of course it cannot be kept up very long, and when all resources are failing I will let them meet and make them madly jealous. It will do one of them good, at least.”

“Well, you have courage,” ejaculated Miss Decker. “You can’t do it. But yes, you can. If the woman lives who can play jackstraws with firebrands, that woman is you. And what fun! We are so dull here—both in mourning. I’ll help you. I’ll carry out your instructions like a major.”

Mrs. Pendleton rose and walked up and down the room once or twice. “There is only one thing,” she said, drawing her straight black brows together, “if I am engaged to them they will want to—hm—kiss me, you know. It will be rather awkward. I never was engaged to anyone but Mr. Pendleton, and he used to kiss me on my forehead and say ‘my dear child.’ I am afraid they won’t be contented with that.”

“I am afraid they won’t! But you have tact enough to manage a regiment. Come, say you will do it.”

“Yes,” said Jessica, “I will do it. In my boarding-school days I used to dream of being a tragedy queen; I find myself thrust by circumstances into comedy. But I have no doubt it will suit my talents better.”

IV.

SCENE I.

Severance strode impatiently up and down the room overlooking the ocean.

" 'Will be down in a minute.' I suppose that means the usual thirty for reflection and contemplation of bric-à-brac. What a pretty room. No bric-à-brac in it, by the way. I wonder if this is the room my lady Jessica is said to have furnished to suit herself. It looks like a woodland glade. She must look stunning against those moss-green curtains. I wonder how the madame liked my letter. It was rather brutal, but to manage a witch you have got to be Jove astride a high horse. Here she comes, I know that perfume. She uses it to sweeten the venom of those snakes of hers."

Mrs. Pendleton entered and gave him her hand with frank welcome. Her "snakes" seemed vibrant with life and defiance, and her individuality pierced through her white conventional gown like a solitary star in a hueless sky.

"How do you do?" she said, shaking his hand warmly; then she sat down at once as a matter of course.

He understood the manœuvre, and—

"Let us play chess by all means," he said, and took a chair opposite. "Your seclusion has done you good," he added, smiling as the crest of a wave appeared in her eyes, "you have lost your fagged look and look more like a girl than a widow. Dissipation does not agree with you. Two more winters, and you would be that most hopeless of horrors, a faded blonde. You would try to make up for it by your wit, and then your nose would get sharp, and you would have a line down the middle of your forehead and another on each side of your mouth."

"You are as rude as ever," said Jessica coldly, but the wave in her eyes threatened to become tidal. "If you marry a blonde and incarcerate her, however, you may find the effect more bleaching than society."

"Was that a reflection upon my own society? You are becoming a real repartee fiend. I do not incarcerate. I only warn."

"So do I," said Mrs. Pendleton, significantly; "I have occasionally gotten the best of a bad bargain."

"And as you will find me the worst you have ever had you are already on the defensive," said Severance, with a laugh. "Come, I have not seen you for

six months and I am really hard hit. I wrote you that I marked off each day with a pencil—a red one at that; I bought it for the occasion. Don't take a base advantage of the admission, but give me one kind syllable. I ask for it as humbly as a dog does for a bone."

"You do, indeed. I began by making disagreeable remarks about your personal appearance, did I not? If you will be a brute I will be a—cat."

"You will acquit yourself with credit. But I will not quarrel with you to-day." He rose suddenly and went over to her, but she was already on her feet. She dropped her eyes, then raised them appealingly, but the sea was level.

"Do not kiss me," she said.

"Why not?"

"I would rather not—yet. Do you know that I have never kissed a man—a lover, I mean—in my life? And this is so sudden—I would rather wait."

He raised her hand chivalrously to his lips. "I will wait," he said; "but you will wear my ring?" And he took a circlet from his pocket and slipped it on her finger.

"Thank you," she said, simply, and touched it with a little caressing motion.

He dropped her hand and stepped back. Miss Decker had pushed aside the portière.

"How do you do, Mr. Severance?" she said, cordially; "I did not interrupt even to congratulate you, but to take Jessica away for a moment. My dear, your dressmaker came down on the train with Mr. Severance and has but a minute. You had better go at once, for you know her temper is none of the sweetest."

"Provoking old thing," said Jessica, with a pout. It was the fourth mood to which she had treated Severance in this short interview, and he looked at her with delight. "But I will get rid of her as soon as possible. Will you excuse me for a few moments? I will be back in ten, sure."

"A dressmaker is the only tyrant to whom I bow, the only foe before whom I lay down my arms. Go; but come back soon."

"In ten minutes."

"Which is it, and where is he?" she whispered, eagerly, as they crossed the hall.

"Mr. Trent. He is in the library."

SCENE II.

Trent was standing before a bust of Daniel Webster, speculating how his own profile would look in bronze.

“You would have to shave off your side whiskers,” murmured a soft voice behind him.

He turned with a nervous start, and a suspicion of color appeared under his gray skin. Mrs. Pendleton was standing with her hands resting lightly on the table. She smiled with saucy dignity, an art she had brought to perfection.

“I give you five years,” she said.

“With you to help me,” he cried, enthusiastically. “Ah! I see you now, leaning on the arm of a foreign ambassador, going in to some grand diplomatic dinner.”

“It is too bad I shall have to take the arm of a small one; you will be but the American minister, you know. [Great heaven! how determined he looks; I know he means to kiss me. If I can only keep his ambition going.]”

“I will be senator first and pass a bill placing this country on an equal diplomatic footing with the proudest in Europe. You will then go to your legation as the wife of an ambassador.”

“I know you will accomplish it. And let it be Paris. I cannot endure to shop anywhere else.”

“It shall be Paris.”

“Are you not tired?” she asked, hurriedly.

“Tired? I have not thought of fatigue.”

“The day is so warm.”

“I have not felt it. Jessica!”

“O—h—h—h!” and catching her face convulsively in her hand she sank into a chair.

“What is it? What is it?” he cried, hopping about her like an agitated spider, the tip of his nose punctuating his excitement. “What can I do? Are you ill?”

Faintly: “Neuralgia.”

“What shall I ring for? Antipyrine? Horseradish for your wrists?

Belladonna? What?”

“Nothing. Sit down and talk to me and perhaps it will go away. Tell me something about yourself and I’ll forget it. Sit down.”

“There is but little to tell. I have been busy making friends against the next election. I have addressed several meetings with great success. I have every chance for the house this time—for the senate next term. How’s your face?”

“Misery! You said that several of my old friends came down with you. How odd!”

“Was it not?”

“I suppose they will all come to see me.”

“Hm. I don’t know. Doubt if they know you are here. I shall not tell them. They would only be coming to see you and getting in my way. I’ll wait until our wedding-day approaches, and ask them to be ushers. But now, Jessica, that you do not seem to suffer so acutely——”

“Oh! Oh! [Thank Heaven, I hear Edith.]”

Trent sprang to his feet in genuine alarm. “Dearest! Let me go for the doctor. I cannot stand this——”

Miss Decker entered with apparent haste, spoke to Trent, then stopped abruptly.

“Jessica!” she cried. “What is the matter?”

“My face. You know how I have suffered. Worse than ever.”

“Oh, you poor dear! She is such a martyr, Mr. Trent, with that tooth——”

“Neuralgia!”

“I mean neuralgia. She was up all night. But, my dear, don’t think me a heartless fiend, but you must see your lawyer. He is here with those deeds for you to sign, and he says that he must catch the train.”

“That estate has given me so much trouble,” murmured Mrs. Pendleton, wretchedly, “and how can I talk business when my head is on the rack? I do not wish to leave Mr. Trent so soon, either.”

“Leave Mr. Trent to me. I will entertain him. I will talk to him about you.”

“May I speak to you one moment before you go?” asked Trent.

“Yes,” pinching her lips with extremest pain, “you need not mind Edith.”

“Not in the least.” He took a box from his pocket with an air of resignation which boded well for the trials of a diplomatic career. “I cannot wait longer to fetter you. You told me once that the emerald was your favorite stone.”

She relaxed her lips and swept her lashes down and up rapturously. “So good of you to remember,” she murmured; “it reminds me of mermaids and things, and I love it.”

“You were always so poetical! But where did you get that ring? I thought you never wore rings. On your engagement finger, too?”

“It was a present from grandma, and I wear it to please her. I’ll slip it in my pocket now—it is too large for any other finger—and you can put yours where it belongs.”

“You will never take it off until you need its place for your wedding ring?”

“Never!”

“Angel! And your face is better?”

“Yes; but Edith is looking directly this way.”

SCENE III.

Mrs. Pendleton entered the drawing-room on tiptoe, with hand upraised.

“Well! the sky did not fall, and the train did not ditch, and the lightning did not strike, and we are neither of us dead. And you—you look as strapping as a West Point cadet. Fie upon your principles.”

“That is a charming tirade with which to greet an impatient lover,” cried Boswell, with beaming face. “You are serious, of course?”

“You have heard the parable of a woman’s ‘No’?” She gave both his outstretched hands a little shake, then retreated behind a chair, and rested both arms on its back.

“My anger is appeased, but I think I am entitled to some recompense.”

“What can he mean? Would you prefer sherry or red wine?”

“There is a draught brewed upon Olympus, which the gods call nectar ____”

“So sorry. We are just out. I gave the last thimbleful away an hour ago.”

“Oh, you did! May I enquire to whom you gave it?”

“You may, indeed. And I would tell you—could I only remember.”

“Provoking—goddess! But perhaps you will allow me to look for myself. Perchance I might find a drop or two remaining. I am willing to take what I can get and be thankful.”

[Then you will never get much.] “The dregs are always bitter.”

“There can be no dregs to the nectar in question.”

“And the last drop always goes to the head. I have heard it asserted upon authority. Think of the scandal—the butler—oh, Heaven!”

“The intoxication would make me but tread the air. I should walk right over the butler’s head. Where did you get that ring?”

“Is it not lovely? It was”—heaving a profound sigh—“the last gift of poor dear Mr. Pendleton.”

“Indeed! Well, under the circumstances, perhaps you will not mind removing it and wearing that of another unfortunate,” and he placed one knee on the chair over which she leaned, and produced a ring.

“Not at all. What a beauty! How did you know that the ruby was my favorite stone?” And she bent her body backward, under pretence of holding the stone up to the light.

“But you have a number of rubies and pearls in your possession of which I consider myself the rightful owner. Shall I have to call in the law to give me mine own?”

“The pearls are sharp, and the rubies may be paste. I have the best of the bargain.”

“I am a connoisseur on the subject of precious stones—of precious articles of all sorts, in fact. What an outrageous coquette you are! What is the use of keeping a man in misery?”

“Why are men always in such a hurry? If I were a man now—and an author—I would wait for moonlight, waves breaking on rocks, and all the rest of it.”

“All the old property business, in short, I am both a man and an author, therefore I know the folly of delay in this short life.”

“But suppose the door should open suddenly?”

“I have been here ten minutes and it has not opened yet.”

“But it might, you know; and the small boys of this house are an exaggeration of all that have gone before. Ah! here comes someone. Sit down

on that chair instantly."

Miss Decker entered and looked deprecatingly at Boswell.

"You have come at last," she said. "We were afraid something had happened to you. I cannot help this interruption, Jessica. Your grandmother is here and wants to see you immediately. She has been telegraphed for to go to Philadelphia; Mrs. Armstrong is very ill. I would not keep her waiting."

"Poor grandma! To think of her being obliged to go to Philadelphia in September. Where is she?"

"In the yellow reception-room. Mr. Boswell will excuse you for a few minutes."

Boswell bowed, his face stamped with gloom.

"What have you done with the others?" asked Jessica, as she closed the door.

"Mr. Severance is storming up and down the sea-room, Mr. Trent is like a caged lion in the library; I expect to hear a crash every minute. But both know what lawyers and dressmakers mean. Boswell will learn something of grandmothers. But they are safe for a quarter of an hour longer. Trust all to me."

SCENE IV.

Dedham was sitting on the edge of one of the reception-room chairs, locking and unlocking his fingers until his hands were as red as those of a son of toil. He was nervous, happy, terrified, annoyed.

"That beastly porter to keep me waiting so long for my portmanteau," he almost cried aloud. "What must she think of me? And I forgot my slip. Severance will have his on this afternoon, I know, and I might have been the first to wear it in Newport. She won't see him, though, thank Heaven!" He examined his unornamented vest in an opposite mirror and shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation. He must be content to look as if he had one waistcoat on instead of two. "And that new cosmetique for my mustache. How could I have been so stupid as to forget it? She'll not be able to see it. I can't be pulling at it all the time, I've twisted it almost out, already. But she won't mind, for she adores—ah!"

"You wicked boy," said Mrs. Pendleton, with gentle reproach. "What made you so late? I was just about to send and inquire if anything had happened to you. But sit down. How tired you must be. Would you like a glass of sherry

and a biscuit?”

“Nothing! Nothing! You know it’s not my fault that I’m late. My portmanteau got mislaid and my travelling clothes were so dusty. And you really are glad to see me?”

“What a question! It makes me feel young again to see you.”

“Young again! You!”

“I am twenty-four, Teddy, and a widow,” and she shook her head sadly. “I feel fearfully old—like your mother. I have had so much care and responsibility in my life, and you are so careless and debonair.”

“You’ll make me cry in a minute,” said Teddy, “and I wish you wouldn’t talk like that. You seem to put a whole Adirondack between us.”

“I can’t help it! Perhaps I’ll get over it after a time. It’s so sad being mewed up six whole months!”

“Then marry me right off. That’s just the point. We’ll go and travel and have a jolly good time. That’ll brace you up and make you feel as young as you look.”

“I can’t, Teddy. I must wait a year in common decency. Think how people would talk.”

“Let ’em. They’ll soon find something else and forget us. Marry me next month.”

“Next month—well——”

“It would be rather fun to be the hero and heroine of a sensation, anyhow. That’s what everybody’s after. You’re just a nonentity until you’ve been blackguarded in the papers. Whose ring is that?”

“One of Edith’s. I put it on to remember something by.”

“Well, take it off and wear this instead. It’ll help your memory just as well.”

“What, a solitaire!”

“I knew you would prefer it. I know all your tastes by instinct.”

“You do, Teddy. Colored stones are so tiresome.”

“By the way, I think your old admirer, Severance, must be about to put himself in silken fetters, as Boswell would say. I caught him buying an unusually fine sapphire in Tiffany’s yesterday. Said it was for his sister. Hm—

hm.”

“Rather. I wonder who it can be?”

“Don’t know. Hasn’t looked at a woman since you left. But I have a strong suspicion that it is some one here in Newport.”

“Here—I wonder—if it can be Edith?”

“Miss Decker? Sure enough. Never seemed to pay her much attention, though. She’s not my style—too much like sixteen dozen other New York girls.”

He buttoned up his coat, braced himself against it and gave his mustache a frantic twist.

“Mrs.—Jessica!” he ejaculated desperately, “you are engaged to me—won’t you—won’t you——”

She drew herself up and glanced down upon him from her higher chair with a look of sad disapproval.

“I did not think it of you, Teddy,” she said. “And it is one of the things of which I have never approved.”

“But why not?” asked Teddy, feebly.

“I thought you knew me better than to ask such a question.”

“I know you are an angel—oh, hang it! You do make me feel as if you were my mother.”

“Now, don’t be unreasonable, or I shall believe that you are a tyrant.”

“A tyrant? I? Horri—no, I wish I was. What a model of propriety you are. I never should have thought it—I mean—darling! you were always such a coquette, you know. Not that I ever thought so. You know I never did—oh, hang it all—but if I let you have your own way in this unreasonable—I mean your perfectly natural whim—you might at least promise to marry me in a month. And indeed I think that if you are an angel I am a saint.”

“Well, on one condition.”

“Any! Any!”

“It must be an absolute secret until the wedding is over. I hate congratulations, and if we are going to have a sensation we might as well have a good concentrated one.”

“I agree with you, and I’ll never find fault with you again. You——”

Miss Decker almost ran into the room.

“Jessica,” she cried. “Oh, dear Mr. Dedham, how are you? Jessica, mother has one of her terrible attacks, and I must ask you to stay with her while I go for the doctor myself. I cannot trust servants.”

“Let me go! let me go!” cried Teddy. “I’ll bring him back in a quarter of an hour. Who shall——”

“Coleman. He lives——”

“I know. Au revoir,” and the girls were alone.

“There!” exclaimed Miss Decker, “we have got rid of him. Now for the others. You slip upstairs and I’ll dispose of them one by one. You are taken suddenly ill. Teddy will not be back for an hour. Dr. Coleman has moved.”

V.

A lamp burned in the sea-room, and the two girls were sitting in their evening gowns before a bright log fire. Miss Decker was in white this time—an elaborate French concoction of embroidered muslin which made her look like an expensive fashion plate. Jessica wore a low-cut black crêpe, above which she rose like carven ivory and brass. The snakes to-night were held in place by diamond hairpins that glittered like baleful eyes. In her lap sparkled four rings.

"What shall I do?" she exclaimed. "If my life depended upon it I could not remember who gave me which."

"Let us think. What sort of a stone would a politician be most likely to choose?"

Mrs. Pendleton laughed. "A good idea. If couleur de rose be synonymous with conceit, then I think the ruby must have come from Mr. Trent."

"I am sure of it. And as your author is always in the dumps, I am certain he takes naturally to the sapphire."

"But the emerald——"

"Is emblematical of your deluded Teddy. The solitaire therefore falls naturally to Mr. Severance. Well, now that you have got through the first interviews in safety, what are you going to do next?"

"Edith, I do not know. They are all so dreadfully in earnest that I believe I shall finally take to my heels in downright terror. But no, I won't. I'll come out of it with the upper hand and save my reputation as an actress. I will keep it up for two or three days more, but after that it will be impossible. They are bound to meet here sooner or later. Thank Heaven, we are rid of them for to-night, at least!"

The man-servant threw back the portière.

"Mr. Trent."

"Heavens!" cried Edith under her breath, "I forgot to give orders that we were not receiv—how do you do, Mr. Trent?"

"And which is his ring?" Jessica made a frenzied dab at the jewels in her lap. She slipped the sapphire on her finger, and hid the others under a cushion. Trent, who had been detained a moment by Miss Decker, advanced to her.

"It is very soon to come again," he said, "but I simply had to call and

inquire if you felt better. I am delighted to see that you apparently do."

"I am better, thank you." Her voice was rather weak. "It was good of you to come again."

"Whose ring is that!"

"Why—a—to—sure——"

"Jessica!" cried Miss Decker, "have you gone off with my ring again? You are so absent-minded. I hunted for that ring high and low."

"You should not be so good-natured, and my memory would turn over a new leaf. Here—take it." She tossed the ring to Miss Decker, and raised her eyes guiltily to Trent's. "Shall I go up and get the other?"

"No. But I thought you promised never to take it off."

"I forgot that water ruins stones."

"Well, it is a consolation to know that water does not ruin a certain plain gold circlet."

"Mr. Boswell."

Jessica gasped and looked at the flames. A crisis had come. Would she be clever enough? Then the situation stimulated her. She held out her hand to Boswell.

"You have come to see me," she cried, delightedly. "Mr. Trent has just been telling us that you came down with him, and I hoped you would call soon."

"Yes, to be sure—to be sure. You might have known I would call soon." He bowed stiffly to Trent, and seating himself close beside Jessica, murmured in her ear: "Cannot you get rid of that fellow? How did he find you out so soon?"

"Why, he came to see Edith, of course. Do you not remember how devoted he always was to her?"

"I do not——"

"May I ask what you are whispering about, Mr. Boswell?" demanded Trent, breaking from Miss Decker. "Is he confiding to you the astounding success of his last novel, Mrs. Pendleton? or was it a history of the United States? I really forget."

"Not the last, certainly. I leave it to you to make history—an abridged edition. My ambition is a more humble one."

“Oh, you will both need biographers,” said Mrs. Pendleton, who was beginning to enjoy herself. “I will give you an idea. Join the theosophists. Arrange for reincarnation. Come back in the next generation and write your own biographies. Then your friends and families cannot complain that you have not had justice done you.”

“Ha! ha!” said Trent.

“You are as cruel as ever,” said Boswell with a sigh. (“Where is my ring?”)

“It was so large that I could not keep it on. I must have a guard made.”

“Dear little fingers——”

“You may never have been taught when you were a small boy, Mr. Boswell,” exclaimed Trent, “that it is rude to whisper in company. Therefore, to save your manners in Mrs. Pendleton’s eyes, I will do you the kindness to prevent further lapse.” And he seated himself on the other side of Jessica and glared defiantly at Boswell.

“Mr. Severance and Mr. Dedham.”

Severance entered hurriedly. “I am so glad to hear—ah, Boswell! Trent!”

“How odd that you should all find your way here the very first evening of your arrival!” And Jessica held out her hand with a placid smile. Miss Decker was more nervous, but the training of five seasons stood her in good stead. “Ah!” continued Mrs. Pendleton, “and Mr. Dedham, too! This is a most charming reunion.”

“Charming beyond expression!” said Severance.

Boswell and Trent being obliged to rise when Miss Decker went forward to meet the newcomers, Severance took the former’s chair, Dedham that of the future statesman.

“You are better?” whispered Severance. “I have been anxious.”

“Oh! I have been worried to death,” murmured Teddy in her other ear. “That wretched doctor had not only moved but gone out of town; and when I came back at last, and found——”

“Mr. Severance,” exclaimed Trent, “you have my chair.”

“Is this your chair? You have good taste. A remarkably comfortable chair.”

“You would oblige me——”

“By keeping it? Certainly. You were ever generous, but that I believe is a characteristic of genius.”

“Mrs. Pendleton,” said Boswell, plaintively, “as Mr. Dedham has taken my chair, I will take this stool at your feet.”

Trent was obliged to lean his elbow on the mantelpiece, for want of a better view of Mrs. Pendleton, and Miss Decker sat on the other side of Dedham.

“How are you, Teddy?” she said.

“Fine. You must let me congratulate you.”

“For what?”

“I see you wear Severance’s ring. Ah, Sev, did the ring suit your sister?”

“To a T. Said it was her favorite stone.” He stopped abruptly. “What the dev—” this below his breath, and Jessica whispered hurriedly:

“Edith was looking at it when Mr. Trent came in, and forgot to return it.”

“Ah! Boswell, I am sure you are sitting on Mrs. Pendleton’s foot. By the way, how’s your aunt?”

“Dead—better.”

“I wonder you could tear yourself away so soon,” said Trent, viciously. “You’d better be careful. She might make a new will.”

“Don’t worry. I spent the happiest fifteen minutes of my life with her this afternoon. She promised me all.” He turned to Severance. “You have been breaking hearts on the beach, I suppose.”

“Which is better, at all events, than breaking one’s head against a stone wall.”

“Politics brought you here, Mr. Trent, I suppose,” interrupted Miss Decker. “I hear you made a stirring speech the other night.”

“I did. It was on the question of Radicalism in the Press versus Civil Service Reform. Something must be done to revolutionize this hell—I beg pardon—this hotbed of iniquity, American politics. Such principles need courage; but when the hour comes the man must not be wanting——”

“That was all in the paper next morning,” drawled Boswell. “Mrs. Pendleton, did you receive the copy of my new book I sent a fortnight ago? Unlike many of my others I had no difficulty in disposing of it. It was lighter, brighter, less philosophy, less—brains. The critics understood it, therefore they were kind. They even said——”

“Don’t quote the critics for Heaven’s sake!” said Severance. “It is enough to have read them.”

“Oh, Mrs. Pendleton,” exclaimed Teddy, “if you could have been at the yacht race. Such excitement? Such——”

“To change the subject,” said Trent, with determination in his eye, “Mrs. Pendleton, did you receive all the marked papers I sent you containing my speeches, especially the one on Jesuitism in Politics?”

“Don’t bother Mrs. Pendleton with politics,” exclaimed Boswell, whose own egotism was kicking against its bars. “You did not think my book too long, did you? One purblind critic said——”

“Good-night, Mrs. Pendleton,” said Severance, rising abruptly. “Good-evening,” and he bowed to Miss Decker and to the men. Jessica rose suddenly and went with him to the door.

“I am going to walk on the cliffs—‘Forty Steps’—at eleven to-morrow,” she said, as she gave him her hand. “This may be unconventional, but *I* choose to do it.”

He bowed over her hand. “Mrs. Pendleton will only have set one more fashion,” he said. “I shall be there.”

As he left the room by one door, Jessica crossed the room and opened another.

“Good-night,” she said to the astounded company, and withdrew.

VI.

Severance sauntered up and down the “Forty Steps,” the repose of his bearing belying the agitation within.

“Why on earth doesn’t she come?” he thought, uneasily. “Can she be ill again? She is ten minutes behind time now. What did it mean—all those fellows there last night? She looked like an amused spectator at a play, and Miss Decker was nervous, actually nervous. Damn it! Here they all come. What do they mean by keeping under my heels like this?”

Dedham, Trent, and Boswell strolled up from various directions, and although each had expectation in his eye, neither looked overjoyed to see the other. There were four cold nods, a dead pause, and then Teddy gave a little cough.

“Beautiful after—I mean morning.”

“It is indeed,” said Severance. “I wonder you are not taking your salt-water constitutional.”

“I always take a walk in the morning,” and Teddy glanced nervously over his shoulder.

Boswell and Trent, each with a little missive burning his pocket, turned red, fidgeted, glared at the ocean and made no remark. Severance darted a glance at each of the three in succession, and then looked at the ground with a contemplative stare. At this moment Mrs. Pendleton appeared.

Three of the men advanced to meet her with an awkward attempt at surprise, but she waved them back.

“I have something to say to you,” she said.

The cold languor of her face had given place to an expression of haughty triumph. A gleam of conscious power lay deep in her calmly scornful eyes. The final act in the drama had come and the dénouement should be worthy of her talents. She looked like a judge who had smiled encouragement to a guilty defendant only to confer the sentence of capital punishment at last.

“Gentlemen,” she said, and even her voice was judicatorial, “I have asked you all to meet me here this morning”—three angry starts, but she went on unmoved—“because I came to the conclusion last night that it is quite time this farce should end. I am somewhat bored myself, and I have no doubt you are so, as well. Your joke was a clever one, worthy of the idle days of autumn. When I received your four proposals by the same mail, I appreciated your wit

—I will say more, your genius—and felt glad to do anything I could to contribute to your amusement, especially as all the world is away in Europe, and I knew that you must be dull. So I accepted each of you, as you know, had four charming interviews and one memorable one of a more composite nature; and now that we have all agreed that the spicy and original little drama has run its length I take pleasure in restoring your rings."

She took from her handkerchief a beautiful little casket of blue onyx, upon which reposed the Pendleton crest in blazing diamonds, and touching a spring revealed four rings sparkling about as many velvet cushions. The four men stood speechless; neither dared protest his sincerity and see ridicule in the eyes of his neighbor.

Mrs. Pendleton dropped her judicial air, and taking the ruby between her fingers, smiled like a teacher bestowing a prize.

"Mr. Boswell," she said, "I believe this belongs to you," and she handed the ring to the stupefied author. He put it in his pocket with never a word.

She raised the emerald. "Mr. Trent, this is yours?—or is it the sapphire?"

"The emerald," snorted Trent.

She dropped it in his nerveless palm with a gracious bend of the head, and turned to Teddy.

"You gave me a solitaire, I remember," she said, sweetly. "A most appropriate gift, for it is the ideal life."

Teddy looked as if about to burst into tears, gave her one beseeching glance, then took his ring and strode feebly over the cliffs. Trent and Boswell hesitated a moment, then hurried after.

Jessica held the casket to Severance, with a little outward sweep of her wrist. He took it, and folding his arms looked at her steadily. A tide of angry color rose to her hair, then she turned her back upon him and, looking out over the water, tapped her foot on the rocks.

"Why do you not go?" she asked. "I hate you more than the other three put together."

"No. You love me."

"I hate you. You are a brute. The coolest, the rudest, the most exasperating man on two continents."

"That is the reason you love me. My dear Mrs. Pendleton," he continued, taking the ring from the casket, and laying the latter on a rock, "a woman of

brains and headstrong will—but unegoistic—likes a brutal and masterful man. An egoistical woman, whether she be fool or brilliant, likes a slave. The reason is that egoism, not being a feminine quality primarily, but borrowed from man, places its fair possessor outside of her sex's limitations and supplies her with the satisfying simulacrum of those stronger characteristics which she would otherwise look for in man. You are not an egoist."

He took her hand and removed her glove in spite of her resistance.

"Don't struggle. You would only look ridiculous if anyone should pass. Besides, it is useless. I am so much stronger.

"I do not know or care what really possessed you to indulge in such a freak as to engage yourself to four men at once," he continued, slipping the ring on her finger. "You had your joke, and I hope you enjoyed it. The dénouement was highly dramatic. As I said: I desire no explanation, for I am never concerned with anything but results. And now—you are going to marry me."

"I am not," sobbed Jessica.

"You are." He glanced about. No one was in sight. He put his arm about her shoulders, forcing her own to her sides, then bent back her head and kissed her on the mouth.

"Checkmate!" he said.

THE END

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.

A Table of Contents has been added to the book for reader convenience.

[The end of *A Question of Time* by Gertrude Franklin Horn Atherton]