

THE THREAD OF FLAME

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Produced by Al Haines.

[image]

"Oh, as for cheering people up—I don't know ... A woman wants more than anything else in the world to feel that she's needed; and when she discovers she isn't—"

THE THREAD OF FLAME

By BASIL KING

Author of
"THE CITY OF COMRADES" "GOING WEST"
"THE INNER SHRINE" ETC.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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She turned on me with a new flash in her blue eyes. "Look here! Tell me honest, now. Are you a swell crook—or ain't you?" "Suppose I say that—that I ain't." "Say,

kid!" she responded, coldly, "talk like yourself, will you? ... If you're not a swell crook I can't make you out"

All these minutes she had been observing me, with that queer, half-choked cry as the result: "Oh, Billy, is this you?"

I had begun on collars and neckties when Vio said, "What kind of a girl was that who was here this afternoon?"

PART I

THE THREAD OF FLAME

CHAPTER I

Without opening my eyes I guessed that it must be between five and six in the morning.

I was snuggled into something narrow. On moving my knee abruptly it came into contact with an upright board. At the same time the end of my bed rose upward, so that my feet were higher than my head. Then the other end rose, and my head was higher than my feet. A slow, gentle roll threw my knee once more against the board, though another slow, gentle roll swung me back to my former position. Far away there was a rhythmic throbbing, like the beating of a pulse. I knew I was on shipboard, and for the moment it was all I knew.

Not quite awake and not quite asleep, I waited as one waits in any strange bed, in any strange place, for the waking mind to reconnect itself with the happenings overnight. Sure of this speedy re-establishment, I dozed again.

On awaking the second time I was still at a loss for the reason for my being at sea. I had left a port; I was going to a port; and I didn't know the name of either. I might have been on any ocean, sailing to any quarter of the globe. How long I

had been on the way, and how far I had still to go, were details that danced away from me whenever I tried to seize them. I retained a knowledge of continents and countries; but as soon as I made the attempt to see myself in any of them my mind recoiled from the effort with a kind of sick dislike.

Nothing but a dull hint came to me on actually opening my eyes. An infiltration of gray light through the door, which was hooked ajar, revealed a mere slit in space, with every peg and corner utilized. A quiet breathing from the berth above my head told me that I shared the cabin with some one else. On the wall opposite, above a flat red couch piled with small articles of travel, two complete sets of clothing swung outward, or from side to side like pendulums, according to the movement of the ship.

I closed my eyes again. It was clearly a cabin of the cheaper and less comfortable order, calling up a faintly disagreeable surprise. It was from that that I drew my inference. I judged that whoever I was I had traveled before, and in more luxurious conditions.

Through the partly open door, beyond which there must have been an open porthole, came puffs of salt wind and the swish and roar of the ocean. Vainly I sought indications as to the point of the compass toward which we were headed. Imagination adapted itself instantly to any direction it was asked to take. In this inside cabin there was no suggestion from sun or cloud to show the difference between east and west.

Because I was not specially alarmed I did my best to doze again. Dozing seemed to me, indeed, the wisest course, for the reason that during the freedom of subconsciousness in sleep the missing connection was the more likely to be restored. It would be restored of course. I was physically well. I knew that by my general sensations. Young, vigorous, and with plenty of money, a mere lapse of memory was a joke.

Of being young and vigorous a touch on my body was enough to give me the assurance. The assumption of having plenty of money was more subtle. It was a habit of mind rather than anything more convincing. Certainly there was nothing to prove it in this cabin, which might easily have been second-class, nor yet in the stuff of my pajamas, which was thick and coarse. I noticed now, as I turned in my bunk, that it rasped my skin unpleasantly. With no effort of the memory I could see myself elegantly clad in silk night-clothing fastened with silk frogs; and yet when I asked myself when and where that had been no answer was accorded me.

I may have slept an hour when I waked again. From the sounds in the cabin I drew the conclusion that my overhead companion had got up.

Before looking at him I tested my memory for some such recollection as men sharing the same cabin have of their first meeting. But I had none. Far-

ther back than that waking between five and six o'clock I couldn't think. It was like trying to think back to the years preceding one's birth; one's personality dissolved into darkness.

When I opened my eyes there was a man standing in the dim gray light with his back to me. Broad, muscular shoulders showed through the undershirt which was all he wore in addition to his trousers, of which the braces hung down the back. The dark hair was the hair of youth, and in a corner of the glass I caught the reflection of a chin which in spite of the lather I also knew to be young. Waiting till he had finished shaving and had splashed his face in the basin, I said, with a questioning intonation:

"Hello?"

Turning slowly, he lowered the towel from his dripping face, holding it out like a propitiatory offering. He responded then with the slow emphasis of surprise.

"Hel-lo, old scout! So you've waked up at last! Thought you meant to sleep the trip out."

"Have I been asleep long?"

"Only since you came on aboard."

It was on my tongue to ask, When was that? but a sudden prompting of discretion bade me seek another way.

"You don't mean to say I've slept more than—more than"—I drew a bow at a venture—"more than twenty-four hours?"

He made the reckoning as he rubbed his shining face with the towel.

"Let me see! This is Friday. We came on board late Tuesday night. When John-M'rie, our bedroom steward, brought me down to the cabin about half past nine you were already in your bunk doing the opium act. John-M'rie passed it up that you were a Frenchman, because you'd spoken French to him; but now I see you're just an American like myself."

So! I was an American but I could speak French. I could speak French sufficiently well for one Frenchman to mistake me for another. I stowed this data away, noting that if I had lost some of the power of memory the faculty of reasoning was unimpaired.

Weighing my questions so as to get the maximum of information with the minimum of betrayal, I waited before hazarding anything else till he had finished polishing a face which had the handsome ugliness of a pug.

"When do you think," was my next diplomatic venture, "that we shall get in?"

"Oh, hang!" The exclamation was caused by finding himself pawing at the foot of my berth in his search for the towel-rack. "Wednesday morning with good luck," he went on, feeling along the wall till he touched a kind of rod, behind

which he tucked the towel. "With bad weather we'll not pick up the Nantucket Lightship before Thursday night. The old bucket's supposed to do it in eight days; but you know what that means these times."

I didn't know, since these times did not distinguish themselves in my mind from any other times. But the Nantucket Lightship was a reference I understood. We were sailing for New York. As an American I was therefore on my way home, though no spot on the continent put forth a special claim on me. I made brief experiments in various directions: New York, Washington, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Denver, Seattle. Nothing responded. The hills of New England, the mountains of California, the levees of Louisiana were alike easy for me to recall; but I was as detached from them as a spirit from another world.

These ideas floated—I choose the phrase as expressive of something more nebulous than active thinking—these ideas floated across my brain as I watched the boy rinse his tooth-brush, replace the tumbler, and feel along the wall for the flannel shirt hanging on a peg. He turned to me then with the twinkling, doggy look I was beginning to notice as a trait.

"Say, you'd eat a whale, wouldn't you? Haven't had a meal since Tuesday night, and now it's Friday. Any one would think you were up in the Ypres region before the eats got on to the time-table. Pretty good grub on board this old French tub, if you holler loud enough."

While he went on to suggest a menu for my breakfast I endeavored to deal with the new hints he had thrown out. He had spoken of Ypres. He had referred to short rations. I remembered that there was a war. Whether it was over, or whether it was going on, or whether I had taken part in it or not, I couldn't say; but I knew there had been, and perhaps that there still was, a war.

I tested myself as to that while I watched him button his collar and put on his tie; but all I drew forth was a sickening sense of noise, mutilation, and dirt, which might have been no more than the reaction from things I had read. Nothing personal to myself entered into these associations; no scene of horror that I could construct took me in as an actor.

My light-hearted companion would not, however, allow me to follow my own train of thought.

"Say," he laughed, "I know your name, but I don't believe you know mine." The laugh grew forced and embarrassed. "I've got the darnedest name for kidding a guy ever got stuck on him. Sometimes it makes me mad, and I think I'll go to law and change it; and more times I get used to it, till some smart Aleck breezes in and begins to hang it all over me again. What do you think it is? Give a guess now."

He said he knew my name—and I didn't know it myself! That was the first of my queer discoveries that appalled me. If I didn't know my own name ... But

the boy laughed on.

"Give a guess now," he coaxed, buttoning up his waistcoat. "I'll give you two; but they must be awful funny ones."

Nothing funnier than Smith and Jones having occurred to me, he burst out with:

"Drinkwater! Isn't that the darnedest? I can't look sidewise at anything that isn't water before the other guys begin to kid me all over the lot. Many a time I *would* drink water—and don't want anything but water to drink—and I'll be hanged if I don't feel ashamed to have them see me doing it—and me with that name! What do you know about that?"

As I was too gravely preoccupied to tell him what I knew about that, he began once more his curious pawing along the wall, till he seized a cap which he pulled down on his head.

"Oh, hang!" he muttered then. "That's yours."

This, too, was information, enabling me to assume that the clothing which hung on the same hook was mine also. I looked at it with some interest, but also with a renewed feeling of discomfort. It was the sort of suit in which I found it difficult to see myself. Of a smooth gray twill, sleek and provincial, there was that about it which suggested the rural beau.

Having momentarily lost his orientation, the boy clawed in the air again, touching first this object and then that, fingering it, considering it, locating it, till once more he got his bearings. All this he did with a slowness and caution that forced on me the recognition of the fact, which I might have perceived before, that he was blind.

Nothing betrayed it but his motions. The starry eyes were apparently uninjured. Only, when you knew his infirmity, you noticed that the starriness was like that of an electric lamp, bright, but with a brightness not connected with intelligence. It was an aimless brightness, directed at nothing. The blaze of the quick pupils was like that which a window flashes back to the sunset, all from outside, and due to nothing in the house.

Dressed now for leaving the cabin, he still had something to tell me.

"Say, there's one man on board who'll be glad to hear you've waked up. That's the doctor. Not the ship's doctor," he hastened to explain, "but my doctor. Say, he's about the whitest!"

My questions were inspired not so much by sympathy with him, though that affected me, as by the hope of getting sidelights on myself.

"Do you travel with a doctor?"

"Came over with him just before the war. I was his stenog. Name of Averill. Been in and out to see you five and six times a day ever since we sailed. Tell you all about him after I've had my breakfast. Off now to send in John-M'rie. Don't

forget what I said about the griddle-cakes. They can give 'em to you good and greasy if you kick; but if you don't they'll just hand you out a pile of asbestos table-mats."

CHAPTER II

Before getting up to make the investigations on which I was so keen I waited to be rid of Jean-Marie. He came in presently—small, black, wiry, not particularly clean, and with an oily smell, but full of an ingratiating kindness. When I had trumped up an explanation of my abnormally long sleep I set him to separating my hand-luggage from my cabin-mate's, nominally for the sake of convenience, but really that I might know which was mine.

The minute he had left with my order for breakfast I sprang from my bunk. I searched first the pockets of my clothes. There was nothing in them but a handkerchief, a few French coins, and a card giving the number of a cabin, the number of a seat at a table in the dining-saloon, and the name of Mr. Jasper Soames. It was a name that to me meant nothing. Referring it to my inner self, nothing vibrated, nothing rang. It was like trying to clink a piece of money on wool or cork or some other unresponsive material.

My clothing itself was what I had guessed from the inspection made from my berth. It suggested having been bought ready to wear, a suggestion borne out by the label of what was apparently a big department store, the Bon Marché, at Tours. My cap had the same label, and my hard felt hat no maker's name at all.

I began on the bags which Jean-Marie had segregated as my property. There were two, a hand-bag and a suit-case, neither of them tagged with a name. The hand-bag contained bottles, brushes, handkerchiefs, all of the cheaper varieties. Where there was anything to indicate the place at which they had been purchased it was always the Bon Marché at Tours.

In the suit-case, which was unlocked, and which I opened feverishly, there was a suit almost identical with that hanging on the hook, a little linen, a few changes of underclothing, a small supply of socks, collars, and other such necessities, all more or less new, some of them still unworn, but with not so much as an initial to give a clue to the owner. It struck me—and I made the observation with a frightened inward laugh—that a man running away from detection for a crime would fit himself out in just this way.

Having repacked the bags, I stood at a loss, in the sense that for the first time I felt stunned. The position was promising to be more serious than I had thought it possible for it to become. There were so many things to think of that I couldn't see them all before me at a glance.

Standing in the middle of the narrow floor, steadying myself by a hand on the edge of Drinkwater's bunk, I suddenly caught my reflection in the glass. It was a new line to follow up. A look into my own eyes would reforge those links with myself that had trembled away. I went closer, staring at the man who now confronted me.

It is an odd experience to gaze at yourself and see a stranger; but that is what happened to me now. The face that gazed back at me was one which, as far as I could tell, I had never seen in my life. I had seen faces like it, hundreds of them, but never precisely this face. It was the typical face of the brown-eyed, brown-haired Anglo-Saxon, lean, leathery, and tanned; but I could no more connect it with my intimate self than I could Drinkwater's face, or Jean-Marie's.

It was that of a man who might have been thirty-two, but who possibly looked older. I mean by that that there was a haggardness in it which seemed to come of experience rather than from time. Had you passed this face in the street you would have said that it was that of a tall, good-looking young fellow with a brown mustache, but you would have added that the eyes had the queer, far-away luminosity of eyes that have "seen things." They would have reminded you of Drinkwater's eyes—not that they were like them, but only because of their fixed retention of images that have passed away from the brain.

My next thought was of money. So far I had found nothing but the few odd coins in my pockets; but that I had plenty of it somewhere I took as a matter of course. I know now by experience that people in the habit of having money and people in the habit of not having it are led by different "senses." In the one case it is a sense of limitation; in the other of liberty. It is like the difference between the movements of a blind man and those of one who can see—a tactful feeling of every step in contrast with the ease to come and go. Of all the distractions induced by poverty and wealth it is one that appeals to me now as the most significant. Merely to do without things, or merely to possess things, is matter of little importance. A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth, we are told on high authority; but it does consist in his state of mind. To be always in a state of mind in which restriction is instinctive is like always creeping as a baby and never learning to walk.

But as far as money went I was free. I had never been without it. I had no conception of a life in which I couldn't spend as much as I reasonably wished. As I had been in Europe, I probably had a letter of credit somewhere, if I could only put my hand on it. On arriving in New York I should of course have access

to my bank-account.

It occurred to me to look under my pillow, and there, sure enough, was a little leather purse. That it was a common little purse was secondary to the fact that it was filled. Sitting on the edge of the couch, I opened it with fingers that shook with my excitement. It contained three five-hundred-franc notes, two for a hundred, some hundred and fifty in gold, and a little silver, nearly four hundred dollars in all. I seemed to know that roughly it was the kind of sum I generally carried on my person when abroad.

After a hasty scrubbing up I crept back into bed, and waited for Jean-Marie to bring my breakfast.

It was my first thought that I must not let him see that anything was wrong. I must let no one see that. The reason I had given him for my extraordinary sleep, that of having long suffered from insomnia and being relieved by the sea air, would have to pass, too, with Drinkwater's friend the doctor, should he come to see me. No one, no one, must suspect that for so much as an hour the sense of my identity had escaped me. The shame I felt at that—a shame I have since learned to be common to most victims of the same mishap—was overwhelming. Rather than confess it I could own to nearly anything in the nature of a crime.

But it was no one's business but my own. I comforted myself with that reflection amid much that I found disturbing.

What I chiefly found disturbing was my general environment. I couldn't understand this narrow cabin, these provincial foreign clothes. While I was sorry for Drinkwater's blindness, I disliked the closeness of contact with one I regarded as my inferior. I am not saying that I took this situation seriously. I knew I could extricate myself from it on arriving in New York. The element in it that troubled me was my inability to account for it. What had I been doing that I should find myself in conditions so distasteful? Why should I have wanted to obliterate my traces? It was obvious that I had done it, and that I had done it with deliberation. Being Somebody in the world, I had made myself Nobody, and for that I must have had a motive. Was it a motive that would confront me as soon as I had become Somebody again? That I should have lost the sense of my identity was bad enough in itself; but that I should reappear in a rôle that was not my own, and with a name I was sure I had never borne, was at once terrifying and grotesque.

CHAPTER III

It occurred to me that I could escape some of my embarrassment by asking Drinkwater to stop his friend the doctor from looking in on me; but before I had time to formulate this plan, and while I was sitting up crosslegged in my berth, eating from the tray which Jean-Marie had laid on my knees, there was a sharp rap on the door. As I could do nothing but say, "Come in," the doctor was before me.

"Good!" he said, quietly, without greeting or self-introduction. "Best thing you could be doing."

The lack of formality nettled me. I objected to his assumption of a right to force himself in uninvited.

I said, frigidly: "I shall be out on deck presently. If you want to see me, perhaps it would be easier there."

"Oh, this is all right." He made himself comfortable in a corner of the couch, propping his body against the rolling of the ship with a fortification of bags. "Glad you're able to get up and dress. I'm Doctor Averill."

To give him to understand that I was not communicative I took this information in silence. My coldness apparently did not impress him, and, sitting in the corner diagonally opposite to mine, he watched me eat.

He was one of those men in whom personality disappears in the scientific observer. His features, manners, clothing, were mere accidents.

He struck you as being wise, though with a measure of sympathy in his wisdom. Small in build, the dome of his forehead would have covered a man of twice his stature. A small, dark mustache was no more consciously a point of personal adornment than a patch of stoncrop to a rock. When he took off his cap his baldness, though more extensive than you would have expected in a man who couldn't have been older than forty-five, was the finishing-touch of the staid.

"You've been having a long sleep."

"Yes."

"Making up for lost time?"

"Exactly."

"Been at the front?"

It was the kind of a question I was afraid of. I knew that if I said, "Yes," I should have to give details, and so I said, "No."

"Look as if you had been."

"Do I?"

"Often leaves some sort of hang-over—"

"It couldn't do that in my case, because I wasn't there."

He tried another avenue of approach. "Drinkwater told me you were a Frenchman."

"That seems to have been a mistake of our steward."

"But you speak the language."

"Yes, I speak it."

"You must speak it very well."

"Probably."

"Have you lived much in France?"

"Oh, on and off."

"Had a position over there?"

It seemed to be my turn to ask a question. I shot him a quick glance. "What sort of position do you mean?"

"Oh, I didn't know but what you might have been in a shop or an office—"

So I looked like that! It was a surprise to me. I had thought he might mention the Embassy. My sense of superior standing was so strong that I expected another man of superior standing to see it at a glance. Contenting myself with a shake of the heads I felt his eyes on me with a graver stare.

"Must have found it useful to speak French so well, especially at a time like this."

I allowed that to pass without challenge.

"If we should ever go into the war a fellow like you could make himself handy in a lot of ways."

We were therefore not in the war. I was glad to add that to my list of facts. "I should try," I assented, feeling that the words committed me to nothing.

"Wonder you weren't tempted to pitch in as it was. A lot of our young Americans did—chaps who found themselves over there."

"I wasn't one of them."

"Poor Drinkwater, now—he went over with me as my stenographer in the spring of that year; and when the thing broke out—"

"He went?"

"Yes, he went."

"And didn't get much good from it."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Depends—doesn't it?—on what we mean by good. You fellows—"

I shot him another glance, but I don't think he noticed that I objected to being classed with Drinkwater.

"You fellows—" he began again.

I never knew how he meant to continue, for a shuffling and pawing outside the door warned us that Drinkwater, having finished his breakfast, was feeling his way in.

The doctor spoke as the boy pushed the door open and stumbled across the threshold.

"Morning, Harry! Your friend here seems to have waked up in pretty good condition. Look at the breakfast he's been making away with." He rose to leave, since the cabin had not room enough for two men on foot at the same time. "See you on deck by and by," he added, with a nod to me; "then we can have a more satisfactory talk."

I waited till he was out of earshot. "Who is he, anyhow?"

In giving me a summary of Averill's history Drinkwater couldn't help weaving in a partial one of his own. It was in fact most of his own, except that it included no reference to his birth and parentage.

Drinkwater had worked his way through one of the great universities, when laboratory research threw him in contact with Boyd Averill. The latter was not a practising physician, but a student of biology. He was the more at liberty to follow one of the less lucrative lines of scientific work because of being a man of large means. Sketching the origin of this fortune, my companion informed me that from his patron's democratic ways no one would ever suppose him the only son, and except for a sister the only heir, of the biggest banker in the state of New Jersey. By one of those odd freaks of heredity which neither Sir Francis Galton nor the great Plockendorff had been able to explain, Boyd Averill had shown a distaste for banking from his cradle, and yet with an interest equally difficult to account for in bacteria.

On the subject of Averill's more personal life all my friend could tell me was that he had married Miss Lulu Winfield, once well known on the concert stage.

"And, say," he went on, enthusiastically, "she's about the prettiest. You'll see for yourself when you come up on deck. She'll speak to you. Oh yes, she will," he hastened to assure me, when I began to demur. "She won't mind. She's not a bit aristocratic, and Miss Blair says the same."

To make conversation I asked him who was Miss Blair, learning that she was the young lady whom Miss Averill had brought over to Europe to act as stenographer to her brother when Drinkwater had gone to the war.

"You see," he continued to explain, "Averill's been white with me from the start. When I left him in the lurch—after he'd paid my expenses over to Europe and all that—because the war broke out, he didn't kick any more than a straw dummy. When I told him I felt mean, but that this war couldn't be going on and me not in it, he said that at my age he'd have felt the same. One of these days I've got to pay him back that fare. I'll do that when I've got to work in New York and saved a bit of dough."

I asked him what he meant to work at.

"Oh, there'll be things. There always are. Miss Blair wants me to learn the touch system and go in for big stenography. Says she'll teach me. Say, she's some

girl. I want you to know her." He reverted to the principal theme. "Big money in piano-tuning, too, though what I'm really out for is biology. But after all what's biology but the science of life?—and you can pick that up anywhere. Oh, I'm all right. I've had the darnedest good luck, when I've seen my pals—" He left this sentence unfinished, going on to say: "That was the way when I got mine at Bois Robert. Shell came down—and, gee whizz! Nothing left of a bunch of six or eight of us but me—and I only got this."

A toss of his hand was meant to indicate his eyes, after which he went on to tell how marvelously he had been taken care of, with the additional good luck of running across Boyd Averill in hospital. Best luck of all was, now that he was able to go home, the Averills were coming, too, and had been willing to have him sail by their boat and keep an eye on him. He spoke as if they were his intimate friends, while I had only to appear on deck to have them become mine.

"In the jewelry business?" he asked me, suddenly.

I stared in an amazement of which he must have recognized the tones in my voice. "What made you ask me that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Speak like it. Thought you might have been in that—or gents' furnishings."

After he had gone on deck, and Jean-Marie had taken away the tray, I got up and dressed. I did it slowly, with a hatred to my clothes that grew as I put them on. How I had dressed in the previous portion of my life I couldn't, of course, tell; but now I was something between a country barber and a cheap Latin Quarter Bohemian. In conjunction with my patently Anglo-Saxon face nothing could have been more grotesque.

I thought of trunks. I must have some in the hold. Ringing for Jean-Marie, I asked if it would be possible to have one or two of them brought up. If so, I could go back to bed again till I found something more presentable. The steward, with comic compassion stealing into his eye as he studied me, said that of course it was possible to have monsieur's trunks brought up if monsieur would give him the checks or receipts, which would doubtless be in monsieur's pockets. But a search revealed nothing. The bags and my purse revealed nothing. My dismay at the fact that I had come on board without other belongings than those on the couch almost betrayed me to the little man watching me so wistfully. I was obliged to invent a story of hurried war-time traveling in order to get him out.

My predicament was growing more absurd. I sat down on the couch and considered it. It would have been easy to become excited, frantic, frenzied, with my ridiculous inability. Putting my hands to my head, I could have torn it asunder to wrest from my atrophied brain the secret it guarded so maliciously. "None of that!" I warned myself; and my hands came down. Whatever I did I must do coolly. So not long after the eight bells of noon I dragged myself to the deck.

All at once I began to find something like consolation. The wild beauty of sky and water beat in on me like love. I must have traveled often enough before, so that it was not new to me; but it was all the more comforting for that. I had come back to an old, old friendship—the friendship of wind and color and scudding clouds and glinting horizons and the mad squadrons of the horses of Neptune shaking their foamy manes. Amid the raging tempests of cloud there were tranquil islands of a blue such as was never unfolded by a flower. In the long, sweeping hollows of the waves one's eye could catch all the hues in pigeons' necks. Before a billow broke it climbed to a tip of that sea-water green more ineffable than any of the greens of grass, jades, or emeralds. From every crest, and in widening lines from the ship's sides as we plowed along, the foam trailed into shreds that seemed to have been torn from the looms of a race more deft and exquisite than ours.

Not many men and women love beauty for its own sake. Not many see it. To most of us it is only an adjunct to comfort or pride. It springs from the purse, or at best from the intellect; but the hidden man of the heart doesn't care for it. The hidden man of the heart has no capacity to value the cloud or the bit of jewel-weed. These things meet no need in him; they inspire no ecstasy. The cloud dissolves and the bit of jewel-weed goes back to earth; and the chances are that no human eye has noted the fact that each has externalized God in one of the myriad forms of His appeal to us. Only here and there, at long intervals, is there one to whom line and color and invisible forces like the wind are significant and sacred, and as essential as food and drink. It came to me now that, somewhere in my past, beauty had been the dominating energy—that beauty was the thread of flame which, if I kept steadily hold of it, would lead me back whence I came.

CHAPTER IV

From the spectacle of sea and sky I turned away at last, only because my senses could take in no more. Then I saw beauty in another form.

A girl was advancing down the deck who embodied the evanescence of the cloud and the grace of the bit of jewel-weed in a way I could never convey to you. You must see me as standing near the stern of the boat, and the long, clean line of the deck, with an irregular fringe of people in deck-chairs, as empty except for this slender, solitary figure. The rise and fall of the ship were a little

like those of a bough in the wind, while she was the bird on it. She advanced serenely, sedately, her hands jauntily in the pockets of an ulster, which was gray, with cuffs and collar of sage-green. A sage-green tam-o'-shanter was fastened to a mass of the living fair hair which, for want of a better term, we call golden. Her awareness of herself almost amounted to inference; and as she passed under the row of onlookers' eyes she seemed to fling out a challenge which was not defiant, but good-natured, defiant but good-natured was the gaze she fixed on me, a gaze as lacking in self-consciousness as it was in hesitation. A child might have looked at you in this way, or a dog, or any other being not afraid of you. Of a blue which could only be compared to that in the rifts in the cloud overhead, her eyes never wavered in their long, calm regard till they were turned on me obliquely as she passed by. She did not, however, look back; and reaching the end of the promenade, she rounded the corner and went up the other way.

Thinking of her merely as a vision seen by chance, I was the more surprised when she entered the dining-saloon, helping my friend Drinkwater. I had purposely got to my place before any one else, so as to avoid the awkwardness of arriving unknown among people who already have made one another's acquaintance. Moreover, the table being near to one of the main entrances, my corner allowed me to take notes on all who came in. Not that I was interested in my fellow-passengers otherwise than as part of my self-defense. Self-defense, the keeping any one from suspecting the mischance that had befallen me, seemed to me, for the moment, even more important than finding out who I was.

Transatlantic travel having already become difficult, those who entered were few in number; and as people are always at their worst at sea, they struck me as mere bundles of humanity. Among the first to pass my table was Boyd Averill, who gave me a friendly nod. After him came a girl of perhaps twenty-five, grave, sensible, and so indifferent to appearances that I put her down as his sister. Last of all was she whom Drinkwater had summed up as "one of the prettiest." She was; yet not in the way in which the vision on the deck had been the same. The vision on the deck had had no more self-consciousness than the bit of jewel-weed. This richly colored beauty, with eyes so long and almond-shaped that they were almost Mongolian, was self-conscious in the grain—luxurious, expensive, and languorous.

My table companions began to gather, turning my attention chiefly on myself. I had traveled enough to know the chief steward as a discriminating judge of human nature. Those who came asking for seats at table he sized up in a flash, associating like with like, and rarely making a mistake. On journeys of which no record remained with me I had often admired this classifying instinct, doubtless because any discrimination it may have contained was complimentary to myself. To-day I had occasion to find it otherwise.

On coming on board I must have followed the routine of other voyages. Before turning into my bunk for my long sleep I had apparently asked to be assigned a seat at table, and given the name of Jasper Soames. Guided by his intuitive social *flair*, the chief steward had adjudicated me to a side table in a corner, where to-day my first companion was a lady's maid. The second was a young man whom I had no difficulty in diagnosing as a chauffeur, after whom Drinkwater and the vision of the deck came gaily along together. She probably informed him that I was already in my place, for as he passed me to reach his chair at the head of the table, he clapped me on the shoulder with a glad salute.

"So, old scout, you've got ahead of us! Bully for you! Knew you'd eat a whale when once you got started. Say, what we'd all like to sit down to now is a good old-fashioned dinner of corned beef and cabbage instead of all this French stuff." He had not, however, forgotten the courtesies of the occasion. "Miss Blair, let me make you acquainted with Mr. Soames. Mr. Soames, Miss Mulberry; Mr. Finnegan, Mr. Soames."

For the ladies I half rose, with a bow; for Mr. Finnegan I made a nod suffice. Mr. Finnegan seemed scarcely to think I merited a nod in return. Miss Mulberry acknowledged me coldly. As for Miss Blair, she inclined her head with the grace of the *lilium canadense* or the nodding trinity-flower. In the act there was that shade of negligence which tells the worldly wise that friendliness is not refused, but postponed.

We three formed a group at one end of the table—Drinkwater having Miss Blair on his right and myself on his left—while Mr. Finnegan and Miss Mulberry forgathered at the other. The table being set for eight, there was a vacant seat between Miss Mulberry and Miss Blair, and two between myself and Mr. Finnegan. This breaking into sets was due, therefore, to the chief steward, and not to any sense of affinity or rejection among ourselves.

After a few polite generalities as to the run and other sea-going topics the conversation broke into dialogues—Mr. Finnegan and Miss Mulberry, Mr. Drinkwater and Miss Blair. This seeming to be the established procedure, it remained for me to take it as a relief.

For again it gave me time to ask why I was graded as I found myself. A man who knows he is a general and wakes up to see himself a private, with every one taking it for granted that he is a private and no more, would experience the same bewilderment. What had I done that such a situation could have come about? What had I been? How long was my knowledge of myself to depend on a group of shattered brain cells?

I had not followed the conversation of Mr. Drinkwater and Miss Blair, even though I might have overheard it; but suddenly the lady glanced up with a clear, straightforward look from her myosotis eyes.

"Mr. Soames, have you ever lived in Boston?"

The husky, veiled voice was of that bantering quality for which the French word *gouaillieur* is the only descriptive term. In Paris it would have been called *une voix de Montmartre*, and as an expression of New York it might best be ascribed to Third Avenue. It was jolly, free-and-easy, common, and sympathetic, all at once.

My instinct for self-defense urged me to say, "No," and I said it promptly.

"Or Denver?"

I said, "No," again, and for the same reason. I couldn't be pinned down to details. If I said, "Yes," I should be asked when and where and how, and be driven to invention.

"Were you ever in Salt Lake City?"

A memory of a big gray building, with the Angel Moroni on the top of it, of broad, straight streets, of distant mountains, of a desert twisted and suffering, of a lake that at sunset glowed with the colors old artists burned into enamels—a memory of all this came to me, and I said, "Yes," I said it falteringly, wondering if it would commit me to anything. It committed me to nothing, so far as I could see, but a glance of Miss Blair's heaven-colored eyes toward her friend, as though I had corroborated something she had said. She had forgotten for the moment that Drinkwater was blind, so that of this significant look I alone got the benefit. What it meant I, of course, didn't know; I could only see it meant something.

The obvious thing for it to mean was that Miss Blair knew more about me than I knew myself. While it was difficult to believe that, it nevertheless remained as part of the general experience of life which had not escaped me, that one rarely went among any large number of people without finding some one who knew who one was. That had happened to me many a time, especially on steamers, though I could no longer fix the occasions. I decided to cultivate Miss Blair and, if possible, get a clue from her.

CHAPTER V

That which, in my condition, irked me more than anything was the impossibility of being by myself. The steamer was a small one, with all the passengers of one class. Those who now crossed the Atlantic were doing it as best they could; and to be thrown pell-mell into a second-rate ship like the *Auvergne* was better, in

the opinion of most people, than not to cross at all. It was a matter of eight or ten days of physical discomfort, with home at the other end.

I knew now that the month was September, and the equinox not far away. It was mild for the time of year, and, though the weather was rough, it was not dirty. With the winds shifting quickly from west to northwest and back again, the clouds were distant and dry, lifting from time to time for bursts of stormy sunshine. For me it was a pageant. I could forget myself in its contemplation. It was the vast, and I was only the infinitesimal; it was the ever-varying eternal, and I was the sheerest offspring of time, whose affairs were of no moment.

Nevertheless, I had pressing instant needs, or needs that would become pressing as soon as we reached New York. Between now and then there were five or six days during which I might recover the knowledge that had escaped me; but if I didn't I should be in a difficult situation. I should be unable to get money; I should be unable to go home. I should be lost. Unless some one found me I should have to earn a living. To earn a living there must be something I could do, and I didn't know that I could do anything.

Of all forms of exasperation, this began to be the most maddening. I must have had a profession; and yet there was no profession I could think of from which I didn't draw back with the peculiar sick recoil I felt the minute I approached whatever was personal to myself. In this there were elements contradictory to each other. I wanted to know—and yet I shrank from knowing. If I could have had access to what money I needed I should have been content to drift into the unknown without regret.

But there was a reserve even here. It attached to the word home. On that word the door had not been so completely shut that a glimmer didn't leak through. I knew I had a home. I longed for it without knowing what I longed for. I could see myself arriving in New York, fulfilling the regular dock routine—and going somewhere. But I didn't know where. Of some ruptured brain cell enough remained to tell me that on the American continent a spot belonged to me; but it told me no more than the fact that the spot had love in it. I could feel the love and not discern the object. As to whether I had father or mother or wife or child I knew no more than I knew the same facts of the captain of the ship. Out of this darkness there came only a vision of flaming eyes which might mean anything or nothing.

I was unable to pursue this line of thought because Miss Blair came strolling by with the same nonchalant air with which she had passed me before lunch. I can hardly say she stopped; rather she commanded, and swept me along.

"Don't you want to take a walk, Mr. Soames? You'd better do it now, because we'll be rolling scuppers under by and by."

For making her acquaintance it was too good an opportunity to miss. In

spite of my inability to play up to her gay cheerfulness I found myself strolling along beside her.

I may say at once that I never met a human being with whom I was more instantly on terms of confidence. The sketch of her life which she gave me without a second's hesitation came in response to my remark that from her questions to me at table I judged her to have traveled.

"I was born on the road, and I suppose I shall never get off it. My father and mother had got hitched to a theatrical troupe on tour."

A distaste acquired as a little girl on tour had kept her from trying her fortunes on the boards. She had an idea that her father was acting still, though after his divorce from her mother they had lost sight of him. Her mother had died six years previously, since which time she had looked after herself, with some ups and downs of experience. She had been a dressmaker, a milliner, and a model, with no more liking for any of these professions than she had for the theatrical. In winding up this brief narrative she astounded me with the statement:

"And now I'm going to be an adventuress."

"A what?" I stopped in the middle of the deck to stare at her.

She repeated the obnoxious noun, continuing to walk on.

"But I thought you were a stenographer."

"That's part of it. I'm deceiving poor Miss Averill. She's my dupe. I make use of people in that way—and throw them aside."

"But doing the work for Doctor Averill in the mean time."

"Oh, that's just a pretext."

"A pretext for what?"

"For being an adventuress. Goodness knows what evil I shall do in that family before I get out of it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, well, you'll see. If you're born baleful—well, you've just got to be baleful; that's all. Did you ever hear of an adventuress who didn't wreck homes?"

I said I had not much experience with adventuresses, and didn't quite know the point of their occupation.

"Well, you stay around where I am and you'll see."

"Have you wrecked many homes up to the present?" I ventured to inquire.

"This is the first one I ever had a chance at. I only decided to be an adventuress about the time when Miss Averill came along."

That, it seemed, had been at the Settlement, to which Miss Blair had retired after some trying situations as a model. Stenography being taught at the Settlement, she had taken it up on hearing of several authenticated cases of girls who had gone into offices and married millionaires. The discouraging side presented itself later in the many more cases of girls who had not been so successful. It

was in this interval of depression on the part of Miss Blair that Mildred Averill had appeared at the Settlement with all sorts of anxious plans about doing good, "If she wants to do good to any one, let her do it to me," Miss Blair had said to her intimates. "I'm all ready to be adopted by any old maid that's got the wad." That, she explained to me, was not the language she habitually used. It was mere pleasantry between girls, and not up to the standard of a really high-class adventuress. Moreover, Miss Averill was not an old maid, seeing she was but twenty-five, though she got herself up like forty.

All the same, Miss Averill having come on the scene and having taken a fancy to Miss Blair, Miss Blair had decided to use Miss Averill for her own malignant purposes.

For by this time the seeming stenographer had chosen her career. A sufficient course of reading had made it clear that of all the women in the world the adventuress had the best of it. She went to the smartest dressmakers; she stayed at the dearest hotels; her jewels and furs rivaled those of duchesses; her life was the perpetual third act of a play. Furthermore, Miss Blair had yet to hear of an adventuress who didn't end in money, marriage, and respectability.

Having been so frank about herself, I could hardly be surprised when she became equally so about me. As the wind rose she slipped into a protected angle, where I had no choice but to follow her. She began her attack after propping herself in the corner, her hands deep in her pockets, and her pretty shoulders hunched.

"You're a funny man. Do you know it?"

Though inwardly aghast, I strove to conceal my agitation. "Funny in what way?"

"Oh, every way. Any one would think—"

"What would any one think?" I insisted, nervously, when she paused.

"Oh, well! I sha'n't say."

"Because you're afraid to hurt my feelings?"

"I'm a good sort—especially among people of our own class. For the others"—she shrugged her shoulders charmingly—"I'm an anarchist and a socialist and all that. I don't care who I bring down, if they're up. But when people are down already—I'm—I'm a friend."

As there was a measure of invitation in these words I nerved myself to approach the personal.

"Are you friend enough to tell me why you thought you had seen me in Salt Lake City?"

She nodded. "Sure; because I did think so—there—or somewhere."

"Then you couldn't swear to the place?"

"I couldn't swear to the place; but I could to you. I never forget a face if

I give it the twice-over. The once-over—well, then I may. But if I've studied a man—the least little bit—I've got him for the rest of my life."

"But why should you have studied me—assuming that it was me?"

"Assuming that that water's the ocean, I study it because there's nothing else to look at. We were opposite each other at two tables in a restaurant."

"Was there nobody there but just you and me?"

"Yes, there was a lady."

My heart gave a thump. "At your table or at mine?"

"At yours."

"Did she"—I was aware of the foolish wording of the question without being able to put it in any other way—"did she have large dark eyes?"

"Not in the back of her head, which was all I saw of her."

Once more I expressed myself stupidly. "Did you—did you think it was—my wife—or just a friend?"

She burst out laughing. "How could I tell? You speak as if you didn't know. You're certainly the queerest kid—"

I tried to recover my lost ground. "I do know, but—"

"Then what are you asking me for?"

"Because you seem to have watched me—"

"I didn't watch you," she denied, indignantly. "The idea! You sure have your nerve with you. I couldn't help seeing a guy that was right under my eyes, could I? Besides which—"

"Yes? Besides which—?" I insisted.

She brought the words out with an air of chaffing embarrassment. "Well, you weren't got up as you are now. Do you know it?"

As I reddened and stammered something about the war, she laid her hand on my arm soothingly.

"There now! There now! That's all right. I never give any one away. You can see for yourself that I can't have knocked about the world like I've done without running up against this sort of thing a good many times—"

"What sort of thing?"

"Oh, well, if you don't know I needn't tell you. But I'm your friend, kid. That's all I want you to know. It's why I told you about myself. I wanted you to see that we're all in the same boat. Harry Drinkwater's your friend, too. He likes you. You stick by us and we'll stick by you and see the thing through."

It was on my lips to say, "What thing?" but she rattled on again.

"Only you can't wear that sort of clothes and get away with it, kid. Do you know it? Another fellow might, but you simply can't. It shows you up at the first glance. The night you came on board you might just as well have marched in carrying a blue silk banner. For Heaven's sake, if you've got anything else in

your kit go and put it on."

"I haven't."

"Haven't? What on earth have you done with all the swell things you must have had? Burned 'em?"

The question was so direct, and the good-will behind it so evident, that I felt I must give an answer. "Sold them."

"Got down to that, did you? What do you know? Poor little kid! Funny, isn't it? A woman can carry that sort of thing off nine times out often; but a fat-head of a man—"

She kept the sentence suspended while gazing over my shoulder. The lips remained parted as in uttering the last word. I was about to turn to see what so entranced her, when she said, in a tone of awe or joy, I was not sure which:

"There's that poor little blind boy coming down the deck all by himself. You'll excuse me, won't you, if I run and help him?"

So she ran.

CHAPTER VI

Beyond this point I had made no progress when we landed in New York. I still knew myself as Jasper Soames. Miss Blair still suspected that I was running away from justice. That I was running away from justice I suspected myself, since how could I do otherwise? All the way up the Bay I waited for that tap on my shoulder which I could almost have welcomed for the reason that it would relieve me of some of my embarrassments.

Those embarrassments had grown more entangling throughout the last days of the voyage. The very good-will of the people about me increased the complications in which I was finding myself involved. Every one asked a different set of questions, the answers I gave being not always compatible with each other. I didn't exactly lie; I only replied wildly—trying to guard my secret till I could walk off the boat and disappear from the ken of these kindly folk who did nothing but wish me well.

I accomplished this feat, I am bound to confess, with little credit; but credit was not my object. All I asked was the privilege of being alone, with leisure to take stock of my small assets and reckon up the possibilities before me. As it was incredible that a man such as I was could be lost on the threshold of his home I

needed all the faculties that remained to me in order to think out the ways and means by which I could be found.

So alone I found myself, though not without resorting to ruses of which I was even then ashamed.

It was Miss Blair who scared me into them. Coming up to me on deck, during the last afternoon on board, she said, casually:

"Going to stay awhile in New York?"

It was a renewal of the everlasting catechism, so I said, curtly:

"I dare say."

"Oh, don't be huffy! Looking for a job?"

"Later, perhaps; not at once."

In her smile, as her eye caught mine, there was a visible significance. "You'll be a good kid, wont you? You'll—you'll keep on the level?"

I made a big effort on my own part, so as to see how she would take it. "If I'm not nabbed going up the Bay."

"Oh, you won't be. It can't be as—as bad as all that. Even if it was—" She left this sentiment for me to guess at while she went on. "Where do you expect to stay?"

I was about to name one of New York's expensive hotels when it occurred to me that she would burst out laughing at the announcement, she would take it as a joke. I realized then that it struck me also as a joke. It was incongruous not only with my appearance, but with my entire rôle throughout the trip. I ended by replying that I hadn't made up my mind.

"Well, then, if you're looking for a place—"

"I can't say that I'm that."

"Or if you should be, I've given Harry Drinkwater a very good address."

It was only a rooming-house, she explained to me, but for active people the more convenient for that, and with lots of good cafés in the neighborhood. She told me of one in particular—Alfonso was the name of the restaurateur—where one could get a very good dinner, with wine, for seventy-five cents, and an adequate breakfast for forty. Moreover, Miss Blair had long known the lady who kept the rooming-house in question, a friend of her mother's she happened to be, and any one whom she, Lydia Blair, sent with her recommendation would find the place O.K.

I was terrified. I didn't mean to go to this well-situated dwelling, "rather far west" in Thirty-fifth Street; I only had visions of being wafted there against my will. So much had happened in which my will had not been consulted that I was afraid of the kindest of intentions. When at dinner that evening Miss Mulberry apologized across the table for her coldness toward me during the trip, ascribing it to a peculiarity of hers in never making gentlemen friends till sure they were

gentlemen, and offering me her permanent address, I resolved that after that meal none of the whole group should catch another glimpse of me.

For this reason I escaped to my cabin directly after dinner, packed my humble belongings, and went to bed. When, toward eleven, Drinkwater came down, putting the question, as he stumbled in, "'Sleep, Jasper?" I replied with a faint snore. For the last two or three days he had been scattering Jaspers throughout his sentences, and I only didn't ask him to give up the practice because of knowing that with men of his class familiarity is a habit. Besides, it would be all over in a few days, so that I might as well take it patiently.

And yet I was sorry that it had to be so, for something had made me like him. During the days of the equinoctial bad weather it had fallen to me to steer him about the staggering ship, and one is naturally drawn to anything helpless. Then, too, of all the men to whom I ever lent a hand he was the most demonstrative. He had a boy's way of pawing you, of sprawling over you, of giving your hand little twitches, or affectionate squeezes to your arm. There was no liberty he wouldn't take; but when he took them they didn't seem to be liberties. If I betrayed a hint of annoyance he would pat me on any part of my person he happened to touch, with some such soothing words as:

"There, there, poor 'ittle Jasper! Let him come to his muvverums and have his 'ittle cry."

But I had to turn my back on him. There was no help for it. I understood, however, that people in his class were less sensitive to discourtesy than those in mine. They were used to it. True, he was blind; but then it was not to be expected that I should look after every blind man I happened to run against in traveling. Besides all this, I had made up my mind what I meant to do, and refused to discuss it further even with myself.

He was hoisting himself to the upper bunk when he made a second attempt to draw me.

"You'll have people to meet you to-morrow morning?"

"Oh, I suppose so," I grunted, sleepily. "Some of 'em will be there." A second or two having passed, I felt it necessary to add, "Same with you, I suppose?"

He replied from overhead. "Sure! Two or three of the guys 'll be jazzing round the dock. There'll be—a—Jack—and—a—Jim—and—a—well, a pile of 'em." He was snuggling down into his pillow as he wound up with a hearty, "Say, Jasper, I'll be—I'll be all right—I'll be *fine*."

Deciding that I wouldn't call this bluff, I turned and went to sleep. Up with dawn, I slipped out of the cabin before the blind man had stirred. Early rising got its reward in a morning of silver tissue. Silver tissue was flung over the Bay, woven into the air, and formed all we could see of the sky. Taking my place as far toward the bow as I could get, I watched till two straight lines forming a right

angle appeared against the mist, after which, magical, pearly, spiritual, white in whiteness, tower in cloud, the great city began to show itself through the haze, like something born of the Holy Ghost.

Having nothing to carry but my bag and suitcase, I was almost the first on shore. So, too, I must have been the first of the passengers ready to leave the dock. But two things detained me, just as I was going to take my departure.

The first was fear. It came without warning—a fear of solitude, of the city, of the danger of arrest, of the first steps to be taken. I was like a sick man who hasn't realized how weak he is till getting out of bed. I had picked up my bags after the custom-house officer had passed them, to walk out of the pen under the letter S, when the thought of what I was facing suddenly appalled me. Dropping my load to the dusty floor, I sank on the nearest trunk.

I have read in some English book of reminiscences the confession of dread on the part of a man released after fifteen years' imprisonment on first going into the streets. The crowds, the horses, the drays, the motors, the clamor and gang, struck him as horrific. For joining the blatant, hideous procession already moving from the dock I was no more equipped than Minerva would have been on the day when she sprang, full-grown and fully armed, from her father's head.

Looking up the long lines of pens, I could see Miss Blair steering Drinkwater from the gangway toward the letter D. I noticed his movements as reluctant and terrified. The din I found appalling even with the faculty of sight must have been menacing to him in his darkness. He was still trying to take it with a laugh, but the merriment had become frozen.

Seizing my two bags again, I ran up the line.

"Oh, you dear old kid!" Miss Blair exclaimed, as I came within speaking distance, "I'm sure glad to see you. I was afraid you'd been—"

Knowing her suspicion, I cut in on her fear. "No; it didn't happen. I—got off the boat all right. I—I've just been looking after my things and ran back to see if there was anything I could do—"

"Bless you! There's everything you can do. Harry's been crying for you like a baby for its nurse."

"Where is he?"

The words were his. Confused by the hub-bub, he was clawing in the wrong direction, so that the grab with which he seized me was like that of a strayed child on clutching a friendly hand.

In the end I was in a taxicab, bound for the rooming-house "rather far west" in Thirty-fifth Street, with my charge by my side.

"Say, isn't this the grandest!"

The accent was so sincere that I laughed. We were out in the sunlight by this time, plowing our way through the squalor.

"What's grand about it?"

"Oh, well, Miss Blair finding me that house to go to—and you going along with me—and the doctor coming to see me to-morrow to talk about a job—"

"What job?"

"Oh, some job. There'll be one. You'll see. I've got the darnedest good luck a guy was ever born with—all except my name."

"What about the fellows you said would be jazzing around the dock to meet you?"

I was sorry for that bit of cruelty before it had got into words. It was one of the rare occasions on which I ever saw his honest pug-face fall.

"Say, you didn't believe that, did you?"

"You said it."

"Oh, well, I say lots of things. Have to."

We jolted on till a block in the traffic enabled him to continue without the difficulty of speaking against noise. "Look here! I'm going to tell you something. It's—it's a secret."

"Then for Heaven's sake keep it."

"I want you to know it. I don't want to be your friend under false pretenses."

It seemed to me an opportunity to clarify the situation. We were on land. We were in New York. It was hardly fair to these good people to let them think that our association could continue on the same terms as at sea. Somewhere in the back of my strained mind was the fact that I had formerly classed myself as a snob and had been proud of the appellation. That is, I had been fastidious as to whom I should know and whom I should not know. I had been an adept in the art of cutting those who had been forced or had forced themselves upon me, and had regarded this skill as an accomplishment. Finding myself on board ship, and in a peculiar situation, I had carried myself as a gentleman should, even toward Mr. Finnegan and Miss Mulberry.

That part had been relatively easy. It was more difficult to dispose of the kindly interest of the Averills. He had made more than one approach which I parried tactfully. Mrs. Averill had contented herself with disquieting looks from her almond eyes, though one day she had stopped me on deck with the condescending inquiries as to my health that one puts to a friend's butler. Miss Averill had been more direct—sensible, solicitous, and rich in a shy sympathy. One day, on entering the saloon, I found her examining some rugs which a Persian passenger was displaying in the interests of trade. Being called by her into council, I helped her to choose between a Herati and a Sarouk, the very names of which she had never heard. My connoisseurship impressed her. After that she spoke to me frequently, and once recommended the employment bureau of her Settlement, in case I were looking for work.

All this I had struggled with, sometimes irritated, sometimes grimly amused, but always ill at ease. Now it was over. I should never see the Averills again, and Drinkwater must be given to understand that he, too, was an incident.

"My dear fellow, there are no pretenses. We simply met on board ship, and because of your—your accident I'm seeing you to your door. That's all. It doesn't constitute friendship."

"You bet it does," was his unexpected rejoinder. "I'm not that kind at all. When a fellow's white with me, he's white. I'm not going to be ashamed of him. If you ever want any one to hold the sponge for you, Jasper—"

I repeated stupidly, "Hold the sponge?"

"Go bail for you—do anything. I couldn't go bail for you on my own, of course; but I could hustle round and get some one to do it. Lydia Blair knows a lot of people—and there's the doctor. Say, Jasper, I'm your friend, and I'm going to stand by the contract."

The taxi lumbered on again, while I was debating with myself as to what to say next, or whether or not to say anything. One thing was clear, that no matter what fate awaited me I couldn't have Drinkwater holding the sponge for me, nor could I appear in court, or anywhere else, with a man of his class as my backer.

We were lurching into Broadway when he grasped me suddenly by the arm, to say:

"Look here, Jasper! To show what I think of you I'm going to make you listen to that secret. I—I wasn't expecting any one to meet me. There's no one *to* meet me. Do you get that?"

I said that I got it, but found nothing peculiar in the situation.

"Oh, but there is, though. I've got—I've got no friends—not so much as a father or a mother. I never did have. I was—I was left in a basket on a doorstep—twenty-three years ago—and brought up in an orphans' home in Texas. There, you've got it straight! I've passed you up the one and only dope on Harry Drinkwater, and any guy that's afraid he can't be my friend without wearing a dress-suit to breakfast—"

It was so delicate a method of telling me that I was as good as he was that it seemed best to let the subject of our future relations drop. They would settle themselves when I had carried out the plan that had already begun to dawn in me.

CHAPTER VII

Miss Goldie Flowerdew, for that was the name on our note of introduction, was at home, but kept us waiting in a room where I made my first study of a rooming-house. It was another indication of what I had *not* been in my past life that a rooming-house was new to me.

This particular room must in the 'sixties have been the parlor of some prim and prosperous family. It was long, narrow, dark, with dark carpets, and dark coverings to the chairs. Dark pictures hung on dark walls, and dark *objets d'art* adorned a terrifying chimneypiece in black marble. Folding-doors shut us off from a back room that was probably darker still; and through the interstices of the shrunken woodwork we could hear a vague rustling.

The rustling gave place to a measured step, which finally proceeded from the room and sounded along the hall, as if taken to the rhythm of a stone march like that in "Don Giovanni," when the statue of the Commander comes down from its pedestal. My companion and I instinctively stood up, divining the approach of a Presence.

The Presence was soon on the threshold, doing justice to the epithet. The statue of the Commander, dressed in the twentieth-century style of sweet sixteen and crowned by a shock of bleached hair of tempestuous wave, would have looked like Miss Goldie Flowerdew as she stood before us majestically, fingering our note of introduction.

"So she's not coming," was her only observation, delivered in a voice so deep that, like Mrs. Siddons's "Will it wash?" it startled.

"Did you expect her?" I ventured to say.

The sepulchral voice spoke again. "Which is the blind one?"

Drinkwater moved forward. She, too, moved forward, coming into the room and scanning him face to face.

"You don't look so awful blind."

"No, but I am—for the present."

"For the present? Does that mean that you expect to regain your sight?"

"The doctors say that it may come back suddenly as it went."

"And suppose it don't?"

"Oh, well, I've got along without it for the past six months, so I suppose I can do it for the next sixty years. I've given it a good try, and in some ways I like it."

"You do, do you?"

"Yes, lady."

"Then," she declared, in her tragic voice, "I like you."

He flushed like a girl flushes, though his grin was his own specialty.

"Say," he began, in confidential glee, "Miss Blair said you would—"

"Tell Lydia Blair that she's at liberty to bestow her affections when and as

she chooses; but beg her to be kind enough to allow me to dispose of mine. You'd like to see her room."

She was turning to begin her stone march toward the stairs, but Drinkwater held her back.

"Say, lady, is it—is it her room?"

"Certainly; it's the one she's always had when she's been with me, and which she reserved by letter four weeks ago. I was to expect her as soon as the steamer docked."

"Oh, then—" the boy began to stammer.

"Nonsense, my good man! Don't be foolish. She's gone elsewhere and the room is to let. If she hadn't sent me some one I would have charged her a week's rent; but now that she's got me a tenant she's at liberty to go where she likes. She knows I'd rather have men than women at any time of day."

"Oh, but if it's her room, and she's given it up for me—"

"It isn't her room; it's mine. I can let it to any one I please. She knows of a dozen places in the city that she'll like just as well as this, so don't think she'll be on the street. Come along; I've no time to waste."

"Better go," I whispered, taking him by the arm, so that the procession started.

The hall was papered in deep crimson, against which a monumental black-walnut hat-and-umbrella stand was visible chiefly because of the gleam of an inset mirror. The floors were painted in the darkest shade of brown, in keeping with the massive body of the staircase. Up the staircase, as along the hall, ran a strip of deep crimson carpet, exposing the warp on the edge of each step.

A hush of solemnity lay over everything. Clearly Miss Flowerdew's roomers were off for the day, and the place left to her and the little colored maid who had admitted us. Drinkwater and I made our way upward in a kind of awe, he clinging to my arm, frightened and yet adventurous.

The long, steep stairs curved toward the top to an upper hall darker than that below, because the one window was in ground glass with a border of red and blue. Deep crimson was again the dominating color, broken only by the doors which may have been mahogany. All doors were closed except the one nearest the top of the stairs, which stood ajar. Miss Flowerdew pushed it open, bidding us follow her.

We were on the spot which above all others in the world Lydia Blair called home. When the exquisite bit of jewel-weed drifted past me on the deck of the *Auvergne* this haven was in the background of her memory.

Through the gloom two iron beds, covered with coarse white counterpanes, sagged in the outlines of their mattresses, as beds do after a great many people have slept in them. A low wicker armchair sagged in the seat as armchairs do

after a great many people have sat in them. A great many people had passed through this room, wearing it down, wearing it out; and yet there was a woman in the world whose soul leaped toward it as the hearth of her affections. Because it was architecturally dark a paper of olive-green arabesques on an olive-green background had been glued on the walls to make it darker still; and because it was now as dark as it could be made, the table, the chest of drawers, the washstand, like the doors, were all of the darkest brown. Miss Flowerdew pointed to their bare tops to say:

"Lydia has her own covers, and when she puts her photographs and knick-knacks round it makes a home for her."

"Say, isn't it grand!" Drinkwater cried, looking round with his sightless eyes.

"It's grand for the money," Miss Flowerdew corrected. "It's not the Waldorf-Astoria, nor yet is it what I was used to when on the stage; but it's clean"—which it was—"and only respectable people have roomed here. Come, young man, and I'll show you how to find your way."

Miss Flowerdew may have been on the stage, but she ought to have been a nurse. Not even Lydia Blair could take hold of a helpless man with such tenderness of strength. Holding Drinkwater by the hand, she showed him how to find the conveniences of this nest, pointing out the fact that the bath-room was the first door on the right as you went into the hall, and only a step away.

"I hope I sha'n't give you any more trouble, lady, after this," the blind boy breathed, gratefully.

"Trouble! Of course you'll give me trouble! The man who doesn't give a woman trouble is not a man. I've had male roomers so neat and natty you'd have sworn they were female ones—and I got rid of 'em. When a man doesn't know whether to put his boots on the mantelpiece or in the wash-basin when he takes them off, I can see I've got something to take care of. I guess I may as well cart these away."

The reference was to two photographs that stood on the ledges of the huge black-walnut mirror.

"I put 'em out to give Lydia a home feeling as soon as she arrived. That's her father, Byron Blair," she continued, handing me the picture of an extremely good-looking, weak-faced man of the Dundreary type, "and that's her mother, Tillie Lightwood, as she was when she and I starred in 'The Wages of Sin.'" I examined the charming head, with profile overweighted by a chignon, while Miss Flowerdew continued her reminiscences. "I played Lady Somberly to Tillie's Lottie Gwynne for nearly three years on end, first here, on Broadway, and then on the road. Don't do you any good, playing the same part so long. Easy work and money, but you get the mannerisms fixed on you. I was a good utility woman up

to that time; but when I came back to Broadway I was Lady Somberly. I never could get rid of her, and so ... I'll show you some of my notices and photographs—no, not to-day; but when you come round to see your friend—that is”—she looked inquiringly—”that is, if you don't mean to use the other bed.”

This being the hint I needed, I took it. With the briefest of farewells I was out on the pavement with my bags in my hands, walking eastward without a goal.

Once more I had to stifle my concern as to Drinkwater. I saw him, when Miss Flowerdew would have gone down-stairs, sitting alone in his darkness, with nothing to do. His trunk, the unpacking of which would give him some occupation, would not arrive until evening; and in the mean time he would have no one but himself for company. He couldn't go out; it would be all he could do to feel his way to the bathroom and back, though even that small excursion would be a break in his monotony....

But I took these thoughts and choked them. It was preposterous that I should hold myself responsible for the comfort of a boy met by chance on a steamer. Had I taken him in charge from affection or philanthropy it would have been all very well; but I had no philanthropic promptings, and, while I liked him, I was far from taking this wavering sympathy as affection. I was sorry for him, of course; but others must take care of him. I should have all I could do in taking care of myself.

So I wandered on, hardly noticing at first the way I took, and then consciously looking for a hotel. As to that, I had definitely made up my mind not to go to any of those better known, though the names of several remained in my memory, till I had properly clothed myself. Though in a measure I had grown used to my appearance, I caught the occasional turning of a head to look at me, and once the eyebrows of a passer-by went up in amused surprise.

I discovered quickly enough that I knew New York and that I knew it tolerably well; and almost as quickly I learned that I knew it not as a resident, but from the point of view of the visitor. Now that I was there, I could see myself always coming and always going. From what direction I had come and in what direction I turned on leaving still were mysteries. But the conviction of having no abiding tie with this city was as strong as that of the spectator in a theater of having no permanent connection with the play.

Coming on a modest hotel at last, I made bold to go in, finding myself in a lobby of imitation onyx and an atmosphere heavy with tobacco. I crossed to the desk, under the eyes of some three or four colored boys who didn't offer to assist me with my bags, and applied for a room. A courteous young man of Slavic nationality regretted that they were "full up." I marched out again.

Repeating this experience at another and another, I was saved from doing

it at a fourth by a uniformed darky porter, who, as I was about to go up the steps, shook his head, at the same time sketching in the air an oval which I took to be a zero. I didn't go in, but I was oddly disconcerted. It had never occurred to me till then that hotels had a choice in guests, just as guests had a choice in hotels. I had always supposed that a man who could pay could command a welcome anywhere; but here I was, with nearly four hundred dollars in my pockets, unable to find a lodging because something strange in my clothes, or my eyes, or in my general demeanor, or in all together, stamped me as unusual. "Who's that freak?" I heard one bell-boy ask another, and the term seemed to brand me.

The day was muggy. After the keen sea air it was breathless. When I could walk no longer I staggered into a humble eating-house that seemed to be half underground. There was no one there but two waitresses, one of whom, wearing her hair *à la madone*, came forward as I closed the door. She did not, however, come forward so quickly but that I heard her say to her companion, "Well, of all the nuts—!" The observation, though breathlessly suspended there, made me shy about ordering my repast.

And when it came I couldn't eat it. It was good enough, doubtless, but coarse and ill served. I think the young lady who found me a nut was sorry for me when it came to close quarters, for she did her best to coax my appetite with other kind suggestions. All I could do in response was to flourish the roll of notes into which I had changed my French money on board and give her an amazing tip.

But a new decision had come to me while I strove to eat, and on making my way up to daylight again I set out to put it into operation. Reaching Broadway, I drifted southward till I came on one of the large establishments for ready-to-wear clothing which I knew were to be found in the neighborhood. On entering the vast emporium I adopted a new manner. No longer shrinking as I had shrunk since waking to the fact of my misfortune, I walked briskly up to the first man whom I saw at a distance eyeing me haughtily.

"See here," I said, in a good-mixer voice, "I've just got back from France, and look at the way they've rigged me out. Was in hospital there, after I'd got all kinds of shock, and this is the best I could do without coming back to God's country in a French uniform. Now I want to see the best you can do and how pretty you can make me look."

On emerging I was, therefore, passable to glance at, and after a hair-cut and a shave I was no longer afraid to see my reflection in a glass. I had, too, another inspiration. It occurred to me that I might startle myself into finding the way home. Calling a taxi, I drove boldly with my bags to the Grand Central Terminal, trusting to the inner voice to tell me the place for which to buy my ticket. With half the instinct of a horse my feet might take the road to the stable of their own

accord.

I recognized the station and all its ways—the red-capped colored men, the white-capped white ones, the subterranean shops, the gaunt marble spaces. I recognized the windows at which I must have taken tickets hundreds of times, and played my comedy by walking up first to one and then to another, waiting for the inner voice to give me a tip. I found nothing but blank silence. The world was all before me where to choose—only Providence was not my guide. Or if Providence was my guide, His thread of flame was not visible.

I suppose that in that station that afternoon I was like any other man intending to take a train. At least I could say that. So pleased was I with myself that more than once during the two hours of my test I went into the station lavatory just for the sake of seeing myself in the glass. It was a long glass, capable of reflecting some dozen men at a time, and I was as like the rest as one elephant is like another. Oh, that relief! Oh, that joy! Not to be a freak or a nut made up for the moment for my sense of homelessness.

When tired of listening for a call that didn't come, I went into the waiting-room and sat down. Again I was like all the other people doing the same thing. Propped up by a bag on each side, I might have been waiting for a train to any of the suburbs. I might have had a family expecting me to supper. The obvious reflection came to me. To all whose glances happened to fall on me I was no more than an unstoried human spot; and yet behind me was a history that would have startled any one of them. So they were unstoried human spots to me; and yet behind each of them there lay a drama of which I could read no more than I could see of the world of light beyond the speck I called a star. Was there a Providence for me, or them, or any other strayed, homeless dog? As I glanced at the faces before me, faces of tired women, faces of despondent men, young faces hardened, old faces stupefied, all faces stamped with the age-long soddenness of man, I asked if anywhere in the universe love could be holding up the lamps to them.

Like millions of others who have asked this question, I felt that I had my trouble for my pains; but I got another inspiration. As it was now the middle of the afternoon, the folly of expecting help from the inner voice became apparent. I must resort to some other expedient, and the new suggestion was a simple one.

Checking my bags in the parcel-office, I made for the nearest great hotel. The hall with its colossal furnishings was familiar from the moment of my entry. The same ever so slightly overdressed ladies might have been mincing up and down as on the occasion of my last visit there; the same knots of men might have begun to gather; the same orchestra might have been jiggling the same tunes; if only the same men were at the office desk I might find my ingenuity rewarded.

"I wonder if there are any letters for me here? I'm not staying in the house;

but I thought—

"Name?"

No one said, as I hoped, "I'll see, Mr. Smith," or, "I'll find out, Mr. Jones," as often happens when a man has been a well-known guest.

Nevertheless, it was a spot where strangers from other places congregated, and I knew that in the lobbies of hotels one often met old friends. I might meet one of mine. Better still, one of mine might meet me. At any minute I might feel a clap on the shoulder, while some one shouted, "Hello, old Brown!" or, "Why, here's Billy Robinson! What'll we have to drink?" These had been familiar salutations and might become so again.

So I walked up and down. I was sorry I had neither stick nor gloves, but promised to supply the lack at once. In the mean time I could thrust my hands into my pockets and look like a gentleman at ease because he is at home. Having enjoyed this sport for an hour or more, I went out to make my purchases.

Fortified with these, I repeated my comedy in another hotel, and presently in a third. In each I began with the same formula of asking for letters; and in each I got the same response, "Name?" In each I receded with a polite, "Never mind. I don't think there can be any, after all." In each I paraded up and down and in and out, courting the glances of head waiters, bell-hops, and lift-men, always in the hope of a recognition and a "How do, Mr. So-and-so?" that never came.

But by six o'clock the game had played itself out for the day and I was not only tired, but depressed. I was not discouraged, for the reason that New York was full of big hotels, and I meant to begin my tramp on the morrow. There were clubs, too, into which on one pretext or another I could force my way, and there were also the great thoroughfares. Some hundreds of people in New York at that moment would probably have recognized me at a glance—if I could only come face to face with them. All my efforts for the next few weeks must be bent on doing that.

But in the mean time I was tired and lonely. There were two or three things I might do, each of which I had promised to myself with some anticipation. I could go to a good restaurant and order a good feed; I could go to a good hotel and sleep in a good bed; I could buy the evening papers and find out what kind of world I was living in.

As to carrying out this program, I had but one prudential misgiving. It might cost more money than it would be wise for me to spend. My visit to the purveyor of clothing in the afternoon had not only lightened my purse, but considerably opened my eyes. Where I had had nearly four hundred dollars I had now nearly three. With very slight extravagance, according to the standards of New York, it would come down to nearly two and then to nearly one, and then to ... But I shuddered at that, and stopped thinking.

Having stopped thinking along one set of lines, I presently found myself off on another. I saw Harry Drinkwater sitting in the dark as I was sitting in the hall of a hotel. That is, he was idle and I was idle. He was eating his heart out as I was eating out mine.

It occurred to me that I might go back to Thirty-fifth Street and take him out to dinner. Alfonso, recommended by Miss Blair, might be no more successful as a host than the lady with tresses *à la madone* who had given me my lunch; but we could try. At any rate, the boy wouldn't be alone on this first evening in New York, and would feel that some one cared for him.

And then something else in me revolted. No! No! A thousand times no! I had cut loose from these people and should stay loose. On saying good-by to Drinkwater that morning I had disappeared without a trace. For any one who tried to follow me now I should be the needle in a haystack. What good could come of my going back of my own accord and putting myself on a level to which I did not belong?

Like many Americans, I was no believer in the equality of men. For men as a whole I had no respect, and in none but the smallest group had I any confidence. Looking at the faces as they passed me in the hall, I saw only those of brutes—and these were mostly people who had had what we call advantages. As for those who had not had advantages I disliked them in contact and distrusted them in principle. I described myself not only as a snob, but as an aristocrat. I had worked it out that to be well educated and well-to-do was the normal. To be poor and ill educated was abnormal. Those who suffered from lack of means or refinement did so because of some flaw in themselves or their inheritance. They were the plague of the world. They created all the world's problems and bred most of its diseases. From the beginning of time they had been a source of disturbance to better men, and would be to the end of it.

It was the irony of ironies, then, that I should have become a member of a group that included a lady's maid, a chauffeur, and two stenographers, and been hailed as one of them. The lady's maid and the chauffeur I could, of course, dismiss from my mind; but the two stenographers had seemingly sworn such a friendship for me that nothing but force would cut me free from it. Very well, then; I should use force if it was needed; but it wouldn't be needed. All I had to do was to refrain from going to take Drinkwater out to dinner, and they would never know where I was.

And yet, if you would believe it, I went. Within half an hour I was knocking at his bedroom door and hearing his cheery "Come in."

Why I did this I cannot tell you. It was neither from loneliness, nor kind-heartedness, nor a sense of duty. The feet that wouldn't take the horse to the stable took him back to that crimson rooming-house, and that is all I can say.

Drinkwater was sitting in the dark, which was no darker to him than daylight; but when I switched on the light his pug grin gave an added illumination to the room.

"Say, that's the darnedest! I knew you'd come in spite of the old lady swearing you wouldn't. I'd given you half an hour yet; and here you are, twenty-five minutes ahead of time."

The reception annoyed me. It was bad enough to have come; but it was worse to have been expected.

"How have you been getting on?" I asked, in order to relieve my first anxiety.

"Oh, fine!"

"Haven't you been—dull?"

"Lord, no!"

"What have you had to do?"

"Oh, enjoy myself—feeling my way about the house. I can go all round the room, and out into the hall, and up and down stairs just as easily as you can. It's a cinch."

"Have you heard anything of Miss Flair?"

"Sure! Called up about an hour ago to say she'd found the swellest place—in Forty-first Street. But, say, Jasper, what do you think of a girl who gives up the room she's reserved for a month and more, just to—"

I broke in on this to ask where he'd had his lunch.

"Oh, the old girl made me go down and have it with her. She's not half a bad sort, when you come to know her. I've asked her to come out to dinner with me at Alfonso's. Lydia Blair says it's a dandy place—and now you can join the party."

"No; I've come to take you out."

"Say, Jasper! Do you think I'm always going to pass the buck, just because ... You and little Goldie are coming to dinner with me."

Not to dispute the point, I yielded it, asking only:

"What made you think I was coming this evening?—because, you know, I didn't mean to."

"Oh, I dunno. Like you to do it. You're the sort. That's all."

So within another half-hour I found myself at Alfonso's, on Drinkwater's left, with little Goldie opposite. Little Goldie seemed somehow the right name for the Statue of the Commander, now that she wore a lingerie hat and a blouse of the kind which I believe is called peek-a-boo. She was well known at Alfonso's, however, her authority securing us a table in a corner, with special attentions from head and subordinate waitresses.

How shall I tell you of Alfonso's? Like the rooming-house, it was for me a

new social manifestation. It was what you might call the home of the homeless, and the homeless were numerous and noisy. They were very noisy, they were very hot. The odor of food struck upon the nostrils like the smell of a whole burnt sacrifice when they offered up an ox. The perfume of wine swam on top of that food, and over and above both the smell of a healthy, promiscuous, perspiring humanity, washed and unwashed, in a festive hurtling together, hilarious and hungry.

The food was excellent; the wine as good as any *vin ordinaire* in France; the service rapid; and the whole a masterpiece of organization. I had eaten many a dinner for which I paid ten times as much which wouldn't have compared with it.

During the progress of the meal it was natural that Miss Flowerdew, whose eye commended the change in my appearance, should ask me what I had been doing through the day. I didn't, as you will understand, find it necessary to go into details; but I told her of my unsuccessful attempts to find a room.

"Did you try the Hotel Barcelona, in Fourth Avenue?"

I told her I had not.

"Then do so." Fumbling in her bag, she found a card and pencil. "Take that," she commanded, when she had finished scribbling, "and ask for Mr. Jewsbury. If he isn't in, show it to the room clerk, but keep it for Mr. Jewsbury to-morrow. I've told them you must have a room and bath, not over two-fifty a day—and clean. Tell them I said so."

"Is Mr. Jewsbury a friend of yours?" I asked, inanely, after I had thanked her.

"He used to be my husband—the one before Mr. Crockett. I could be Mrs. Jewsbury again, if I so chose; but I do not so choose."

With this astonishing hint of the possibilities in Miss Goldie Flowerdew's biography I saw the value of discretion, and as soon as courtesy permitted took my leave to visit the Hotel Barcelona.

CHAPTER VIII

After a delicious night I woke in a room which gave the same shock to my fastidiousness as the first glimpse of my cabin on board ship. I woke cheerfully, however, knowing that I was in New York and that not many days could pass

before some happy chance encounter would give me the clue of which I was in search. Cheerfully I dressed and breakfasted; cheerfully I sat down in the dingy hall to scan the morning's news.

It was the first paper I had opened since landing. It was the first I had looked at since...

I had no recollection of when I had read a newspaper last. It must have been long ago; so long ago that the history of my immediate time had lapsed into formlessness, like that of the ancient world. I knew there was a world; I knew there were countries and governments; I knew, as I have said, that there was a war. Of the causes of that war I retained about the same degree of information as of the origin of the Wars of the Roses.

Bewilderment was my first reaction now; the second was amazement. Reading the papers with no preparation from the day before, or from the day before that—with no preparation at all but the vague memory of horrors from which my mind retreated the minute they were suggested—reading the papers thus, the world seemed to me to have been turned upside down. Hindus were in France, Canadians in Belgium, the French in the Dobrudja, the Australians in Turkey, the British and Germans in East Africa, and New-Zealanders on the peninsula of Sinai. What madness was this? How had the race of men got into such a tragi-comic topsy-turvydom? A long crooked line slashed all across Europe showed the main body of the opponents locked in a mutual death embrace.

I had hardly grasped the meaning of it when, looking up, I saw a figure of light standing in the lobby before me. It was all in white serge, with a green sash about the waist, and the head wreathed in a white motor veil.

"Hello, kid!" The husky, comic, Third Avenue laugh was Lydia Blair's. I had just time to rehearse the series of irritations I knew I should feel at being tracked down, and to regret my folly for having gone back to Drinkwater on the previous evening. Then I saw the heavenly eyes surveying me with an air of approval. "Well, you look like a nice tailor's dummy at last. Takes me back to Seattle or Boston or Salt Lake City—and the lady." As she rattled on, a pair of dark eyes began to flash on me from the air. "We haven't got *her* to-day, but there's some one else who perhaps will fill the bill. Come on out."

Wondering what she could mean, and whether or not the longed-for clue might not be at hand, I suffered myself to be led by the arm to the door of the hotel.

At first I saw nothing but a large and handsome touring-car drawn up against the curb. Then I saw Drinkwater snuggled in a corner—and then a brown veil. I couldn't help crossing the pavement, since Lydia did the same, and the brown veil seemed to expect me.

"Miss Blair thought you might like a drive, Mr. Soames, so we came round

to see if we could find you.”

”Come on in, Jasper,” Drinkwater urged; ”the water’s fine.”

”Come on. Don’t be silly,” Miss Blair insisted, as I began to make excuses.

Before I knew what I was doing I had stumbled into the seat opposite Miss Averill. She sat in the right-hand corner, Drinkwater in the left, Miss Blair between the two. I occupied one of the small folding armchairs, going backward. In another minute we were on our way through one of the cross-streets to Fifth Avenue.

Having grasped the situation, I was annoyed. Miss Averill was taking the less fortunate of her acquaintance for an airing. Though I could do justice to her kindness, I resented being forced again into a position from which I was trying to struggle out.

Then I saw something that diverted my attention even from my wrongs. The pavements in Fifth Avenue were thronged with a slowly moving crowd of men and women, but mostly men, that made progress up or down impossible. Looking closely, I saw that they were all of the nations which people like myself are apt to consider most alien to the average American. Of true Caucasian blood there was hardly a streak among them. Dark, stunted, oddly hatted, oddly dressed, abject and yet eager, submissive and yet hostile, they poured up and up and up from all the side-streets, as runlets from a mountain-side into a great stream. For the pedestrian, the shopper, the *flâneur*, there was not an inch of foot room. These surging multitudes monopolized everything. From Fourteenth Street to Forty-second Street, a distance of more than a mile along the most extravagantly showy thoroughfare in the world, these two dense lines of humanity took absolute possession, driving clerks back into their shops and customers from trade by the sheer weight of numbers.

”Good heavens! What’s up?” I cried, in amazement.

Miss Averill, who was doubtless used to the phenomenon, looked mildly surprised.

”Why, it’s always this way!” she smiled. ”It’s their lunch-hour. They come from shops and workshops in the side-streets to see the sights and get the air.”

”But is it like this every day?”

”Sure it is!” laughed Miss Blair. ”Did you never see the Avenue before?”

”I’ve never seen this before. I’m sure they didn’t do it a few years ago.”

Miss Averill agreed to this. It was a new manifestation, due to the changes this part of New York had undergone in recent years.

”But how do the people get in and out of the shops?”

Miss Blair explained that they couldn’t, which was the reason why so many businesses were being driven up-town. There was an hour in the day when everything was at a standstill.

"And if during that hour this inflammable stuff were to be set ablaze—"

Miss Averill's comment did not make the situation better. "Oh, the same thing goes on in every city in the country, only you don't see it. New York is unfortunate in having only one street. Any other street is just a byway. Here the whole city, for every purpose of its life, has to pour itself into Fifth Avenue, so that if anything is going on you get it there."

We did not continue the subject, for none of us really wanted to talk of it. In its way it went beyond whatever we were prepared to say. It was disquieting; it might be menacing. We preferred to watch, to study, to wonder, as, in the press of vehicles, we slowly made our way between these banks of outlandish faces, every one of which was like a slumbering fire. If our American civilization were ever to be blown violently from one basis to another, as I had sometimes thought might happen, the social TNT was concentrated here.

But we were soon in the Park. Soon after that we were running along the river-bank. Soon after that we came to an inn by a stream in a dimple of a dell, and here Miss Averill had ordered lunch by telephone. It was a nice little lunch, in a sort of rude pavilion that simulated eating in the open air. I noticed that all the arrangements had been made with as much foresight as if we had been people of distinction.

So I began to examine my hostess with more attention than I had ever given her, coming to the conclusion that she belonged to the new variety of rich American whom I had somewhere had occasion to observe.

Sensible and sympathetic were the first words you applied to her, and you could see she was of the type to seek nothing for herself. Brown was her color, as it so often is that of self-renouncing characters—the brown of woodland brooks in her eyes, the brown of nuts in her hair, and all about her an air of conscientiousness that left no place for coquetry.

Conscientiousness was her aura, and among the shades of conscientiousness that in spending money easily came first. I was sure she had studied the whole question of financial inequality from books, and as much as she could from observation. Zeal to make the best use of her income had probably held her back from marriage and dictated her occupations. It had drawn her to working-girls like Lydia Blair, to struggling men like Harry Drinkwater, and now indirectly to me. It had suggested the drive of this morning, and had bidden her gather us round her table as if we were her equals. She knew we were not her equals, but she was doing her best to forget the fact, and to have us forget it, too. With Harry and Lydia I think she was successful. But with me...

She herself knew she was not successful with me, and when, after the coffee, the working-girl had taken the blind man and strayed with him for a few hundred yards into the woods, Miss Averill grew embarrassed. The more she tried

to keep me from seeing it the more she betrayed it—not in words, or glances, or any trick of color, but in inner hesitations which only mind-reading could detect.

As we still sat at the table, but each a little away from it, she gathered all her resources together to be the lady in authority.

"I'm glad of a word alone with you because—" Apparently she could get no farther in this direction, and so took another line. "I think you said your business was with carpets, didn't you?"

"Somebody may have said it for me—especially after our little talk about the rug—but it didn't come from me."

Her hazel eyes rested on me frankly. "And it's not?"

"No, it's not."

"Oh, then—" Her tone was slightly that of disappointment.

"Did you want it to be?" I smiled.

"It isn't that; but my brother thought it was—"

"I'm sure I don't know why—except for the rug. But one can know about rugs and not have to sell them, can't one?"

"It's not a usual branch of knowledge, except among connoisseurs and artists—"

"Oh, well!"

"So my brother thought if you were in that kind of work he'd give you a note to a friend of his—at the head of one of the big carpet establishments in New York—"

"It's awfully kind of him," I broke in, as she drew a letter from the bag she carried, "and if I needed it I'd take it; but—but I don't need it. It—it wouldn't be any good to me. I thank him none the less sincerely—and you, too, Miss Averill—"

She looked at the ground, her long black lashes almost resting on her cheek.

"I must seem to you very officious, but—"

"Not in the slightest. I'm extremely grateful. If I required help there's nobody—"

"You don't live in New York?"

"I'm going to stay here for—for the present."

"But not—not to work?"

"That I shall have to see."

"I suppose you're a—a writer—or one of those things."

"No, I'm not any of those things," I said, gravely; and at that we laughed.

CHAPTER IX

We got back to New York in time for me to begin the parade of the hotels. Taking this task seriously, I selected the biggest and made myself conspicuous by keeping on my feet.

For three days nothing happened except within myself. This focusing of men and women into vast assemblies from four to seven every afternoon began to strike me as the counterpart of the gatherings I was watching each day between twelve and one on the pavements of Fifth Avenue. Though the activities were different, the same obscure set of motives seemed to lie behind both. In both there was the impulse to crowd densely together, as if promiscuity was a source of excitement. In both there was a vacuity that was not purposeless. In both there was a suggestion of the sleeping wild beast. While in the one case the accompaniment was the inchoate uproar of the streets, in the other it was an orchestra that jazzed with the monotonous incitement of Oriental tom-toms, nagging, teasing, tormenting the wild beast to get up and show his wildness. Across tea-rooms or between arcades one could see couples dancing in a languorous semi-paralysis of which the fascination lay in a hint of barbaric shamelessness. Barbaric shamelessness marked the huge shaven faces of most of the men and the kilts of most of the women. I mention these details only to point out that to me, after my mysterious absence, they indicated a socially new America.

It was the fourth afternoon when, drifting with the crowd through a corridor lined with tables at which small parties were having tea, I felt the long-expected tap on my shoulder.

In the interval too brief to reckon before turning round two possibilities were clear in my mind. The unknown crime from which I was running away might have found me out—or some friend had come to my deliverance. Either event would be welcome, for even if it were arrest I should learn my name and history.

"Hello, old chap! Come and have some tea."

I was disappointed. It was only Boyd Averill. Behind him his wife and sister were seated at one of the little tables. It was the sort of invitation one couldn't refuse, especially as they saw I was strolling without purpose.

It was Mrs. Averill who talked, in the bored *voix trainante* of one who has everything the world can give, except what she wants most. I had seen before that she was a beautiful woman, but never so plainly as now—a woman all softness and dimpling curves, with the same suggestions of the honeyed and melting and fatigued in her glances that you got from the inflection of her sentences.

She explained that they had come from a song recital in the great hall upstairs. It was given at this unusual time of the year by a well-known singer who was passing through New York on her way to Australia. With this interruption she continued the criticism she had been making when I sat down, and which dealt with certain phrases in a song—Goethe's "*Ueber allen Gipfeln*."

"The Schubert setting?" I asked, after informing Miss Averill as to how I should have my tea.

"No, the Hugo Wolff."

I began to hum in an undertone: "*Ueber allen Gipfeln ist Ruh; in allem Wipfeln hörest du kaum einen Hauch*." Is that the one?"

The ladies exchanged glances; Averill kept his eyes on my face.

"Yes, that's the one," Mrs. Averill said, as if nothing unusual had happened. "So you sing."

"No; I—I just know the song. I've—I've heard a good deal of music at one time and another."

"Abroad?"

"Yes—abroad—and here."

"Where especially here?"

"Oh, New York—Boston—Chicago—different places." I did my best to be vague.

I noticed for the first time then a shade of wistfulness in Mildred Averill's brown eyes as she said:

"You seem to have moved about a good deal."

"Oh yes. I wanted—I wanted to see what was happening."

"And you saw it?"

Averill asked me that, his gaze still fixed on me thoughtfully.

"Enough for the present."

There was a pause of some seconds during which I could hear the unuttered question of all three, "Why don't you tell us who you are?" It was a kindly question, with nothing but sympathy behind it. It was, in fact, a tacit offer of friendship, if I would only take it up. More plainly than they could have expressed themselves in words, it said: "We like you. We are ready to be your friends. Only give us the least little bit of encouragement. Link yourself up with something we know. Don't be such a mystery, because mystery breeds suspicion."

When I let it go by Mildred Averill began to talk somewhat at random. She

didn't want that significant silence to be repeated. I had had my chance and I hadn't taken it. Very well, my reasons would be respected, but I couldn't keep people from wondering. That was what I knew she was saying, though her actual words referred to our expedition of a few days previously.

And of that she spoke with an intonation that associated me with herself. She and I had taken two nice young people of the working-classes for an outing. Let me hasten to say that there was no condescension in what she said; condescension wasn't in her; there was only the implication that whatever the ground she stood on, I stood on that ground, too. She threw out a hint that as New York in these September days was barely waking from its summer lethargy, and there was little to fill time, we might all four do the same again.

In this she was reserved, unlike, yet—what shall I say? What is there to say when a woman betrays what very few people perceive and one isn't supposed to know to be there? There is a decoration on certain old Chinese porcelains which you can only see in special lights. A vase or a bowl may be of, let us say, a rich green monochrome. You may look at the thing a thousand times and nothing but the monochrome will be visible. Then one day the sun will strike it at a special angle, or the light may otherwise be what the artist did his work for, and beneath the green you will discern dragons or chrysanthemums in gold. Somewhat in that way the real Mildred Averill came out and withdrew, withdrew and came out, not so much according to changes in her as according to changes in the person observing her. When you saw her from one point of view she was diffident, demure, not colorless, but all of one color like a rare piece of monochrome. When you looked at her from another you saw the golden dragons and chrysanthemums. You might not have understood what they symbolized, but this much at least you would have known—that the gold was the gold of fire, all the more dangerous, perhaps, because it was banked down.

That in this company, with its batteries of tacit inquiry turned on me all the while I took my tea, I was uneasy will go without saying, and so I took the earliest possible opportunity to get up and slip away. I did not slip away, however, before Mrs. Averill had asked me to lunch on the following Sunday, and I had been forced into accepting the invitation. I had been forced because she wouldn't take no for an answer. She wanted to talk about music; she wanted to sing to me; in reality, as I guessed then, and soon came to know, she was determined to wring from me, out of sheer curiosity, the facts I wouldn't confide of my own accord.

But having accepted the invitation, I saw that there were advantages in doing so. Once back in the current to which I belonged, I should have more chances of the recognition for which I was working. The social life of any country runs in streams like those we see pictured on isothermal charts. The same kind of people move in the same kind of medium from north to south, and from east

to west. If you know one man there you will soon know another, till you have a chain of acquaintances, all socially similar, right across the continent. That I had such a chain I didn't doubt for an instant; my only difficulty was to get in touch with it. As soon as I did that each name would bring up a kindred name, till I found myself swimming in my native channel, wherever it was, like a fish in the Gulf Stream, whether off the coast of Norway or off that of Mexico.

So I came to the conclusion that I had done right in ceding to Mrs. Averill's insistence, though it occurred to me on second thoughts that I should need another suit of clothes. That I had was well enough for knockabout purposes, especially when carried off with some amount of bluff; but the poverty of its origin would become too evident if worn on all occasions. I had seen at the emporium that by spending more money and putting on only a slightly enhanced swagger I could make a much better appearance in the eyes of those who didn't examine me too closely. I decided that the gain would warrant the extravagance.

Within ten days of my landing, therefore, my nearly four hundred dollars had come down to nearly two, though I had the consolation of knowing that my chances of soon getting at my bank-account were better. At any minute now my promenades in the hotels might be rewarded, while conversation with the Averills would sooner or later bring up names with which I should have associations.

It was disconcerting then, on the following Sunday, to be received with some constraint. It was the more disconcerting in that the coldness came from Averill himself. He strolled into the hall while I was putting down my hat and stick, shaking hands with the peculiar listlessness of a man who disapproves of what is happening. As hitherto I had found him interested and cordial, I couldn't help being struck by the change.

"You see how we are," he observed, pointing to an open packing-case. "Not up to the point of having guests; but Mrs. Averill—"

"Mrs. Averill was too kind to me to think of inconveniences to herself."

"Just come up to the library, will you, and I'll tell her you're here."

It was a way of getting rid of me till his wife could come and assume her own responsibilities.

So long a time had passed since I had seen the interior of an American house of this order that I took notes as I made my way up-stairs. Out of the unsuspected resources of my being came the capacity to do it. Most people on entering a house see nothing but its size. A background more or less elaborately furnished may be in their minds, but they have not the knowledge to enable them to seize details. The careful arrangement of taste is all one to them with some nondescript, haphazard jumble.

In this dwelling, in one of the streets off Fifth Avenue, on the eastern side of Central Park, I found the typical home of the average wealthy American. Money

had been spent on it, but with a kind of helplessness. Helplessness had designed the house, as it had planned, or hadn't planned, the street outside.

A square hall contained a few monumental pieces of furniture because they were monumental. A dining-room behind it was full of high-backed Italian chairs because they were high-backed and Italian. The stairs were built as they were because the architect had not been able to avoid a dark spot in the middle of the house and the stairs filled it. On the floor above a glacial drawing-room in white and gold, with the furniture still in bags, ran the width of the back of the house, while across the front was the library into which I was shown, spacious, cheerful, with plenty of books, magazines, and easy-chairs. In the way of pictures there were but two—modern portraits of a man and a woman, whom I had no difficulty in setting down as the father and mother of Averill. Of the mother I knew nothing except that she had been a school-teacher; of the father Miss Blair had given me the detailed history as told in *Men Who Have Made New Jersey*.

Hubbard Averill was the son of a shoemaker in Elizabeth. On leaving school at fifteen he had the choice of going into a grocery store as clerk or as office-boy into a bank. He chose the bank. Ten years later he was teller. Five years after that he was cashier. Five years after that he had the same position in a bank of importance in Jersey City. Five years after that he was recognized as one of the able young financiers in the neighborhood of New York. Before he was fifty his name was honored by those who count in Wall Street. It was the history of most of the successful American bankers I had ever heard of.

There was no packing-case in the library, but a number of objects recently unpacked stood round about on tables, waiting to be disposed of. There was a little Irish glass, with much old porcelain and pottery, both Chinese and European. I had not the time to appraise the things with the eye before Miss Averill slipped in.

She wore a hat, and, dressed in what I suppose was tan-colored linens, she seemed just to have come in from the street.

"My sister will be down in a minute. She's generally late on Sunday. I've been good and have been to church."

We sat down together on a window-seat, with some self-consciousness on both sides. I noticed again that, though her hair was brown, her eyebrows and long curving lashes were black, striking the same discreet yet obscurely dangerous note as the rest of her personality. In the topaz of her eyes there were little specks of gold like those in her chain of amber beads.

After a little introductory talk she began telling me of the help Miss Blair was giving Drinkwater. She had begun to teach him what she called "big stenography." Shorthand and the touch system were included in it, as well as the knack of transcribing from the dictaphone. Boyd had bought a machine on purpose for

them to practise with, looking forward to the day when Harry should resume his old job connected with laboratory work.

"And what's to become of Miss Blair?"

My companion lowered her fine lashes, speaking with the seeming shyness that was her charm.

"I'm thinking of asking her to come and live with me. You see, if I take a house of my own I shall need some one; and she suits me. She understands the kind of people I like to work among—"

"Oh, then you're not going to keep on living here."

"I've lived with my brother and sister ever since my father died; but one comes to a time when one needs a home of one's own. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, of course!"

"A man—like you, for instance—can be so free; but a woman has to live within exact limitations. The only way she can get any liberty at all is within her own home. Not that my brother and sister aren't angelic to me. They are, of course; but you know what I mean." The glance that stole under her lashes was half daring and half apologetic. "It must be wonderful to do as one likes—to experiment with different sorts of life—and get to know things at first hand."

So that was her summing up concerning me. I was one of those moderns with so keen a thirst for life that I was testing it at all its springs. She didn't know my ultimate intention, but she could sympathize with my methods and admire my courage and thoroughness. Almost in so many words she said if she had not been timid and hedged in by conventions it was what she would have liked herself.

Before any one came to disturb us there seeped through her conversation, too, the reason of Averill's coldness. They had discussed me a good deal, and while he had nothing to accuse me of, he considered that the burden of the proof of my innocence lay with me. I might be all right—and then I might not be. So long as there was any question as to my probity I was a person to watch with readiness to help, but not one to ask to luncheon. He would not have invited me to tea a few days before, and had allowed me to pass and repass before ceding to his wife's persistence. He had consequently been the more annoyed when she carried her curiosity to the point of bringing me there that day.

Miss Averill did not, of course, say these things; she would have been amazed to know that I inferred them. I shouldn't have inferred them had I not seen her brother and partially read his mind.

But my hostess came trailing in—the verb is the only one I can find to express her gracefully lymphatic movements—and I was obliged to submit to a welcome which was overemphasized for the benefit of the husband who entered behind her.

"We're really not equipped for having any one come to us," she apologized. "We're scarcely unpacked. We're going to move from this house anyhow when we can find another. It's so poky. If we're to entertain again—" She turned to her sister: "Mildred dear, *couldn't* some one have cleared these things away?" Waving her hand toward the array of potteries and porcelains, she continued to me: "One buys such a lot during two or three years abroad, doesn't one? I'm sure Mrs. Soames must feel the way I do, that she doesn't know where to put the things when she's got them home."

I knew the reason for the reference which others were as quick to catch as I, and, in the idiom of the moment, tried to "side-step" it by saying:

"That's a good thing—that Rouen *saladier*. You don't often pick up one of that shape nowadays."

"I saw it in an old shop at Dreux," Mrs. Averill informed me, in her melting tone. "I got this pair of Ming vases there, too. At least, they said they were Ming; but I don't suppose they are. One is so taken in. But I liked them, whatever they are, and so—"

She lifted one up and brought it to me—a dead-white jar, decorated with green foliage, violet-blue flowers, and tiny specks of red fruit.

Something in me leaped. I took the vase in my hand as if it had been a child of my flesh and blood. I was far from thinking of my hearers as I said:

"It's not Ming; but it's very good K'ang-hsi."

I had thrown another little bomb into their camp, but it surprised them no more than it did me. A trance medium who hears himself speaking in a hitherto unknown tongue could not have been more amazed at his own utterance. I went on talking, not to give them information, but to listen for what I should say next.

They had all three drawn near me. "How can you tell?" Miss Averill asked, partly in awe at my knowledge, and partly to give me the chance to display it.

"Oh, very much as you can tell the difference between a hat you wear this year and one you wore five years ago. The styles are quite different. Ming corresponds roughly to the Tudor period in English history, and K'ang-hsi to the earlier Stuarts—with much the same distinction as we get between the output of those two epochs. Ming is older, bolder, stronger, rougher, with a kind of primitive force in it; K'ang-hsi is the product of a more refined civilization. It has less of the instinctive and more deliberate selection. It is more finished—more self-conscious." I picked up the Rouen salad-dish and a Sèvres cup and saucer, putting them side by side. "It's something like the difference between these—strength and color and dash in the one, and in the other a more elaborately perfected art. You couldn't be in any doubt, once you'd been in the habit of seeing them."

Mrs. Averill's question was as natural and spontaneous as laughter.

"Where have you seen them so much, Mr. Soames?"

"Oh, a little everywhere," I managed to reply, just as we were summoned to luncheon.

At table we talked of the pleasures of making "finds" in old European cities. I had evidently done a lot of it, for I could deal with it in general quite fluently. When they pinned me down with a question as to details I was obliged to hedge. I could talk of The Hague and Florence and Strasbourg and Madrid as backgrounds, but I could never picture myself to myself as walking in their streets.

That, however, was not evident to my companions, and as Mrs. Averill's interests lay along the line of ceramic art I was able to bring out much in the way of connoisseurship which did not betray me. With Averill himself I scored a point; with Mildred Averill I scored many. With Mrs. Averill, beneath a seeming ennui that grew more languorous, I quickened curiosity to the fever-point.

"What a lot of things you must have, Mr. Soames."

My refuge being always in the negative, I said, casually: "Oh no! One doesn't have to own things just because one admires them."

"But you say yourself that you've picked them up—"

As she had nearly caught me here I was obliged to wriggle out. "Oh, to give away—and that kind of thing."

Averill's eyes were resting on me thoughtfully. "Sell?"

"No; I've never sold anything like that."

"But what's the use," Mrs. Averill asked, "of caring about things when you can't have them? I should hate it."

"Only that there's nothing you can't have."

"Do you hear that, Boyd?" I caught the impulse of the purring, velvety thing to vary the monotony of life by scratching. "Mr. Soames says there's nothing I can't have. Much he knows, doesn't he?"

"There's nothing you can't have—within reason, dear."

"Ah, but I don't want things within reason. I want them out of reason. I want to be like Mr. Soames—free—free—"

"You can't be free and be a married woman."

"You can when you have a vocation, can't you, Mr. Soames? I suppose Mr. Soames is a married man—and look at him." She hurried beyond this point, to add: "And look at Sydna, whom we heard the other afternoon! She's a married woman and her husband lives in London. He lets her sing. He lets her travel. He leads his life and lets her ... Mr. Soames, what do you think?"

I said, tactfully, "I shall be able to judge better when you've sung to me."

Miss Averill, taking up the thread of the conversation here, we got through the rest of the luncheon without treading in difficult places, and presently I was alone with Averill, who was passing the cigars.

The constraint which had partially lifted during the conversation at lun-

cheon fell again with the departure of the ladies. I had mystified them more than ever; and mystery does not make for easy give and take in hospitality. To Averill himself his hospitality was sacred. To entertain at his own board a man with no credentials but those which an adventurer might present was the source of a discomfort that amounted to unhappiness. He couldn't conceal it; he didn't care to conceal it. While fulfilling all that courtesy required of a host, he was willing to let me see it. I saw it, and could say nothing, since he might easily be right; and an adventurer I might be.

As, with his back to the open doorway into the hall, he sat down with his own cigar, I felt that he was saying to himself, "I wish to God you were not in this house!" I myself was responding silently by wishing the same thing.

It was the obvious minute at which to tell him everything. I saw that as plainly as you do. Had I made a clean breast of it I should have become one of the most interesting cases of his experience. Such instances of shell-shock were just beginning to be talked about. The term was finding its way into the newspapers and garnishing common speech. Though I knew of no connection between my misfortunes and the Great War, I could have made shift to furnish an illustration of this new phase among its tragedies.

During a pause in our stilted speech I screwed myself up to the point. "There's something—" But his attention was distracted for the moment, and when it came back to me I couldn't begin again. No! I could fight the thing through on my own; but that would be my utmost. A confession of breakdown was impossible.

Then, all at once, I got a glimpse of what was in the back of his mind, though something else happened simultaneously, of which I must tell you first. Into the open space between the portieres behind him there glided a little figure clad in amber-colored linen, the monochrome with the sun-spots beneath it. She didn't speak, for the reason that Averill spoke first.

"You're—" He struck a match nervously to relight his cigar—"you're a—a married man?"

Once more negation had to be my refuge. If I admitted that I was he might ask me whom I had married, and when, and where. I spoke with an emphasis that sprang not from eagerness of denial, but from anxiety that the topic shouldn't be discussed.

"No."

The question and answer followed so swiftly on Mildred Averill's arrival on the threshold that she caught them both. Little sparks of gold shone in the brown pools of her eyes, and her smile took on a new shade of vitality.

"Boyd, Lulu wants you to bring your cigars up-stairs. The coffee is there, and she'd like to talk to Mr. Soames about the old Chinese things before she

begins to sing.”

He jumped to his feet. He was not less constrained, but some of his uneasiness had passed. I could read what was in his mind. If the worst came to the worst I was at least a single man; and the worst might not come to the worst. There might be ways of getting rid of me before his sister...

He led the way up-stairs. I followed with Miss Averill, saying I have forgotten what. I have forgotten it because, as we crossed the low-ceiled hall with its monumental bits of furniture, two gleaming eyes stood over me like sentinels in the air.

CHAPTER X

Within a fortnight my nearly two hundred dollars had come down to nearly one, and this in spite of my self-denials.

Self-denials were new to me. I knew that by my difficulties in beginning to practise them. Such economics as staying at the Barcelona instead of a more luxurious hotel, or as buying ready-made clothes instead of waiting for the custom-made, I do not speak of as self-denials, since they were no more than concessions to a temporary lack of cash. But the first time I made my breakfast on one egg instead of two; the first time I suppressed the eggs altogether; the first time I lunched on a cup of chocolate taken at a counter; the first time I went without a midday meal of any kind—these were occasions when the saving of pennies struck me as akin to humiliation. I had formed no habits to prepare me for it. The possibility that it might continue began at last to frighten me.

For none of my artful methods had been successful. I frequented the hotels; I hung about the entrances to theaters; I tramped the streets till a new pair of boots became a necessity; but no one ever hailed me as an old acquaintance. Once only, standing in the doorway of a great restaurant, did I recognize a face; but it was that of Lydia Blair, dining with a man. He was a big, round-backed, silver-haired man, with an air of opulence which suggested that Miss Blair might be taking the career of adventuress more seriously than I had supposed. Whether or not she saw me I couldn't tell, for, to avoid embarrassment both for herself and me, I withdrew to another stamping-ground. What the young lady chose to do with herself was no affair of mine. Since a pretty girl of facile temperament would have evident opportunities, it was not for me to interfere with her. Had

she belonged to my own rank in life I might have been shocked or sorry; but every one knew that a beautiful working-girl...

As to my own rank in life a sense of going under false pretenses added to my anxieties, though it was through no fault of my own. Miss Averill persisted in giving me the rôle of romantic seeker for the hard facts of existence. She did it only by assumption; but she did it.

"There's nothing like seeing for oneself, is there? It's feeling for oneself, too, which is more important. I'm so terribly cut off from it all. I'm like a bird in a cage trying to help those whose nests are being robbed."

This was said during the second of the excursions for which Miss Blair captured me from the lobby of the Barcelona. Her procedure was exactly the same as on the first occasion, except that she came about the middle of the afternoon. Nothing but an unusual chance found me sitting there, idle but preoccupied, as I meditated on my situation while smoking a cigar. My first impulse to refuse Miss Averill's invitation point-blank was counteracted by the thought of escape from that daily promenade up and down the halls of hotels which had begun to be disheartening and irksome.

Of this the novelty had passed. The expectations that during the first week or two had made each minute a living thing had simmered away in a sense of futility. No old friend having recognized me yet, I was working round to the conviction that no old friend ever would. If I kept up the tramp it was because I could see nothing else to do.

But on this particular afternoon for the first time I revolted. The effect was physical, in that my feet seemed to be too heavy to be dragged along. They were refusing their job, while my mind was planning it.

Thus in the end I found myself sharing the outing given nominally for the blind boy, but really planned from a complication of motives which to Miss Averill were obscure. It did not help to make them clearer that her wistful, unuttered appeals to me to solve the mystery surrounding my personality passed by without result.

The high bank of an autumn wood, the Hudson with a steamer headed southward, more autumn woods covering the hills beyond, a tea-basket, tea—this was the decoration. We had alighted from the motor somewhere in the neighborhood of Tarrytown. Tea being over, Miss Blair and Drinkwater, with chaff and laughter, were clearing up the things and fitting them back into the basket.

"She's very clever with him," Miss Averill explained, as she led the way to a fallen log, on which she seated herself, indicating that I might sit beside her. "She seizes on anything that will teach him the use of his fingers, and makes a game of it. He's very quick, too. The next time he'll be able to take the things out of the tea-basket and put them back all by himself."

So we had dropped into her favorite theme, the duty of helping the helpless.

She was in brown, as usual, a brown-green, that might have been a Scotch or Irish homespun, which blended with the wine shades and russets all about us with the effect of protective coloration. The day was as still as death, so breathless that the leaves had scarcely the energy to fall. In the heavy, too-sweet scents there was suggestion and incitement—suggestion that chances were passing and incitement to seize them before they were gone.

I wish there were words in which to convey the peculiar overtones in Miss Averill's comparison of herself with a bird in a cage. There was goodness in them, and amusement, as well as something baffled and enraged. She had been so subdued when I had seen her hitherto that I was hardly prepared for this half-smothered outburst of fierceness.

"If you're like a bird in a cage," I said, "you're like the one that sings to the worker and cheers him up."

Her pleasure was expressed not in a change of color or a drooping of the lids, but in a quiet suffusion that might most easily be described as atmospheric.

"Oh, as for cheering people up—I don't know. I've tried such a lot of it, only to find that they got along well enough without me. A woman wants more than anything else in the world to feel that she's needed; and when she discovers she isn't—"

The sense of my own apparent superfluity in life prompted me to say:

"Oh, it isn't only women who discover that."

Her glance traveled down the steep wooded bank and over the river, to rest on the wine-colored hills on the other side.

"Did you—did you ever?"—she corrected herself quickly—"I mean—do men?"

"Some men do. It's—it's possible."

"Isn't it," she asked, tackling the subject in her sensible way, "primarily a question of money? If you have enough of it not to have to earn a living—and no particular duties—don't you find yourself edged out of the current of life? After all, what the world wants is producers; and the minute one doesn't produce—"

"What do you mean by producers?"

She reflected. "I suppose I mean all who contribute, either directly or indirectly, either mentally or physically, to the sum total of our needs in living. Wouldn't that cover it?"

I admitted that it might.

"And those who don't do that, who merely live on what others produce, seem to be excluded from the privilege of helpfulness."

"I can't see that. They help with their money."

"Money can't help, except indirectly. It's the great mistake of our philan-

thropies to think it can. We make a great many mistakes; but we can make more in our philanthropies than anywhere else. We've never taken the pains to study the psychology of help. We think money the panacea for every kind of need, when as a matter of fact it's only the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. If you haven't got the grace the sign rings false, like an imitation coin."

"Well, what is the grace?"

"Oh, it's a good many things—a blend—of which, I suppose, the main ingredient is love." She gave me a wistful half-smile, as she added: "Love is a very queer thing—I mean this kind of big love for—just for people. You can always tell whether it's true or false; and the less sophisticated the people the more instinctively they know. If it's true they'll accept you; if it's only pumped up, they'll shut you out."

"I'm sure you ought to know."

"I do know. I've had a lot of experience—in being shut out."

"You?"

She nodded toward Drinkwater and Miss Blair. "They don't let me in. In spite of all I try to do for them, they're only polite to me. They'll accept this kind of thing; but I'm as far outside their confidence—outside their hearts—as a bird in a cage, as I've called myself, is outside a flock of nest-builders."

"And assuming that that is so—though I do not assume it—how do you account for it?"

"Oh, easily enough! I'm not the real thing. I never was—not at the Settlement—not now—not anywhere or at any time."

"But how would you describe the real thing?"

"I can't describe it. All I know is that I'm not it. I'm not working for them, but for myself."

"For yourself—how?"

"To fill in an empty life. When you've no real life you seek an artificial one. As every one rejects the artificial, you get rejected. That's all."

"What would you call a real life—for yourself?"

The fierceness with which she had been speaking became intensified, even when tempered with her diffident half-smile.

"A life in which there was something I was absolutely obliged to do. I begin to wonder if parents know how much of the zest of living they're taking away from their children by leaving them, as we say, well provided for. When there's nothing within reason you can't have and nothing within reason you can't do—well, then, you're out of the running."

"Is that the way you look at yourself—as out of the running?"

"That's the way I *am*."

"And is there no means of getting into the running?"

"There might be if I wasn't such a coward."

"If you weren't such a coward what would you do?"

"Oh, there are things. You've—you've found them. I would do like you."

"And do you know what I'm doing?"

"I can guess."

"And you guess—what?"

"It's only a guess—of course."

"But what is it?"

She rose with a weary gesture. "What's the good of talking about it? A knight in disguise remains in disguise till he chooses to throw off his incognito."

"And when he has thrown it off—what does he become then?"

"He may become something else—but he's—he's none the less—a knight."

We stood looking at each other, in one of those impulses of mutual frankness that are not without danger.

"And if there was a knight who—who couldn't throw off his incognito?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Then I suppose he'd always be a knight in disguise—something like Lohengrin."

"And what would Elsa think of that?"

Seeing the implication in this indiscreet question even before she did, I felt myself flush hotly.

I admired the more, therefore, the ease with which she carried the difficult moment off. Moving a few steps toward Drinkwater and Miss Blair, who were shutting up the tea-basket, she threw over her shoulder:

"If there was an Elsa I suppose she'd make up her mind when the time came."

She was still moving forward when I overtook her to say:

"I wish I could speak plainly."

She stopped to glance up at me. "And can't you?"

"Were you ever in a situation which you felt you had to swing alone? You know you could get help; you know you could count on sympathy; but whenever you're impelled to appeal for either something holds you back."

"I never was in such a situation, but I can imagine what it's like. May I ask one question?"

I felt obliged to grant the permission.

"Is it of the nature of what is generally called trouble?"

"It's of the nature of what is generally called misfortune."

"And I suppose I mustn't say so much as that I'm sorry."

"You could say that much," I smiled, "if you didn't say any more."

She repeated the weary gesture of a few minutes earlier, a slight tossing

outward of both hands, with a heavy drop against the sides.

"What a life!"

As she began to move on once more I spoke as I walked beside her.

"What's the matter with life?"

Again she paused to confront me. In her eyes gold lights gleamed in the brown depths of the irises.

"What sense is there in a civilization that cuts us all off from each other? We're like prisoners in solitary confinement—you in one cell and Boyd in another and Lulu in another and I in another, and everybody else in his own or her own and no communication or exchange of help between us. It's—it's monstrous."

The half-choked passion of her words took me the more by surprise for the reason that she treated me as if the defects of our civilization were my fault. Joining Lydia Blair and taking her by the arm, she led the way back to the motor, while I was left to pilot Drinkwater, who carried the tea-basket. During the drive back to town our hostess scarcely spoke, and not once to me directly.

CHAPTER XI

But I was troubled by all this, and puzzled. That I couldn't afford the complication of a love-affair will be evident to any one; but that a love-affair threatened was by no means clear. As far as that went it was as fatuous on my part to think of it as it would have been for Drinkwater, except in so far as it involved danger to myself.

For a few hours that danger did not suggest itself. That is, I was so busy speculating as to Mildred Averill's meaning that I had no time to analyze the way I was taking it. Weighing her words, her impulses, her impatiences, I saw no more than that she might be offering her treasures at the feet of a wooden man, a carved and painted figment, without history or soul.

That is, unless I mistook her meanings as Malvolio mistook Viola's!

There was that side to it, too. It was the aspect of the case on which I dwelt all through my lonely dinner. I had not forgotten Boyd Averill's reception of me on the Sunday of the luncheon; I never should forget it. There is something in being in the house of a man who is anxious to get you out of it unlike any other form of humiliation. The very fact that he refrains from pointedly showing you the door only gives time for the ignominy to sink in. Nothing but the habit of

doing certain things in a certain way carried me through those two hours and enabled me to take my departure without incivility. On going down the steps the sense that I had been kicked out was far more keen than if Averill had given way to the actual physical grossness.

Some of this feeling, I admit, was fanciful. It was due to the disturbed imagination natural to a man whose mental equipment has been put awry. Averill had been courteous throughout my visit. More than that, he was by nature kindly. Anywhere but in his own house his attitude to me would have been cordial, and for anything I needed he would have backed me with more than his good-will.

Nevertheless, that Sunday rankled as a poisoned memory, and one from which I found it impossible wholly to dissociate any member of his family. Though I could blame Mrs. Averill a little, I could blame Miss Averill not at all; and yet she belonged to the household in which I had been made to feel an unwelcome guest. That in itself might give me a clue to her sentiment toward me.

As I went on with my dinner I came to the conclusion that it did give me such a clue. I was the idiot Malvolio thinking himself beloved of Viola. Where there was nothing but a balked philanthropy I was looking for the tender heart. The dictionary teemed with terms that applied to such a situation, and I began to heap them on myself.

I heaped them on myself with a sense not of relief, but of disappointment. That was the odd discovery I made, as much to my surprise as my chagrin. Falling in love with anybody was no part of my program. It was out of the question for obvious reasons. In addition to these I was in love with some one else.

That is to say, I knew I had been in love; I knew that in the portion of my life that had become obscured there had been an emotional drama of which the consciousness remained. It remained as a dream remains when we remember the vividness and forget the facts—but it remained. I could view my personality somewhat as you view a countryside after a storm has passed over it. Without having witnessed the storm you can tell what it was from the havoc left behind. There was some such havoc in myself.

Just as I could look into the glass and see a face young, haggard, handsome, if I may use the word without vanity, that seemed not to be mine, so I could look into my heart and read the suffering of which I no longer perceived the causes. It was like looking at the scar of a wound received before you can remember. Your body must have bled from it, your nerves must have ached; even now it is numb or sensitive; but its history is lost to you. It was once the outstanding fact of your childish existence; and now all of which you are aware is something atrophied, lacking, or that shrinks at a touch.

In just that way I knew that passion had once flashed through my life,

but had left me nothing but the memory of a memory. I could trace its path almost as easily as you can follow the track of a tornado through a town—by the wreckage. I mean by the wreckage an emotional weariness, an emotional distress, an emotional distaste for emotion; but above everything else I mean a craving to begin the emotion all over again.

I often wondered if some passional experience hadn't caused the shattering of the brain cells. I often wondered if the woman I had loved was not dead. I wondered if I might not even have killed her. Was that the crime from which I was running away? Were the Furies pursuing me? Was it to be my punishment to fall in love with another woman and suffer the second time because the first suffering had defeated its own ends in making me insensible?

All through the evening thoughts of this kind, now and then with a half-feverish turn, ran through my mind, till by the time I went to bed love no longer seemed impossible. It was appalling; and yet it had a fascination.

So for the next few days I walked with a vision pure, unobtrusive, subdued, holy in its way, which nevertheless broke into light and passion and flame that nobody but myself was probably aware of. I also gleaned from Lydia Blair, who had a journalistic facility in gathering personal facts, that Mildred Averill's place in New York life was not equal to her opportunities.

"There are always girls like that," Miss Blair commented. "They've got all the chances in the world, and don't know how to make use of them. She's not a bad looker, not when you come to study her; and yet you couldn't show her off with the dressiest models in New York."

I ventured to suggest that showing off might not be Miss Averill's ambition.

"And a good thing too, poor dear. If it was it would be the limit. She sure has the sense to know what she can't do. That's something. Look here, Harry," she continued, sharply, "I told you before that if you're going to take letters down from the dictaphone you've got to read them through to the end before you begin to transcribe. Then you'll know where the corrections come in. Now you've got to go back and begin all over again. See here, my dear. If you think I'm going to waste my perfectly good time giving you lessons that you don't listen to you've got your nerve with you."

It was one of my rare visits to Miss Flowerdew's dark front parlor, of which Drinkwater had the use, and I was making the call for a purpose. I knew there were certain afternoons when Miss Blair "breezed in," as she expressed it, to give some special lesson to her pupil; and I had heard once or twice that on such occasions Miss Averill, too, had come to lend him her encouragement. Nominally she brought a cylinder from which Drinkwater was to copy the letters her brother had dictated; but really her mission was one of sympathy. Seeing the boy in such good hands, and happy in his lot, I had the less compunction in leaving him alone.

I left him alone, as I have said, in order not to be identified more than I could help with two stenographers.

My visit of this day was notably successful in that I obtained from Miss Blair her own summing up of the social position of the Averill family.

As far as they carried a fashionable tag it was musical. Mrs. Averill had a box at the opera, and was seen at all the great concerts. She entertained all the great singers and all wandering celebrities of the piano and violin. Before she went to Europe she had begun to make a place for herself with her Sunday afternoons, at which one heard the most renowned artists of the world singing or playing for friendship's sake. In her own special line she might by now have been one of the most important hostesses in New York had it not been for her constitutional weakness in "chucking things."

She had always chucked things just when beginning to make a success of them. She had chucked her career as a girl in good society in order to work for the concert stage. She had chucked the concert stage in order to marry a rich man. She had chucked the advantages of being a rich man's wife while in the full tide of social recognition. With immense ambitions, she lacked steadiness of purpose, and so, according to Miss Blair, she was always "getting left." Getting left implied that as far as New York was concerned Lulu Averill was nowhere when she might easily have been somewhere, with a consequent feeling on her part of boredom and disappointment.

It reacted on her husband in compelling him to work in unsettled conditions and without the leisure and continuity so essential to research. Miss Blair's expression was that the poor man never knew where he was at. Adoring his wife, he was the more helplessly at her beck and call, for the reason that he had long ago come to the knowledge that his wife didn't adore him. Holding her only by humoring her whims, he was just now struggling with her caprice to go back to the concert stage again.

To Mildred Averill all this made little difference because she had none of the aims commonly grouped as social. Miss Blair understood that from her childhood she had been studious, serious, living quietly with her elderly parents at Morristown, and acquiring their elderly tastes. "It's fierce the way old people hamper a girl," Lydia commented. "Just because they're your father or mother they think they've a right to suck your life-blood like a leech. My mother died when I was sixteen," she added, in a tone of commendation. "Of course you're lonely-like at times—but then you're free." Freedom to Mildred Averill, however, was all the same as being bound. She didn't know how to make use of liberty or give herself a good time. When her father died she stayed on with her mother at Morristown, and when the mother "punched the clock for the next life"—the figure was Miss Blair's—she simply joined her brother and sister-in-law in New York. After she

went out of mourning she was sometimes seen at a concert or the opera with Mrs. Averill. There was no more to her social life than that and an occasional dinner. "Gray-blooded, I call it," Miss Blair threw in again, "and a sinful waste of good chances. My! if I had them!"

"Perhaps you can have them," I suggested, Harry Drinkwater having gone for a minute to his room. "Miss Averill told me one day that she thought of taking a house and asking you to live with her."

"Me? Do you see me playing second fiddle to a girl as sure bound to be an old maid as I'm bound to be—"

"An adventuress."

"I'm bound to be an adventuress—if I like."

"Oh, then there's a modification to your program. The last time we talked about it you were going to do it. Now it's only—if you like."

Her lovely blue eyes shot me a look of protest. "You wouldn't want me to do it—if I didn't like. The worst of being an adventuress is the kind of guys you must adventure with. You don't mean to thrust them down my throat."

"Oh, I'm not urging you at all. I did happen to see you one evening at the restaurant Blitz—"

She nodded. "I saw you. What were you doing there? You don't feed at places like that."

"How do you know I don't?"

"Well, I don't know. That's just the trouble. Sometimes I think you're a—"

"I'm a—what?"

"See here! You give me the creeps. Do you know it?"

"How?"

"Well, you saw that guy I was with at the Blitz."

"Looked like a rich fathead."

"Yes; but you know he's a rich fathead. He's as clear as a glass of water. You're like"—she paused for a simile—"you're like something that might be a cocktail—and might be a dose of poison." She turned on me with a new flash in her blue eyes. "Look here! Tell me honest, now. Are you a swell crook—or ain't you?"

"Suppose I say that—that I ain't."

"Say, kid!" she responded, coldly, "talk like yourself, will you?" She threw her hands apart, palms outward. "Well, if you're not a swell crook I can't make you out."

"But as a swell crook you could. Is that it?"

"Why do you keep hanging round Miss Averill?" she asked, bluntly. "What do you expect to get by that?"

"What do you expect to get by asking me?"

[image]

She turned on me with a new flash in her blue eyes. "Look here! Tell me honest, now. Are you a swell crook—or ain't you?" "Suppose I say that—that I ain't." "Say, kid!" she responded, coldly, "talk like yourself, will you? ... If you're not a swell crook I can't make you out.

Her reply was a kind of challenge. "The truth. Do you know it?"

I felt uncomfortable. It was one of the rare occasions on which I had seen this flower-like face drop its bantering mask and grow serious. The *voix de Montmartre* had deepened in tone and put me on the defensive.

"I thought you told me on board ship that you looked on all people of Miss Averill's class as the prey of those in—in ours."

"I don't care what I told you on board ship. You're to keep where you belong as far as she's concerned—or I'll give the whole bloomin' show away, as they say in English vawdville."

"There again; it's what you said you wouldn't do. You said you'd be my friend—"

"I'll be your friend right up to there—but that's the high-water mark."

I thought it permissible to change my front. "If it comes to that, I've done no hanging round Miss Averill on my own account. It's you who've come for me to the Hotel Barcelona every time—"

"Harry made me do that; but even so—well, you don't have to fall in the water just because you're standing on a wharf."

"It doesn't hurt the water if you do. You can get soaked, and make yourself look ridiculous, but the beautiful blue sea doesn't mind."

"You can make it splash something awful, and send ripples all over the lot. Don't you be too sure of not being dangerous. You wouldn't be everybody's choice—but you have that romantic way—like a prince-guy off the level—and she not used to men—or having a lot of them around her all the time, like—"

"Like you."

"Like me," she accepted, composedly; "and so if I see anything that's not on the square I'll—I'll hand out the right dope about you without the least pity."

"And when you hand out the right dope about me what will it be?"

"You poor old kid, what do you think it will be? If you make people think you're a swell crook it's almost the same as being one."

"But do I make people think I'm a swell crook?"

"You make me."

"What do I do to—"

"It's not what you do, it's what you don't do—or what you don't say. Why don't you tell people who you are, or what your business is, or where you come from? Everybody can hitch on to something in a world, but you don't seem to belong anywhere. If any one asks you a question it's always No! No! No! till you can tell what your answer will be beforehand. Surely there's a Yes somewhere in your life! If you always hide it you can't blame people for thinking there's something to be hidden."

"And yet you'd be my friend."

"Oh, I've been friends to worse than that. I wasn't born yesterday—not by a lot. All I say is, 'Hands off little old Milly Averill!' but for the rest you can squeak along in your own way. I'm a good sort. I don't interfere with any one."

Drinkwater being on the threshold and the conversation having yielded me all I hoped to get, I made an excuse for going. Miss Averill had not appeared, and now I was glad of it. Had she come I could not have met her under Lydia's cold eye without self-consciousness. It began to strike me, too, that the best thing I could do was to step out from the circle of all their lives and leave no clue behind me.

CHAPTER XII

It was not a new reflection, as you know; and of late it had been growing more insistent. The truth is that I needed to find work. My nearly one hundred dollars was melting away with unbelievable rapidity. Expenses being reduced to a rule of thumb, I could count the days after which I shouldn't have a cent. Winter was coming. Already there were mornings with the nip of frost in them. I should require boots, clothes, warm things of all sorts. Food and shelter I couldn't do without.

It was the incredible, the impossible. Nebuchadnezzar driven from men and eating grass like an ox couldn't have been more surprised to see himself in such a state of want. Somewhere, out of the memories that had not disappeared, I drew the recollection that to need boots and not be able to afford them had been my summary of an almost inhuman degree of poverty. I could remember trying to picture what it would be like to find myself in such a situation and not being

able to do so. I had bought a new pair since coming to New York, and they were already wearing thin.

It came to me again—it came to me constantly, of course—that I could save myself by going to some sympathetic person and telling him my tale. I rejected now the idea of making Boyd Averill my confidant; but there were other possibilities. There were doctors, clergymen, policemen. As a matter of fact, people who suffered from amnesia, and who didn't know their names, generally applied to the police.

In the end I opted for a clergyman as being the most human of these agencies. Vaguely I was aware that vaguely I belonged to a certain church. I had tested myself along the line of religion as well as along other lines, with the discovery that the services of one church were familiar, while those of others were not.

From the press I learned that the Rev. Dr. Scattlethwaite, the head of a large and wealthy congregation, was perhaps the best known exponent in New York of modern scientific beneficence, and by attendance at one of his services I got the information that at fixed hours of every day he was in his office at his parish house for the purpose of meeting those in trouble. It was a simple matter, therefore, to present myself, and be met on the threshold of his waiting-room by the young lady who acted as his secretary.

She was a portly young lady, light on her feet, quick in her movements, dressed in black, with blond fluffy hair, and a great big welcoming smile. The reception was much the same as in any doctor's office, and I think she diagnosed my complaint as the drug habit. Asking me to take a seat she assured me that Doctor Scattlethwaite would see me as soon as he was disengaged. When she had returned to her desk, where she seemed to make endless notes, I had leisure to look about me.

Except for a large white wooden cross between two doors, it might have been a waiting-room in a hospital. Something in the atmosphere suggested people meeting agonies—or perhaps it was something in myself. As far as that went, there were no particular agonies in the long table strewn with illustrated papers and magazines, nor in the bookrack containing eight or ten well-thumbed novels. Neither were agonies suggested by the Arundel print of the Resurrection on one bit of wall-space, nor by the large framed photograph of the Arch of Constantine on another. All the same there was that in the air which told one that no human being in the world would ever come into this room otherwise than against his will.

And yet in that I may be wrong, considering how many people there are who enjoy the luxury of sorrow. I guessed, for example, that the well-dressed woman in mourning who sat diagonally opposite me was carrying her grief to every pastor in New York and refusing to be comforted by any. Another woman

in mourning, rusty and cheap in her case, flanked by two vacant-eyed children, had evidently come to collect a portion of the huge financial bill she was able to present against fate. An extremely thin lady, with eyes preternaturally wide open, was perhaps a sufferer from insomnia, while the little old man with broken boots and a long red nose was plainly an ordinary "bum." These were my companions except that a beaming lady of fifty or so, dressed partly like a Salvation Army lassie and partly like a nun, and whom I took to be Doctor Scattlethwaite's deaconess *en litre*, bustled in and out for conferences with the fluffy-haired girl at the desk.

I beguiled the waiting, which was long and tedious, by co-ordinating my tale so as to get the main points into salience. It was about ten in the morning when I arrived, and around half past ten the lady who had first claim on Doctor Scattlethwaite came out from her audience. She was young and might have been pretty if she hadn't been so hollow-eyed and walked with her handkerchief pressed closely to her lips. I put her down as a case of nervous prostration.

The lady with the inconsolable sorrow was next summoned by the secretary, and so one after another those who had preceded me went in to take their turns. Mine came after the old "bum," when it was nearly twelve o'clock.

The room was a kind of library. I retain an impression of books lining the walls, a leather-covered lounge, one or two leather-covered easy-chairs, and a large flat-topped desk in the center of the floor-space. Behind the desk stood a short, square-shouldered man in a dark-gray clerical attire, with a squarish, benevolent, clean-shaven face, and sharp, small eyes which studied me as I crossed the floor. His aspect and attitude were business-like, and business-like was his manner of shaking hands as he asked me to sit down. An upright arm-chair stood at the corner of the desk, and as I took it he resumed his seat in his own revolving-chair which he tilted slightly backward. With his elbows on the arms and fitting the tips of his fingers together, he waited for me to state my errand, eying me all the while.

Relieved and yet slightly disconcerted by this non-committal bearing, I stumbled through my story less coherently than I had meant to tell it. Badly narrated, it was preposterous, especially as coming from a man in seemingly full possession of his faculties. All that enabled me to continue was that my hearer listened attentively, with no outward appearance of disbelieving me.

"And you've come to me for advice as to the wise thing for you to do," he said, not unsympathetically, when I had brought my lame story to a close.

"That's about it," I agreed, though conscious of a regret at having come at all.

"Then the first thing I should suggest," he continued, never taking his penetrating eyes from my face, "is that you should see a doctor—a specialist—a neu-

rologist. I'll give you a line to Doctor Glegg—"

"What would he do?" I ventured to question.

"That would depend on whether or not you could pay for treatment. I presume, from what you've said of your funds giving out, that you couldn't."

"No, I couldn't," I assented, reddening.

"Then he'd probably put you for observation into the free psychopathic ward at Mount Olivet—"

"Is that an insane-asylum?"

"We don't have insane-asylums nowadays; but in any case it isn't what you mean. It's a sanitarium for brain diseases—"

"I shouldn't want to go to a place like that."

"Then what would you suggest doing?"

"I thought—" But I was not sure as to what I had thought. Hazily I had imagined some Christian detective agency hunting up my family, restoring my name, and giving me back my check-book. It was probably on the last detail that unconsciously to myself I was laying the most emphasis. "I thought," I stammered, after a slight pause, "that—that you might be inclined to—to help me."

"With money?"

The question was so direct as to take me by surprise.

"I didn't know exactly how—"

"An average of about fifteen people come to see me every day," he said, in his calm, business-like voice, "and of the fifteen about five are men. And of the five men an average of four come, with one plausible tale or other, to get money out of me under false pretenses."

I shot out of my seat. The anger choking me was hardly allayed by the raising of his hand and his suave, "Sit down again." He went on quietly, as I sank back into my chair: "I only want you to see that with all men who come telling me strange tales my first impulse must be suspicion."

Indignation almost strangled me. "And—and—am I to understand that—that it's suspicion—now?"

"So long as money is a factor in the case it must be—till everything is explained."

"But everything *is* explained."

"To your satisfaction—possibly; but hardly to mine."

"Then what explanation would be satisfactory to you?"

"Oh, any of two or three. Since you decline to put yourself under Doctor Glegg, you might be able to offer some corroboration.

"But I can't. I've kept my secret so closely that no one has heard it but myself. The few people I know would be as incredulous as you are."

"I don't say that I'm incredulous; I'm only on my guard. Don't you see? I

have to be."

"But surely when a man is speaking the truth his manner must carry some conviction."

"I wish I could think so; but I've believed so many false yarns on the strength of a man's manner, and disbelieved so many true ones on the same evidence, that I no longer trust my own judgment. But please don't be annoyed. If your mental condition is such as you describe, I'm proposing the most scientific treatment you can get in New York. In addition to that, I know that Doctor Glegg has had a number of such cases and has cured them."

"You know that?"

"Perhaps I ought to say that they've been cured while under his care. I think I've heard him say that as a matter of fact they've cured themselves. Without knowing much of the malady, I rather think it's one of those in which time restores the ruptured tissues, with the aid of mental rest."

"If that's all—"

"Oh, I don't say that it's all; but as far as I understand it's a large part of it. But then I don't understand very much. That's why I'm suggesting—"

"I could get mental rest of my own accord if—"

"Yes? If—what?"

"If I could find out who—who I am."

"And you've no clues at all?"

I shook my head.

"Have you heard no names that were familiar to you—?"

"Scores of them; but none with which I could connect myself."

"And did you think I could find out for you what you yourself have not been able to discover?"

"I didn't know but what you might have means."

"What means could I have? As far as I've ever heard, the only way of tracing a lost man is through the police—with detectives—and publicity—descriptions in the papers—photographs thrown on screens—that sort of thing. I don't think there's any other way."

I took perhaps two minutes, perhaps three, to ponder these possibilities. In the end they seemed to magnify my misfortune.

"Then, sir, that's all you can do for me?"

"Remember that I should be doing a great deal if I got you to put yourself under Doctor Glegg."

"In the free psychopathic ward of a sanitarium for diseases of the brain—to be watched."

"To be under observation. There's a difference."

"All the observation in the world wouldn't tell Doctor Glegg more than I'm

telling you now.”

”Oh yes, it would. It would tell him—it would tell me—you must excuse me, you know—but the situation obliges me to speak frankly—it would tell him—it would tell me—whether or not your story is a true one.”

”So you don’t believe me?”

”How can I believe you on the strength of this one interview?”

”But how could I convince you in a dozen interviews?”

”You couldn’t. Nothing would convince me but something in the way of outside proof—or Doctor Glegg’s report.”

I rose, not as I did before, but slowly, and I hoped with dignity.

”Then I see no reason, sir, for taking your time any longer—”

He too rose, business-like, imperturbable.

”My dear young man, I must leave that to you. My time is entirely at your disposal and all my good-will.”

”Thanks.”

”And I’ll go as far as to say this, that I think the probabilities are in your favor. I will even add that if I hadn’t thought so in a hundred other cases, in which men whom I pitied—trusted—and aided—were making me a dupe— You see, I’ve been at this thing a good many years—”

Managing somehow to bow myself out, I got into the air again. I attributed my wrath to the circumstances of not being taken at my word; but the real pang lay in the thought of being watched, as a type of mild lunatic and a pauper.

PART II

CHAPTER I

I had made this experiment as a concession to what you will consider common sense. Ever since landing in New York the idea that the natural thing to do was to make my situation known had haunted me. Well, I had made it known, much against the grain, with results such as I had partly expected. I had laid myself open to the semi-accusation of trumping up a cock-and-bull story to get money

under false pretenses.

So no one could help me but myself! I had felt that from the first, and now I was confirmed in the conviction. It was useless either to complain or to rebel. Certain things were to be done, and no choice remained with me but to do them in the heartiest way possible. I had the wit to see that the heartier the way the more likely I was to attain to the mental rest which was apparently a condition of my recovery.

From this point of view work became even more pressing than before, and I searched myself for things that I could do.

Of all my experiences this was the most baffling. In the same way that I knew I had enjoyed a generous income I knew I had never been an idler. That is, I knew it by the habit of a habit. I had the habit of a habit of occupation. I got up each morning with a sense of things to do. Finding nothing to be done, I felt thwarted, irritated, uneasy in the conscience. I must always have worked, even if pay had not been a matter of importance.

But what had I worked at? I had not been a doctor, nor a lawyer, nor a clergyman, nor a banker, nor a merchant, nor a manufacturer, nor a teacher, nor a journalist, nor a writer, nor a painter, nor an actor, nor a sculptor, nor a civil engineer. All this was easy to test by the things I didn't know and couldn't do. I could ride and drive and run a motor-car. I had played tennis and golf and taken an interest in yachting and aviation. I could not say that I had played polo, but I had looked on at matches, and had also frequented horse-races. These facts came to me not so much as memories, but as part of a general equipment. But I could find no sense of a profession.

Thrown back on the occupations I can only class as nondescript, I began looking for a job. That is, I began to study the advertised lists of "Wants" in the hope of finding some one in search of the special line of aptitude implied by cultivation. I had some knowledge of books, of pictures, of tapestries, of prints. Music was as familiar to me as to most people who have sat through a great many concerts, and I had followed such experiments as those of the Abbey Theater in Dublin and Miss Horniman's Manchester Players in connection with the stage.

Unfortunately, there was no clamor for these accomplishments in the press of New York and the neighboring cities, the end of a week's study finding me just where I began. For chauffeurs and salesmen there were chances; but for people of my order of attainment there were none. I thought of what Mildred Averill had said during our last conversation:

"After all, what the world wants is producers; and the moment one doesn't produce—"

She left her sentence there because all had been said. The world wanted producers and was ready to give them work. It would also give them pay, after

a fashion. One producer might get much and another little, but every one would get something. The secret of getting most evidently lay in producing the thing most required.

I remembered, too, that Mildred Averill had defined the producer as he seemed to her: I suppose I mean all who contribute, either directly or indirectly, either mentally or physically, to the sum total of our needs in living.

There again, the more vital the need, the greater the contribution, and needs when you analyzed them were mostly elementary. The more elemental you were, the closer you lived to the stratum the world couldn't do without. That stratum was basic; it was bedrock. Wherever you went you had to walk on it, and not on mountain-peaks or in the air.

I was not pleased with these deductions. It seemed to me a gross thing in life that salesmen and chauffeurs should be more in demand than men who could tell you at a glance the difference between a Henri Deux and a Jacobean piece of furniture, or explain the weaves and designs of a Flemish tapestry as distinguished from a Gobelin or an Aubusson. I was eager to prove my qualifications for a place in life to be not without value. To have nothing to do was bad enough, but to be unfit to do anything was to be in a state of imbecility.

So I made several attempts, of which one will serve as an instance of all.

Walking in Fifth Avenue and attracted by the shop windows, I couldn't help being struck by New York's love of the antique. To me the antique was familiar. Boyd Averill had asked me if I hadn't sold it. I had said I hadn't—but why not? Beauty surely entered into the sum total of needs in living, and I had, moreover, often named it to myself as the thread of flame by which I should find my way.

All the same, it required some effort to walk into any of these storehouses of the loot of castles and cathedrals and offer my services as judge and connoisseur. On the threshold of three I lost my courage and stepped back. It was only after stopping before a fourth, the window severely simple with three ineffable moon-white jars set against a background of violet shot with black, that I reasoned myself into taking the step. It was a case of *de l'audace, de l'audace, et encore de l'audace*. By audacity alone were high things accomplished and great fortunes won. Before I could recoil from this commendable reflection I opened the door and went in.

I found myself in a gallery resembling certain venerable sacristies. The floor was carpeted in red, the walls lined with cabinets paneled in ebony, their doors discreetly closed on the treasures inside. In a corner an easel supported a black-framed flower-piece, probably by Huysmans. On a well-preserved Elizabethan table partly covered with a square of filet lace was a tea-service of Nantgarw or Rockingham. Nothing could have been more in accordance with my own ideas of conducting a business than this absence of crude display.

I had leisure to make these observations, because the only other visible occupant of the shop, if I may use the word of a shrine so dignified, was a young lady who moved slowly toward me down the gallery. She was in the neatest black, with only a string of pearls for ornament. Healthily pale, with fair hair carefully "marcelled," her hands resting on each other in front of her, she approached me with a faint smile that emphasized her composure.

"You wish—?"

I had not considered the words in which I should frame my application, so I stammered:

"I—I thought I—I might be of—of some use here."

The faint smile faded, but the composure remained as before.

"Some—what?"

"Use. I—I understand these things. That tea-service, now, it's Rockingham or Nantgarw, possibly Chelsea. The three moon-white jars in the window, two of them gourd-shaped—"

"Did you want to look at them?"

"No," I blurted out, "to—to sell them."

"Sell them? How do you mean? We mean to sell them ourselves."

"But don't you ever—ever need—what shall I call it—an extra hand? Don't you ever have a place for that?"

She grew nervous, and yet not so nervous as to lose the power of keeping me in play.

"Oh yes! Certainly! An—an extra hand! I'll call Mr. Chessland. Mr. Chessland! Please—*please*—come here. Lovely day, isn't it?" she continued, as a short, thick-set figure came waddling from the back of the premises. "We don't often have such lovely weather at this time of year, though sometimes we do—we do very often, don't we? You never can tell about weather, can you?"

Mr. Chessland, who was more Armenian than his name, having come near enough to keep an eye on me, she fell back toward him, whispering something to which he replied only in pantomime. Only in pantomime he replied to me, pursing his rosy, thick lips, and lifting his hands, palms outward, as in some form of Oriental supplication, pushing me with repeated gestures back toward the door. I went back toward the door in obedience to the frightened little fat man's urge, since I was as terrified as he. Though I was out on the pavement again the door didn't close till I heard the girl ask, in an outburst of relief:

"Do you think he was nervy, or only off his nut?"

It came to me slowly that a man in search of work is somehow the object of suspicion. The whole world being so highly mechanized, it admits of no loose screw. The loose screw obviously hasn't fitted; and if it hasn't fitted in the place for which it was made it is unlikely to fit in another.

Furthermore, a man is so impressionable that he quickly adopts of himself the view that others take of him. Going about from shop to shop, bringing my simple guile to bear first on one smooth-spoken individual and then another, only in the end, in the phrase once used to me, "to get the gate," I shrank in my own estimation. The gate seemed all I was fit for. I began to see myself as going out through an endless succession of gates, expelled by hands like Mr. Chessland's, but never welcomed within one. For a man who had instinctively the habit of rating himself with the best, of picking and choosing his own company, of ignoring those who didn't suit him as if they had never existed, the revolution of feeling was curious.

Then I discovered that one point of contact with organized society had been also removed.

Early in December I went to look up Drinkwater, whom I hadn't seen for a month. It was not friendliness that sent me; it was loneliness. Day after day had gone by, and except for the people to whom I applied for work I hadn't spoken to any one.

True, I had been busy. In addition to looking for a job I had written articles for the press and had made strenuous efforts to secure a place as French teacher in a boys' school. This I think I should have got had I been actually French; but when the decision was made a native Frenchman had turned up and been given the preference. As for my articles, some of them were sent back to me, and of the rest I never heard. So I had been less lonely than I might have been, even if my occupations had brought me no success.

In addition to that I had refrained from visiting the blind boy from a double motive: there was first the motive that was always present, that of not wishing to continue the acquaintance of people outside my class in life; then there was the reason that I was anxious now to avoid a possible chance meeting with Miss Averill.

I could easily have been in love with her. There was no longer a question about that. It must be remembered that I was appallingly adrift—and she had been kind to me. I had been grotesque, suspected, despised—and she had been kind to me. She had gone out of her way to be kind to me; she had been sisterly; she had been tender. Something that was of value in me which no one else had seen, she had seen and done justice to. In circumstances that made me a mystery to every one, myself included, she had had the courage to believe me a gentleman and to put me on a level with herself. As the days went by, and this recognition remained the sole mitigation of a lot that had grown infinitely bitterer than I ever supposed it could become, I felt that if I didn't love her I adored her.

For this reason I had to avoid her; I had to take pains that she should not see me. Even if other circumstances had not made friendship between us hopeless,

my impending social collapse must have had that effect. No good could ensue from our meeting again; and so I kept away from places where a meeting could occur.

But an afternoon came when some sort of human intercourse became necessary to keep me from despair. It was the day when I lost my chance at the boys' school. It was also a day when three of my articles had fluttered back to me. It was also a day when I had made two gentlemanly appeals for employment, losing one because I couldn't write shorthand, and the other because the man in need of a secretary didn't want a high-brow.

Drinkwater was, then, a last resort. He would welcome me; he would tell me of his good luck; he would call me Jasper; he would make a fuss over me that would have the warmth of a lighted fire.

But at the door I was met by Miss Flowerdew's little colored maid with the information, given with darky idioms that I cannot reproduce, that Mr. Drinkwater had gone to take his old position with Doctor Averill, and was living in his house. Miss Blair had also found a job, though the little maid couldn't tell me where. Miss Flowerdew knew, but, unfortunately, she was spending a week in Philadelphia, "where her folks was."

It was a shock, but a shock with a thrill in it. If Drinkwater had gone to Boyd Averill's, to Boyd Averill's I ought to follow him. That which I had denied myself for one reason might, therefore, become unavoidable for another. I forgot that I had been planning to drop Drinkwater from the list of my acquaintances, for Drinkwater in Boyd Averill's house had another value.

He stood for a temptation. It was like wrestling with a taste for drink or opium. At one minute I said I wouldn't go; at another I admitted that I couldn't help myself. In the end I went. As I turned from Fifth Avenue my heart pounded and my legs shook. I knew I was doing wrong. I said I would do it just this once, and never any more.

But I sinned in vain. The house was empty. In the window beside the door hung a black-and-white sign, "To Let."

CHAPTER II

It would have been easy enough to find out where the Averills had moved to, but I didn't make the attempt. It was best for me to lose sight of them; it was best for them to lose sight of me. Now that the process had begun I decided to carry it to the utmost.

Nothing is simpler than being lost in a city like New York, so long as it is to nobody's interest to find you. You have only to move round a corner, and it is as if you had gone a thousand miles. The minute I carried my bags away from the Barcelona without leaving an address I was beyond the ken of any one inclined to follow me.

I did this not of choice, but of necessity. In the matter of choice I should have preferred staying where I was. Though it was a modest, uncleanly place, I had grown used to it; and I dreaded another expedition into the unknown. But I had come down to my last ten dollars, with no relief in sight. A humbler abode was imperative even to tide me over a few days.

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On the Odyssey of that afternoon I could write a good-sized volume. Steps that would have been simple to a working-man were difficult to me, because I had never had to take them. Moreover, because the business was new to me I went at it in the least practical way. Instead of securing a bed in one place before giving it up in another, I followed the opposite method. Paying my bill at the Barcelona, I went out in the street with no definite direction before me.

Rather, I had one definite direction, but that was only a first stage. I had spotted on my walks a dealer in old clothes to whom I carried the ridiculous suits I had brought with me from France. He was a little old Polish Jew, dressed in queer, antiquated broadcloth, whose beard and tousled gray hair proclaimed him a sort of Nazarite.

When I mentioned my errand he shook his head with an air of despair, lifting his hands to heaven somewhat in the manner of Mr. Chessland.

"No, no! Open not," he exclaimed, as I laid the suit-case on the counter in order to display my wares. "Will the high-born gentleman but look at all the good moneys spent on these beautiful garments, and no one buys my merchandise? Of what use more to purchase?"

When I had opened the suit-case he cast one look at the contents, turning away dramatically to the other side of the reeking little shop. A backward gesture of the hand cast my offerings behind him.

"Pah! Those can I not sell. Take 'em away." He came back, however, fingering first one suit and then the other, appraising them rapidly. "One dollar!" he cried, lifting a bony forefinger and defying me to ask more. "One! One! One! No more but one!"

I raised him to two, to three, and finally to five for each suit. In spite of his tragic appeals to Ruin not to overtake him, he seized my hand and kissed it.

Thus I was out on the pavement, with twenty dollars in my pocket, and so much liberty of action that I didn't know what to do. It was about three in the afternoon of a sullen December day, and big flakes of snow had begun to fall softly. It was cold only in the sense that my suit had been bought for hot weather, and the light French box-coat, which was all I had besides, added little in the way of warmth. Unable to stand with my two bags in the doorway of a shop for second-hand clothes, I moved on more or less at random.

But one thought was clearly in my mind. I must find a house where the sign "Rooms" was displayed in a window, and there I must go in.

For the first half-hour I kept this purpose in view, walking slowly and turning my head now to one side of the street, now to the other, so as to miss no promising haven. A room being all I needed, any room within my price would do. Having no experience, I could have no choice. If I had choice, it would have been for Miss Flowerdew's; but that would have brought me back into the circle from which I was trying to slip out.

Miss Flowerdew's setting my only standard as to "Rooms," I had imagined myself as walking into something of the kind, though possibly more cheerful. It is hardly necessary to say that in this I was disappointed. Drifting in and out of houses through most of that afternoon, I saw women and conditions that almost shattered such faith as I had left in human nature. The first to answer my ring at a doorbell was a virago. An enormous creature, bigger if not taller than myself, and clad in a loose pink-flannel wrapper that added to her bulk, she challenged me to find a fault with the room I declined after having seen it. "Better men than you have slept in that bed," she called after me as I clattered down the stairs, "and any one who says different 'll lie." The next was a poor, leering thing who smiled

in a way that would have been horrible if it had not been so sickeningly imbecile. The next was a slattern, pawing her face and wiping it with her apron while she showed me the doghole for which I was to pay seven dollars a week. There were others of whom it is useless to attempt a catalogue further than to say that they left me appalled. When the lights were being lit I was still in the streets with my two bags, and the snow falling faster.

I was about to go back to the Barcelona for the night when something happened which I tell to you just as it occurred.

That morning I had read in a paper the account given by a young Canadian officer of his escape from a German prison, of his beating his way to the Rhine, and of his final swim across the river to Switzerland. But the point that remained in my memory was his picture of himself as he lay like a lizard with his nose to the stream and his feet in the underbrush as the bank rose behind him. Listening to the current, he could guess how strong it was; putting his hand in the water, he could feel it cold. For over two hours he lay there in the darkness, resting, wondering, and thinking of a little cemetery not far from Basel where lay the bodies of the prisoners who had tried to make this swim.

Then, as the minute approached at which he must give himself to these difficult waters, he prayed. His account of the act was simple and straightforward. He asked God to have him in His keeping while he made this attempt, and to comfort those at home if he failed. With that he slipped into the stream and struck outward.

Well, standing somewhere in the neighborhood of Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue I turned this over in my mind, considering its advisability. I was not what would be called a praying man. As to that, I had not prayed in years. I had sometimes told myself that I didn't know what prayer was, that its appeal seemed to me illogical. Illogical it seemed to me now, in the sense of imploring God to do what He wouldn't do of His own accord.

So, although I didn't pray, something passed through my mind that might have been prayer's equivalent. As far as I can transcribe it into the words which I did not use at the time it ran like this:

"I know there is a God. I know that His will is the supreme law for all of us. I know that that law is just and beneficent. It is not just and beneficent for me to be standing here in the snow and the slush, chilled, hungry, with wet feet, workless, and homeless. Consequently, this is not His will. Consequently, I must give myself to discovering that will as the first principle of safety. When I have got into touch with that first principle of safety I shall find a home and work."

Of this the immediate result was that I did not return to the Barcelona. Something like a voice, the voice of another, told me that the thread of flame led onward. Onward I drifted, then, hardly noticing the way I went, hypnotized by

the physical process of being on the move. It was just on and on, through the slanting snowfall, through the patches of blurred light, with feet soggy and heart soggy, a derelict amid these hundreds of vehicles, these thousands of pedestrians, all bound from somewhere to somewhere, and knowing the road they were taking. I didn't know the road I was taking and in a sense I didn't care. Having given up from sheer impotence the attempt to steer my ship, I was being borne along blindly.

When I lifted my head to look about me again I was in a part of New York not only new to me, but almost refreshing to the eye. I mean that it was one of those old-fashioned down-town regions where the streets hadn't yet learned the short and easy cut to beauty of running only at right angles. Two or three thoroughfares focused in an irregular open space, which I saw by the signboard to bear the name of Meeting-House Green. There was no meeting-house in the neighborhood now, and probably nothing green even in spring. If it was like the rest of New York it would be dirty in winter and fetid in summer, but after the monotonous ground plan of the uptown regions its quaintness relieved the perceptions to a degree which the thunder of the near-by Elevated couldn't do away with. Just now all was blanketed in white, through which drays plunged heavily and pedestrians slipped like ghosts.

As I stared about me my eye was once more arrested by the magic notice "Rooms," though this time with the qualifying phrase, "for gentlemen." Rooms for gentlemen! The limitation seemed to fit my needs. It implied selection and a social standard.

The house, too, was that oasis in New York, an old-time dwelling in gray-painted brick which progress has not yet swept away. Standing where Wapping Street and Theodora Place ran together at a sharp angle, it was shaped like a sadiron or a ship's prow. The tip of the ground floor was given over to a provision dealer, while a barber occupied the long slit in the rear. Between the two shops a door on the level of the pavement of Theodora Place gave on a little inset flight of steps which led up to the actual entrance. The vestibule was shabby, but, moved by my experience in the early part of the afternoon, I observed that it was clean.

The woman who answered my ring was not only clean, but neatly dressed in what I suppose was a print stuff, and not only neatly dressed, but marked with a faded prettiness. What I chiefly noticed for the minute was a pair of those enormous doll-blue eyes on a level with the face, as the French say, *à fluer de fête*, which make the expression sweet and vacuous. In her case it was resignedly mournful, as if mournfulness was a part of her aim in life. A single gas-jet flickered behind her, showing part of a hallway in which the same walnut furniture must have stood for so many years that it was now groggy on its feet. To my question about a room she replied with a sweet, sad, "Won't you step in?" which

was tantamount to a welcome.

The floor of the hallway was covered with an oilcloth or linoleum which had once simulated a terra-cotta tiling, and was now but one remove from dust. On a mud-brown wall a steel-engraving of a scow, with Age at the helm, and Youth peering off at the bow, sagged at an angle which produced a cubist effect in its relation to the groggy-footed hat-rack. The doors on the left of the hall were closed; on the right a graceful stairway, lighted by a tall window looking out on Theodora Place, curved upward to the floor above.

At the sound of voices in the hall one of the closed doors opened, and a second woman, a replica of the first, except for being older, came out and looked inquiringly. She, too, was fadedly pretty; she, too, was mournful; she, too, was saucer-eyed; she, too, was neatly dressed in a print stuff.

"This gentleman is looking for a room," was the explanation, sadly given, of my presence.

The ladies withdrew to the foot of the stairway for a whispered conference. This finished, the elder came back to where I stood on the door-mat.

"We generally ask for references—" she began, with a glance at my sodden appearance.

"If that's essential," I broke in, "I'm afraid it must end matters. I've only recently come over from France, and I'm a total stranger in New York. I rang the bell because I saw the notice and I liked the look of the house."

As it happened, the last was the most tactful thing I could have said, going to the hearts of my hostesses. Something, too, in my voice and choice of words must have appealed to their sense of gentility.

"It's a nice old house," the elder lady smiled, with her brave air of having to overcome agony before being able to speak at all. "It's old-fashioned, of course, and horribly in the wrong part of the city nowadays; but my sister and I love it. We've always lived here, and our dear father before us. He was Doctor Smith, quite a famous oculist in his day; you may have heard of him?"

"I've heard the name," I admitted, politely.

"We've two good rooms vacant at present; but if you can't give references"—a wan smile deprecated the unladylike suggestion—"I'm afraid we should have to ask you for a week's rent in advance. I shouldn't speak of it if it was not our rule."

When I had agreed to this she led the way over the frayed cocoanut matting of the staircase to an upper hallway, also carpeted in pulverized oilcloth. With one sister ahead of me, and the other shepherding me behind, I was ushered into a large prow-shaped room immediately over the provision dealer, and smelling faintly of raw meat. I could have borne the odor if the rent had not been six a week.

"We've another room just over this," the spokeswoman informed me, "but it's only half this size."

"If it's only half this rent—"

"It's just half this rent."

So, marshaled as before, I mounted another stairway in cocoanut matting to a slit of a room shaped like half a ship's prow, with its single window placed squintwise. As the smell of raw meat was less noticeable here, the squint of the window out into Meeting-House Green, and the rent so low, I made my bargain promptly.

In the days of the famous oculist the room must have been a maid's. It was still furnished like a maid's in a house of the second order. A rickety iron bedstead supported a sagging mattress covered with a cotton counterpane in imitated crochet-work. A table, a washstand, a chair, and a chest of drawers were perhaps drearier than they might have been, because of the sick light of the gas-jet. On a drab wooden mantelpiece, which enshrined a board covered with a piece of cretonne where once had been a fireplace, stood the only decoration in the room, three large fungi, painted with landscapes. The fungi were of the triangular sort which grow about the trunks of trees. There was a big one in the middle of the mantelpiece, and smaller ones at each end, giving glimpses of rivers and bays, with castles on headlands, to one tired of the prospect of Meeting-House Green. Taking the initiatory three dollars from my purse, I bent to study these objects of art.

Once more the act was ingratiating to my hostesses.

"That's my work," said the little woman who had admitted me to the house. Her tone was one of shy pride, of a kind of fluttered boastfulness.

"My sister's an artist," the elder explained, taking my three one-dollar bills as if their number didn't matter, but making conversation in order to count them surreptitiously. "She's a widow, too, Mrs. Leeming. I'm Miss Smith. We've had great sorrows. We try not to complain too much, but—"

A long-drawn sigh with a quiver in it said the rest, while Mrs. Leeming's eyes spilled tears with the readiness of a pair of fountain cups.

To escape the emotional I returned to my inspection of the landscapes, at which I was destined to gaze for another two years.

"Are these studies of—of Italy?" I asked, for the sake of showing appreciation.

Mrs. Leeming recovered herself sufficiently to be faintly indignant.

"Oh no! I never copy. I work only from imagination. Landscapes just come to me—and all different."

Before they left me Miss Smith managed to convey a few of the principles on which they conducted their house.

"We've three very refined gentlemen at present, two salesmen and a Turkish-bath attendant. One has to be so careful. We almost never take gentlemen who don't bring reference; but in your case, Mr. Soames—well, one can see." Her wan, suffering smile flickered up for a minute and died down. "There's a sort of free-masonry, isn't there? We *have* taken gentlemen on that, and they've never disappointed us."

I hoped I should not disappoint them, either.

"Now, some young men—well, to put it plainly, if there's liquor we just have to ask them to look for another room. Tobacco, with gentlemen, one can't be too severe on. We overlook it, and try not to complain too much. And, of course, only gentlemen visitors—"

With my assurance that I should do my utmost to live within their regulations, they were good enough to leave me to my single chair and the fungi. Dropping into the one and staring at the other, it seemed to me that I had reached the uttermost edge of the forlorn. I could bear the extreme modesty of this lodging, seeing that it gave me a shelter from the storm; I could bear being hungry, cold, and wet; I could bear the wall of darkness and blankness that hemmed in not only my future, but my past; what I found intolerable was the sense of being useless. The blows of Fate I could take with some equanimity, but, not to be able to "make good" or to earn a living cut me to the quick in my self-esteem.

And yet it was not that which in the end beat me to my knees beside the bed, to bury my head against the counterpane of imitation crochet-work. That was a more primal craving, a need as primal as thirst or the desire for sleep. It was the longing for some sort of human companionship—for the gay toleration of Lydia Blair, or Drinkwater's cheerfulness, or Mildred Averill's....

CHAPTER III

But in the end I found work, so why tell of the paroxysm of loneliness which shook me that night like a madness? Never before had I known anything like it, and nothing like it has seized me since. I must have remained on my knees for an hour or more, largely for the reason that there was nothing to get up for. Though I had had no dinner, I didn't want to eat, and what else was there to do? To eat and sleep, to sleep and eat, that apparently would be my fate till my seventeen dollars gave out. If the miracle didn't happen before then—but the miracle began

to happen not long after that, and this is how it came to pass:

I got up and crept supperless to bed. There I slept with the merciful soundness of fatigue, wakened by the crashing past my window of an Elevated train to a keen sunny morning, with snow on the ground and the zest of new life.

As I washed, I could hear my neighbor washing on the other side of the partition. The partition was, in fact, so thin that I had heard all his movements since he got out of bed. The making of one man's toilet taking about the same amount of time as that of another man in similar conditions, we met at the doors of our respective rooms as we emerged to go down-stairs.

I looked at him; he looked at me. With what he saw I am concerned; I saw a stocky, broad-shouldered individual, with smooth black hair, solemn black eyes, bushy black eyebrows, a clean-shaven skin so dark that shaving could not obliterate the trace of hair, and a general air of friendliness. Putting on the good-mixer voice, which was not natural to me but which I could assume for a brief spurt, I said:

"Say, I wonder if you could advise a fellow where to get a breakfast? Only breezed in last night—"

Between working-people there is always that camaraderie I had already noticed in Drinkwater and Lydia Blair, and which springs from the knowledge that where there is nothing to lose there is nothing to be afraid of. While I cannot say that my companion viewed me with the spontaneous recognition he would have accorded to a man of his own class, he saw enough to warrant him in giving me his sympathy. The man of superior station down on his luck is not granted the full rights of the stratum to which he has descended; but even when an object of suspicion he is not one of hostility. Between moral bad luck and sheer fortuitous calamity the line is not strictly drawn; and wherever there is need there is a free inclination to meet it.

"I'm on my way to my breakfast now," my neighbor said, after sizing me up with a second glance. "Why don't you come along? It's not much of a place to look at," he continued, as I followed him down-stairs, "but the grub isn't bad. Most of the places round here is punk."

Within ten minutes' time I found myself in a little eating-place that must once have been the cellar kitchen of a dwelling-house, sitting at a bare deal table, opposite a man I had never seen till that morning.

"Don't take bacon," he advised, when I had ordered bacon and eggs; "it 'll be punk. Take ham. Coffee 'll be punk, too. Better stick to tea."

Having given me these counsels, he proceeded with those short and simple annals of his history which I had already found to be the usual form of self-introduction. An Englishman, a Cornishman, he had been twenty years in America. He was married and had a family, but preferred to live in New York while he

maintained his household in Chicago.

"Married life is punk," was his summing up. "Got the best little wife in the state of Illinois, and three fine kids, a boy and two girls—but I couldn't come it."

"Couldn't come what?"

"Oh, the whole bloomin' business—toein' the line like, bein' home at night, and the least little smell of anythink on your breath—"

A wave of his fork sketched a world of domestic embarrassment from which he had freed himself only by a somber insouciance. A somber insouciance might be called his key-note. Outwardly serious, ponderous, hard-working, and responsible, he was actually light-hearted and inconsequent. During the progress of the meal he recited the escapades of a Don Juan with the gravity of a Bunyan.

Still with my good-mixer air I asked:

"How does a guy like me get a job in New York?"

"Ever work in a Turkish bath?" He answered this question before I could do it myself. "Sure you didn't—not a chap of your cut. It isn't a bad sort of thing for a"—he hesitated, but decided to use the epithet—"for a—gentleman. Only a good class of people take Turkish baths. Hardly ever get in with a rough lot. A few drunks, but what of that? Could have got you a place at the Gramercy if you'd ha' turned up last week; but a Swede has it now and it's too late."

By the end of breakfast, however, he had made a suggestion.

"Why don't you try the Intelligence? They'll often get you a berth when everything else has stumped you."

I said I was willing to try the Intelligence if I knew what it was, discovering it to be the Bureau of Domestic and Business Intelligence conducted by Miss Bryne. You presented yourself, gave your name and address, indicated your choice of work, told your qualifications for the job, and Miss Bryne did the rest, taking as her commission a percentage of your first week's pay.

"But I don't know any qualifications," I declared, with some confusion.

"Oh, that's nothing. Say clerical work. That covers a lot. Somethink 'll turn up."

"But if they ask me if I can do certain things—?"

"Say you can do 'em. That's the way to pull it off. Look at me. Never was in a Turkish bath in my life till I went to an employment-office in Chicago. When the old girl in charge asked me if I had been, I said I'd been born in one. Got the job right off, and watched what the other guys did till I'd learned the trick. There's always some nice chap that 'll show you the ropes. Gee! The worst they can do is to bounce you. All employers is punk. Treat 'em like punk and you'll get on."

With a view to this procedure I was at the Bureau of Domestic and Business Intelligence by half past nine, entering, unfortunately, with the downcast

air of the employer who is punk, instead of the perky self-assertion which I soon began to notice as the proper attitude of those in search of work. Miss Bryne's establishment occupied a floor in one of the older office-buildings a little to the south of Washington Square. Having ascended in the lift, you found yourself, just inside the narrow doorway, face to face with a young lady seated at a desk, whose duty it was to ask the first questions and take the first notes. She was a pretty young lady, bright-eyed, blond, with a habit of cocking her head in a birdlike way as she composed her lips to a receptive smile.

She so composed them, and so cocked her head, as I appeared on the threshold, awkward and terrified.

"Such as—?"

I knew what she meant by the questioning look and the encouraging smile of the bright eyes.

"I'm—I'm hoping to find a job," I stammered to her obvious astonishment.

"Oh!" It was a surprised little crow. "To find one!"

"Yes, miss; to find one."

"Of—of what sort?"

"Clerical work," I said, boldly.

She bent her head over her note-book. "Your name?"

"Jasper Soames."

"Age?"

"Thirty-one."

"Occupation?"

"I've told you. Any kind of clerical work. I suppose that that means writing—and—and copying—and that sort of thing, doesn't it?"

She glanced up from her writing. "Is that what you've done?"

I nodded.

"Where? Have you any references?"

I confessed my lack of references, stating that I had just come over from France, where I had worked with a firm whose name would not carry weight in America.

"What did they do—the firm?"

I answered, wildly, "Carpets."

Another young lady was passing, tall, graceful, distinguished, *air de duchesse*, carrying a notebook and pencil.

"Miss Gladfoot," my interlocutrice murmured, "won't you ask Miss Bryne to step here?"

Miss Bryne having stepped there, I found myself face to face with a competent woman of fifty or so, short, square, square-faced, and astute. She also had a pencil and note-book in her hand, and, seeing me, looked receptive, too, though

remaining practical and business-like.

While the young lady at the desk explained me as far as she had been able to understand my object, delicacy urged me out of earshot. I had, therefore, not heard what passed when Miss Bryne came forward to take charge of the situation.

"What you are is a kind of educated handyman. Wouldn't that be it?"

Delighted at this discriminating view of my capacities, I faltered that it would be.

"Well, we don't often have a call for your kind of specialty, and yet we do have them sometimes. There might be one to-day, and then again there mightn't be for another six months. Now you can either go in and wait on the chance, or you can leave your address and we'll 'phone you if anything should turn up that we think would suit."

Encouraged by this kindly treatment and the possibility of a call that day, I opted for going in to wait.

"Then come this way."

Following the Napoleonic figure down the narrow passageway, I was shown into a little room, where five other men sat with the dismayed, melancholy faces of dogs at a dog-show at minutes when they are not barking. Dismayed and melancholy on my side, I took the seat nearest the door, feeling like a prisoner in the dock or the cell, and wondering what would happen next.

Nothing happened next so far as I was concerned, but I had a gratifying leisure in which to look about me.

I was obliged to note at once that the Bureau of Domestic and Business Intelligence was chiefly of Domestic. Women crowded the hall, the two large rooms across the way, and the three small ones on our side, except the coop in which we six men were segregated from the gay and chatty throng. Gay and chatty were the words. The tone was that of what French people call a *feeve o'clock*. Girls, for the most part pretty and stylishly dressed, sat in the chairs, perched on the arms of them, grouped themselves in corners, in seeming disregard of the purpose that had brought them there. Unable at first to differentiate between mistresses and maids, I soon learned to detect the former by their careworn faces, shabbier clothes, apologetic arrival, and crestfallen departure. Now and then I caught a few broken phrases, of which the context and significance eluded me.

"I told her that before I'd be after washin' all thim dishes I'd—"

"Ah, thin, ye'll not shtay long in that plaace—"

"Says I, 'You've got a crust, Mrs. Johnson, to ask me to shtay in when it's me night—'"

"With that I ups and walks away—"

All this animation and repartee contrasted oddly with the low, cowed remarks of my companions in the coop, who ventured to exchange observations

only at intervals.

Where was your last? What did you get? How did you like your boss? Did you leave or was you fired? Are you a single fella or a married fella? Did you have long hours? Wouldn't he give you your raise? Did he kick against the booze? These were mere starters of talk that invariably died like seedlings in a wrong climate. Getting used to my mates, I made them out to be a gardener, a chauffeur, a teamster, a decayed English butler, and a negro boy who called himself a waiter. Talking about their bosses, their tone on the whole was hostile without personal malevolence. That is to say, there was little or no enmity to individuals, though the tendency to curse the systems of civilized life was general. I think they would have agreed with my Cornish friend that "all employers is punk," and considered their feelings sufficiently expressed at that.

But as I sat among them, day after day, I began, oddly enough, to orientate my vision to their point of view. They were, of course, not always the same men. The original five melted away into jobs within three or four days; but five or six or seven was about the daily average in our little pen. They came, were cowed, were selected, and went off. Twice during the first week I was called out in response to applicants for unusual grades of help, but my manner and speech seemed to overawe the ladies who wanted to hire, and I was remanded to my cell. "She said she didn't want that *kind* of a man." "He wouldn't want to eat in the kitchen," were the explanations given me by Miss Bryne. In vain I protested that I would eat anywhere, so long as I ate. The other servants wouldn't get used to me, and so no more was to be said.

But I was getting used to the other servants. That is my point. Insensibly I was changing my whole social attitude. It was like the difference in looking at the Grand Cañon of Arizona—downward from El Tovar, or upward from the brink of the Colorado. Little by little I found myself staring upward from the bottom, through all sorts of ranks above me. I didn't notice the change at once. For a time I thought I still retained my sense of obscured superiority. I arrived in the morning, heard from the lips of the birdlike young lady at the desk the familiar "Nothing yet," passed on to the pen, nodded to those who were assembled, some of whom I would have seen the day before, listened to their timid scraps of talk, which hardly ever varied from a few worn notes.

At first I felt apart from them, above them, disdainful of their limitations. My impulse was to get away from them, as it had been to cut loose from Lydia Blair and Drinkwater. It was only on seeing them one by one called out of the pen, not to come back again, that I began to envy them. Sooner or later, every one went but me. I became a kind of friendly joke with them. "Some little sticker," was the phrase commonly applied to me. It was used in a double sense, one of which was not without commendation. "Ye carn't stick like wot you're doin', old

son," a footman said to me one day, "without somethin' turnin' up, wot?" and from this I took a grim sort of encouragement.

But all I mean is that by imperceptible degrees I felt myself one of them. After the first lady had turned me down, I began to adapt myself to their views of the employer. After the second lady had repeated the action of the first, I began to experience that feeling of dull hostility toward the class in which I had been born that marked all my companions in the coop. It was what I have already called it, hostility without personal malevolence—hostility to a system rather than to individuals. For a pittance barely sufficient to keep body and soul together, leaving no margin for the higher or more beautiful things in life, we were expected to drudge like Roman slaves, and not only feel no resentment, but be contented with the lot to which we were ordained. The clearest thing in the world to all of us was that between us and those who would have us work for them some great humanizing element was lacking—an element which would have made life acceptable—and that so long as it was not there each one of us would, as a revolutionary bookkeeper put it, "go to bed with a grouch." To me, as to them, the grouch was growing intimate—and so was hunger.

By the end of a fortnight I was down to one meal a day, the breakfast I continued to take with Pelly, my Cornish friend, and over which he told me his most intimate experiences, with an absence of reserve to which conversation in the pen had accustomed me. Looking for some such return on my part, he was not only disappointed, but a little mystified. I got his mental drift, however, when he asked me on one occasion if I had ever "hit the pipe," and on another if I had ever been "sent away." Had these misfortunes happened to himself he would have told me frankly, and it would have made no difference in his sympathy for me had I confessed to them or to any other delinquency. What puzzled him was that I should confess to nothing, a form of reserve which to him was not only novel, but abnormal.

Nevertheless, when through the thin partition I announced one morning that I wasn't going to breakfast, giving lack of appetite as a plea, he came solemnly into my room.

"See here, Soames; if a fiver'd be of any use to you—or ten—or any think—"

When I declined he did not insist further; but on my return that evening I found a five-dollar bill thrust under my door in an envelope.

I didn't thank him when I heard him come in; I pretended to be asleep. As a matter of fact, I thought it hardly worth while to say anything. It was highly possible that the next day would say all, for I had reached the point where it seemed to me the Gordian knot must be cut. One quick stroke of some sort—and Pelly would get his five dollars back untouched.

A cup of chocolate had been all my food that day. Though I had still a few

pennies, less than a dollar, it would probably be all my food on the next day. On the day after that my rent would be due, and I couldn't ask the two good women who had been kind to me for credit. What would be the use? A new week would bring me no more than the past weeks, so why not end it once and for all?

Next morning, therefore, I gave Pelly back his bill, bluffing him by going out to our usual breakfast, on which I spent all I had in the world but a nickel and a dime. I must get something to do that day, or else—

Left alone, I tossed one of the two coins to decide whether or not I should go back to "the Intelligence." Going back had not been easy for the last few days, for I had noticed cold looks on the part of Miss Bryne and Miss Gladfoot, with a tendency to take me for a hoodoo. Even the young lady at the desk had ceased to say "Nothing yet," as I passed by, or as much as to glance at me. But as this was to be the last time, I obeyed the falling of the coin and went.

I went—to receive a little shock. Miss Bryne was waiting for me near the door, with a bit of paper in her hand.

"You must remember, Soames," she said, in her business-like way, "that this is not the only employment-office in New York. Here's a list of addresses, at any of which you may find what we haven't been able to secure for you."

I took the paper, thanked her, and went on into the coop before the significance of this act came to me. It was dismissal. It was not merely dismissal from a place, it was dismissal from the possibility of a dismissal. To have a place, even if only, as Pelly put it, to be bounced from it, was something; but to be denied the chance of being bounced...

I ought to have got up there and then and walked out; but I think I was too stunned. The chatty groups were forming all over the place, and early matrons looking for maids were being refused first by one spirited damsel and then by another. In the coop there was the usual low, intermittent murmur, accentuated now and then by ugly words, and now and then by oaths. To me it was no more than the hum of activity in the streets in the ears of a man who is dying.

Recovering from this state, which was almost that of coma, I began feeling for my hat. I had to go out. I had to find a way to do the only thing left for me to do. I had no idea of the means, and so must think them over.

And just then I heard a young fellow speaking, with low gurgles of fun. He was at the end of the pen and was narrating an experience of the afternoon before.

"It was a whale of a rolled-up rug that must have weighed five hundred pounds. 'Carry that up-stairs,' says the Floater. 'Like hell I will,' says I. He says, 'You'll carry that up or you'll get out o' here.' I says, 'Well, Creed and Creed ain't the only house to work for in New York.' 'You was damn glad to get here,' he says, madder 'n blazes. I says, 'Not half so damn glad as I'll be to get somewhere

else,' says I. 'You've had five men on this job in less than four weeks,' says I, 'and now you'll have to get a sixth,' says I, 'if there's any one in the city fool enough to take it. Carryin' rugs that 'd break a man's back,' I says, 'is bad enough; but before I'd go on workin' under a blitherin' old son of a gun like you—'"

I didn't wait to hear more. I knew the establishment of Creed & Creed, not far away, in the lower part of Fifth Avenue. Many a time I had stopped to admire the great rugs hung in its windows as a bait to people living in palaces. Not twenty-four hours earlier a place had been vacated there, a hard place, a humble place, and it was possible, barely possible...

Up the street that led to Washington Square I ran; I ran through Washington Square itself; for the two or three blocks of Fifth Avenue I slackened my pace only in order not to arrive breathless.

There it was on a corner, the huge gray pile, with its huge bright windows—and my heart almost stopped beating. Breathless now from another cause than speed, I paused, nominally to gaze at an immense Chinese rug, but really to compose my mind to what might easily prove the last effort of my life. This rug, too, hanging with a graceful curve in which yellow deepened to orange and orange to glints of acorn-brown, might easily prove the last beautiful thing my eyes would ever rest upon. I remembered saying to myself that beauty was the thread of flame that would lead me home; but the thread of flame had been treacherous. I could have given an expert's opinion on a work of art like this; and yet I was begging for the privilege of handling it in the most laborious manner possible, just that I might eat.

And as I stared at the thing, forming the words in which I should frame my request for work, a soft voice, close beside me, said:

"Surely it must be possible for me to be of use to you!"

CHAPTER IV

As I recall the minute now my first thought was of my appearance. I had noticed for some time past that it was running down, and had regarded the change almost with satisfaction. The more out at elbow I became the less would be the difference between me and any other young fellow looking for employment. It hadn't escaped me that I grew shabby less with the honorable rough-and-tumble of a working-man than with the threadbare, poignant poverty of broken-down

gentility; but I hoped that no one but myself would perceive that. I had thus grown careless of appearances, and during the past forty-eight hours more careless than I had been hitherto. Feeling myself a lamentable object, I had more or less dressed to suit the part.

I knew instantly that it was this that had inspired the words I had just listened to. I knew, too, that I must bluff. Wretched as I looked, I must carry the situation off, with however pitiful a bit of comedy.

Turning, I lifted my hat, with what I could command of the old dignity of bearing.

"How early you are!" I smiled bravely. "I didn't know young ladies were ever down-town by a little after ten."

She nodded toward the neighboring bookshop. "I've been in there buying something for Lulu to read. She's bored." She threw these explanations aside as irrelevant to anything we had to say, now that we had met. "Where have you been all these weeks? Why didn't you let me know—?"

"How could I let you know? I called at your old house, and you were gone."

"You could have easily found out. If you'd merely called up Central she would have told you the new address of our number. It wasn't kind of you."

"Sometimes we have things to do more pressing than just being kind."

"There's never anything more pressing than that."

"Not for people like you."

"Not for people like any one. Listen!" she hurried on, as if there was not a minute to spare. "One of my trustees came to me yesterday. He said I had nearly thirty thousand dollars of accumulated income that there's nothing to do with but invest."

"Well? Don't you like to see your money invested?"

"I like it well enough when there's nothing else to do with it."

"Which you say that in this case there isn't."

"Oh, but there is—if you look at it in the right way."

"I don't have to look at it any way."

"Yes, you do, when it's—when it's only common sense."

"What's only common sense?"

"My being—being useful to you."

"Oh, but you're useful to me through—through your very kindness."

"That's not enough. Surely you—you see!"

I could say quite truthfully that I didn't see. "But suppose," I continued, "that we don't talk of it."

"Yes," she answered, fiercely, "and leave everything where we left it the last time. You see what's come of that."

"I see what's come, of course; but I don't know that it's come of that."

There were so few people in the neighborhood, and we were so plainly examining the Chinese rug, that we could talk together without attracting attention.

"Oh, what kind of people are we?" she exclaimed, tapping with one hand the book she held in the other. "Here I am with more money than I know what to do with; and here are you—"

"With all the money I want."

Her brown eyes swept me from head to foot. "That's not true," she insisted. "When I first knew you I thought—I thought you were just experimenting—"

"And how do you know I'm not?"

"I know it from what you said yourself—that last time."

"What did I say?"

"That if it wasn't trouble it was misfortune."

"Oh, that!"

"Yes, that. Isn't it enough? And then I know it— Well, can't I see?"

I tried to laugh this off. "Oh, I know I'm rather seedy-looking, but then—"

"You're worse than seedy-looking; you're—you're—tragic—to me. Oh, I know I haven't any right to say so; but that's what I complain of, that's what I rebel against, that we've got our conventions so stupidly organized that just because you're a man and I'm a woman I shouldn't be allowed to help you when I can."

"You do help me, with your great sympathy."

She brushed this aside. "That's no help. It doesn't feed and clothe you."

I endeavored to smile. "That's very plain talk, isn't it?"

"Of course it's plain talk, because it's a perfectly plain situation. It isn't a new thing to me to see people who've been going without food. At the Settlement—"

I still kept up the effort to smile. "If I'd been going without food there are a dozen places—"

"Where they'd give you a meal, after they'd satisfied themselves that you hadn't been drinking. I know all about that. But would you go? Would you rather drop dead of starvation first? And what good would it do you in the end, just one meal, or two meals, when everything else is lacking? It's the whole thing—"

"But how would you tackle that, the whole thing? It seems to me that if I can't do it myself no one else—"

"I'll tell you as straightforwardly as you ask the question. I should give you, lend you, as much money as you wanted, so that you should have time to reorganize your life."

"And suppose I couldn't, that I spent your money and was just where I was before?"

"Then my conscience would be clear."

"But your conscience must be clear in any case."

"It isn't. When all you ask for is to help—"

"But you can help other people—who need it more."

"Oh, don't keep that up. I *know* what you need. I've told you already I've seen starvation before. Don't be offended! And when it's you, some one we've all known, and liked—Boyd liked you from the first."

"But not from the last."

"He thinks you're—you're strange, naturally. We all think so. I think so. But that doesn't make any difference when you don't get enough to eat."

"And suppose I turned out to be only an adventurer?"

She shrugged her shoulders, after a habit she had. "That would be your responsibility. Don't you see? I'm not thinking so much about you as I am about myself. It's nothing to me what you are, not any more than what Lydia is, or a dozen others I could name to you. I think it highly probable that Lydia Blair will take the road we call going to the bad—"

"Oh, surely not!"

This invitation to digression she also swept aside. "She won't do it with her eyes shut, never fear! She'll know all about it, and take her own way because it's hers. Don't pity her. If I were half so free—"

"Well?"

"Well, for one thing, you'd have another chance. If you didn't use it that would be your own affair."

"Why do you speak of another chance? Do you think—?"

"Oh, don't ask me what I think. I take it for granted that—"

"Yes? Please tell me. What is it that you take for granted?"

"What good would it do for me to tell you?"

"It would do the good that I should know."

"Well, then, I take it for granted, since you insist, that you've done something, somewhere—"

"And still you'd lend me as much money as I asked for?"

"What difference does it make to me? I want you to have another chance. I shouldn't want it if you didn't need it; and you wouldn't need it unless there was something wrong with you. There! Is that plain enough? But because there is something wrong with you I want to come in and help you put it right. I don't care who you are or what you've done, so long as those are the facts."

"But I'm obliged to care, don't you see? If I were to take advantage of your generosity—"

"Tell me truthfully now. Would you do it if I were a man, a friend, who insisted on helping you to start again?"

I tried to gain time. "It would depend on the motive."

"We'll assume the motive to be nothing but pure friendship, just the desire that you should have every opportunity to make good again, and nothing else. *Absolutely nothing else!* Do you understand? Would you take it from him then? Please tell me as frankly as if—"

"I—I might."

"And because I'm not a man but a woman, you can't."

"It isn't the same thing."

"Which is just what we women complain of, just what we fight against, the stupid conventions that force us into being useless in a world—"

"Oh, but there are other ways of being useful."

"No other way of being useful compensates for the one which seems to you paramount, above all others, and from which you are debarred."

"But why should it? You and I never met till—"

"You can't argue that way. You can't reason about the thing at all. I'm not reasoning, further than to say that—that I believe in you, in your power of—of coming back. That's the phrase, isn't it? And as, apparently, I'm the only one in a position to go to your aid—"

She threw out her hands with a gesture she sometimes used which implied that all had been said.

And in the end we compromised. That is, I told her I had one more possibility. If that failed, I would let her know. This she informed me I could do by telephone, as Boyd's name was in the book. If it didn't fail ... But as to that she forgot to exact a promise, just as she forgot to tell me her new address. Like most shy people who dash out of their shyness for some adventure too bold for the audacious, she retreated as suddenly. Springing into her motor as soon as we had arrived at a temporary decision, she drove away, leaving me still at a loss as to whether or not I was Malvolio.

Dumfounded and distressed by this unexpected meeting, and the still more unexpected offer made in it, my thoughts began to run wild. It was in my power to live, to eat, to pay my way for a little longer. Of the money at her disposal I need accept no more than a few hundred dollars, a trifle to her, but to me everything in the world. Even if it did me no more than a passing good, it would do me that. If I had in the end to "get out," as I phrased it, I would rather get out in a month's time than do it that very day. In the mean while there might be—the miracle.

It was the mad prospect of all this that sent me out of Fifth Avenue to crawl along the side of Creed & Creed's establishment, which flanked the cross-street, without noticing the way I took. For the minute I had forgotten the errand that brought me to this particular spot in New York. It had been crowded out of my memory by the fact that, after all, it might not matter whether I found work or

not. I could live, anyhow. All I had to do was to take a telephone list, call up Boyd Averill's number, say that I had changed my mind....

It was a temptation. For you to understand how fierce a temptation it was you would have to remember that for a month I had been insufficiently fed, and that for a week I had not really been fed at all. Moreover, I could see before me no hope of being fed in the immediate future. I was asking myself whether it would be common sense on the part of a drowning man to refuse a rope because a woman in whom there might be a whole confusion of complex motives had thrown it, when I suddenly found my passage along the pavement blocked.

It was blocked by what appeared to be a long cylindrical bar, some two or three feet in diameter. Covered with burlap, it ran from a motor truck, in which one end still rested, toward the entrance to that part of Creed & Creed's establishment that lay slightly lower than the pavement. It was a wide entrance, after which came two or three broad, shallow steps, and then a cavern which was evidently a storehouse. Two men were tugging at the long object, the one big, dark, brawny, clad in overalls, and equal to the work, the other a little elf of an old man, nattily dressed for the street, wearing a high soft felt hat, possibly in the hope of making himself look taller. A gray mustache that sprang outward in a semi-circle did not conceal a truculent mouth, though it smothered his wrathful expletives. That he had once been agile I could easily guess, but now his poor old joints were stiff from age or disuse. It was also clear that he was lending a hand to an irksome task because of a shortage of labor.

While the younger man—he was about my own age—could manage his end easily enough, the old one tugged desperately at his, finally letting it drop.

"Gr-r-r-r!"

The growl was that of an irascible man too angry to be articulate. If the thread of flame ever led me, it was then. Without a minute's hesitation, I picked up the dropped end of the cylinder, with no explanation beyond the words, "Let me have a try," and presently I was finding my way down the steps and into the cavern.

"Chuck it there, on top o' thim," my companion ordered, and our cylinder lay as one of a pile of similar cylinders, which I could see from the labels to have been shipped from India.

"There's eight or tin more of thim things," the big fellow was beginning.

"Is that the Floater?" I asked in a hurried undertone, as the little man hobbled down the steps and made his way toward us in the semi-darkness.

"He sure is, and some damn light floater at that."

Before I could analyze this reply the Floater himself stood in front of me.

"Who are you?" he demanded, sharply.

"Do you mean my name?"

"I don't care a damn about your name. What business had you to pick up that rug?"

"Only the business of wanting to help. I could see it wasn't a gentleman's job—and—and I—I thought you might take me on."

He danced with indignation.

"Take you on? Take you on? What do you mean by that?"

"You see, sir, it was this way. I've just run up from the Intelligence where I heard a fellow gassing about"—I varied the story from that which I had heard at Miss Bryne's—"about being kicked out of here."

"Was he a gabby sort of a guy?" my big colleague inquired.

"That would describe him exactly; and so I thought if I could reach here in time, before you'd had a chance to get any one else—"

"Chance to get any one else?" the little man snarled. "I can go out into the street and shovel 'em in by the cartload. Dirt, I call 'em!"

"Yes, sir; but you haven't done it. That's all I mean. I thought if I got here first—"

It was easy to size him up as a vain little terrier, and my respectful manner softened him. He stood back for a minute to examine me.

"You don't look like a fellow that 'd be after this sort of a job. Does he, Bridget?"

Bridget's answer, though non-committal, was in my favor:

"Sure I've seen ivery kind o' man lookin' for a job at one time or another. It's not his looks that 'll tell in handling rugs; it's his boiceps."

He tapped his own strong biceps to emphasize his observation, while I endeavored to explain.

"You're quite right, sir. You'd see that when lots of other men wouldn't. As a matter of tact, this job or any other job would be new to me. I had some money—but the war's got me stone-broke. I lived in France till just lately.

"If you lived in France, why ain't you fightin'?"

Not having the same dread of inventing a tale as with Boyd Averill, I said, boldly:

"I did fight, till they discharged me. Got a blow on the head, and wasn't any good after that. I was with the French army because my people lived over there. When I got out of it, there was no provision made for me, of course. My father and mother had died, my father's business had been smashed to pieces—"

"What was he?"

Luckily my imagination didn't fail me.

"An artist. He was just beginning to make a hit. I was to have been"—I sought for the most credible possibility—"an architect. I was to have studied at the Beaux Arts, that's the big school for architects in Paris; but of course all that

was knocked on the head when my father died, and so I sailed for New York."

"Haven't you got no relations here?"

I remembered that Lydia Blair thought she might have seen me in Salt Lake City, but I was afraid of the Mormon connotation. "My family used to live in—in California; but they're all scattered, and we'd been in Europe for so many years—"

"Amur'cans should live in God's country—"

"Yes, sir; so I've found out. If we had, I shouldn't be asking for a job in order to get a meal. I'm down to that," I confessed, showing him the nickel and the dime.

He took a minute or two to reflect on the situation, saying, finally, with a little relenting in his tone:

"There's nine more rugs out in that lorry. If you help this man to lug them in you'll get fifty cents."

If it was not the miracle, it was a sign and a wonder none the less. Fifty cents would tide me over the night. I should have sixty-five cents in all, and it would be my own. I should not have cadged it from a woman, whatever the motive of her generosity. It was that motive which made me tremble. If it was what it might have been, if I was not a mere fatuous fool, then there was no hole so deep that I had better not hide in it, no distance so great that I had better not put it between her and me. It would wound her if I did, but on every count that would be preferable....

The Floater went off to regions where I couldn't follow him, and Bridget spoke in non-committal but not unkindly tone.

"Better take off that topcoat and hang it in Clancy's locker. Clancy was the gabby chap you heard at Lizzie's. That's Lizzie Bryne. Sure I moind her when her mother kep' a little notion store down by Grime Street, and now the airs she gives herself! Ah, well, there's no law ag'in' it! Come awn now. We'll get these other bits in, because Daly, that's the driver, 'll have to be after goin' back to the station for the Bokharas."

"Will that be more to unload?" I asked, eagerly.

"Sure it 'll be more to unload. Dee ye think they'll walk off the truck by themselves?"

Vaguely afraid of something hostile or supercilious on Bridget's part, I was pleasantly surprised to find him not merely good-natured, but helpful and patient, showing me the small tricks of unloading long burlap cylinders from a motor lorry, which proved to be as much an art in its simple way as anything else, and enlivening the work by anecdote. All that he knew of Creed & Creed I learned in the course of that half-hour, though it turned out to be little more than I knew myself, except as it concerned the minor personnel. Of the heads of the firm and the managers he could tell me only as much as the peasants in the vale

of Olympus could have recounted of the gods on the mountain-top. To Bridget they were celestial, shadowy beings, seen as they passed in and out of the office, or stopped to look at some new consignment from the Far East; but he barely knew their names.

The highest flight of his information was up to the Floater; beyond him he seemed to consider it useless to ascend. Of the gods on the summit, the Floater was the high priest, and in that capacity he, alone, was of moment to those on the lower plane. He administered the favors and meted out the punishments. "He's It," was Bridget's laconic phrase, and in the sentence, as far as he was concerned, or I was concerned, or any salesman or porter was concerned, Creed & Creed's was summed up.

Of the Floater's anomalous position in the establishment, the explanation commonly accepted by the porters, the "luggers" they called themselves, was that he was in possession of dark secrets, which it would have been perilous to tempt him to divulge, concerning the firm's prosperity. A mysterious blood-relationship with "Old Man Creed," who had founded the house some sixty years before, was also a current speculation. Certain it was that his connection with the business antedated that of any one among either partners or employees, a fact that gave him an authority which no one disputed and all subordinates feared.

The job finished, Bridget and I sat on the pile, while he shared his lunch with me, and I waited for the Floater to bring me my fifty cents. When he appeared at last, I stood to attention, though Bridget nonchalantly kept his seat. I learned that if the little man was treated as an equal in the office he was treated as an equal in the basement. This circumstance gave to my politeness in standing up and saying "sir" a value to which he was susceptible, though too crusty to admit it.

"There's another load coming, sir, isn't there?" I asked, humbly, after I had been paid.

"What's it to you if there is?"

"Only that I might earn another fifty cents."

"Earn another fifty cents! Why, fifty cents would pay you for two such jobs as the one you've done."

"Then I'd like to work off what you've paid me by unloading the other lot for nothing."

He lifted a warning finger as he turned to go up-stairs. "See here, young feller! You beat it. If I find you here when I come down again—"

"You stay jist where y'are," Bridget warned me. "They're awful short-handed above, and customers comin' in by the shovelful. They've got to have four luggers to pull the stuff out for the salesmen to show, and there's only six of us in all. When Clancy put the skids under hisself last night I could see how

it 'd be to-day. It was a godsend to the little ould man when you blew in; but he always wants ye to think he can beat the game right out of his own hand."

Thus encouraged I stood my ground, and when the next load came I had the privilege of helping Bridget to handle it. By the end of the day I had not only earned a dollar and a half but had been ordered by the Floater to turn up again next morning.

"Ye're all right now," Bridget said, complacently. "Ye've got the job so long as ye can hould it down. I'll give ye the dope about that, and wan thing is always to trate him the way ye've trated him to-day. It's what he wants of us other guys, and we've not got the trick o' handin' it out. Men like us, that's used to a free country, don't pass up no soft talk to no one. What's your name?"

I said it was Jasper Soames.

"Sure that's a hell of a name," he commented, simply. "The byes 'd never get round the like o' that. Yer name 'll be Brogan. Brogan was what we called the guy that was here before Clancy, and it done very well. All right, then, Brogan. Ye'll have Clancy's locker; and moind ye don't punch the clock a minute later than siven in the mornin', or that little ould divil 'll be dancin' round to fire ye."

So Brogan I was at Messrs. Creed & Creed's all through the next two years.

CHAPTER V

No lighter-hearted man than I trod the streets of New York that evening. I had breakfasted in the morning; I had shared Bridget's cold meat and bread at midday; I could "blow myself in" to something to eat now, and then go happily to bed.

There was but one flaw in this bliss, and that was the thought of Mildred Averill. Whether she would be glad or sorry that for the minute I was landing on my feet, I could not forecast. And yet when I called her up she pretended to be glad. I say she pretended, only because in her first words there was a note of disappointment, perhaps of dismay, though she recovered herself quickly.

"But I can be easy in my mind about you?" she asked, after I had declined to tell her what my new occupation was.

"Quite easy; only I want you to know how grateful I am."

"Oh, please don't. If I could have done more!"

"Fortunately that wasn't needed."

"But if it should be needed in the future—"

"I hope it won't be."

"But if it should be?"

"Oh, then we'd—we'd see."

"So that for now it's—" that note stole into her voice again, and with a wistful question in the intonation—"for now it's—it's good-by?"

"Only for now."

She seemed to grasp at something. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, just that—that the future—"

"I hate the future."

It was one of her sudden outbursts, and the receiver was hung up.

After all, this abrupt termination to an unsatisfactory mode of speech was the wisest method for us both. We couldn't go on sparring and there was nothing to do but spar. Knowing that I couldn't speak plainly she had ceased to expect me to do so, and yet...

When I say that this was a relief to me, you must understand it only in the sense that my situation was too difficult to allow of my inviting further complications. Had I been free—but I wasn't free. The conviction that somewhere in the world I had permanent ties began to be as strong as the belief that at some time in my life love had been the dominating factor. There had been a woman. Lydia Blair had seen her. Her flaming eyes haunted me from a darkness in which they were the only thing living. The fact that I couldn't construct the rest of the portrait no more permitted me to doubt the original than you can doubt the existence of a plant after you have seen a leaf from it. The best I could hope for now was the privilege of living and working in some simple, elemental way that would give me the atmosphere in which to re-collect myself, *recueillement*, the French graphically name the process, and grow unconsciously back into the facts that effort would not restore to me.

For that simple, elemental work and life the opportunity came to me at last. I see now that it was opportunity, though I should not have said so at the time. At the time it was only hard necessity, though hard necessity with those products of shelter and food which in themselves meant peace. I had peace, therefore, of a kind, and to it I am able now to attribute that growth and progress backward, if I may so express myself, which led to the miracle.

My work next day lay in peeling off the burlap from the newly arrived consignment, stripping the rolls of the sheepskins in which they were wrapped inside, spreading the rugs flat, and sweeping them with a stiff, strong broom. After that we laid them in assorted piles, preparatory to carrying them up-stairs. They were Khorassans, Kirmanshahs, Bokharas, and Sarouks, with a superb lot of blue and gold Chinese reproduced on the company's looms in India.

The good-natured Peter Bridget taking his turn up-stairs, my colleague that

day was an American of Finnish extraction, whose natural sunniness of disposition had been soured by the thwarting of a strong ambition to "get on." Combining the broad features of the Lapp with Scandinavian hair and complexion, his expression reminded you of a bright summer day over which a storm was beginning to lower. The son of one large family and the father of another, he was at war with the world in which his earning capacity had come to have its limitations fixed at eighteen dollars a week.

He was not conversational; he only grunted remarks out of a slow-moving bitterness of spirit.

"What's the good of always layin' the pipe and never gettin' no oil along it? That's what I want to know. Went to work when I was fourteen, and now I'm forty-two, and in exactly the same spot."

"You're not in exactly the same spot," I said, "because you've got your wife and children."

"And the money I've spent on that woman and them kids!"

"But you're fond of them, aren't you?"

"No better wife no guy never had, and no nicer little fam'ly."

"Well, then, that's so much to the good. Those are assets, aren't they? They'll mean more to you than if you had money in the savings bank and didn't have *them*."

"I can't eddicate 'em proper, or send 'em to high-school, let alone college, or give 'em nothin' like what they ought to have. All I can leave 'em when I die is what my father left me, the right not to be able to get nowhere—and yet you'll hear a lot of gabbers jazzin' away about this bein' the best country for a working-man."

During the lunch-hour we drifted into Fifth Avenue, joining the throng of those who for sixty minutes were like souls enjoying a respite from limbo. Limbo, I ask you to notice, is not hell; but it is far from paradise. The dictionary defines the word as a borderland, a place of restraint, and it was in both those senses, I think, that the shop and the factory struck the imaginations of these churning minds. The shop and the factory formed a borderland, neither one thing nor another, a nowhere; but a place of restraint none the less. More than the physical restraint involved in the necessity for working was implied by this; it was restraint of the spirit, restraint of the part of a man that soars, restraint of the impulse to seize the good things of life in a world where they seemed to be free.

Though I could understand little of the conversation around me—Yiddish, Polish, Armenian, Czech—I knew they were talking of jobs and bosses in relation to politics and the big things of life.

"What's the matter with them guys at Albany and Washington that they

don't come across with laws—?"

That was the question and that was the complaint. It was one of the two main blends in the current of dissatisfaction. The other blend was the conviction that if those who had the power didn't right self-evident wrongs, the wronged would somehow have to right themselves. There was no speechmaking, no stump oratory, after the manner of a Celtic or Anglo-Saxon crowd; all was smothered, sullen, burning, secretive, and intense.

On our way back to the cavern the Finn remarked:

"No man doesn't mind work. He'd rather work than loaf, even if he was paid for loafin'. What he can't stick is not havin' room to grow in, bein' squeezed into undersize, like a Chinese woman's foot."

After all, I reflected, this might be the real limbo, not only of the working-man, but of all the dissatisfied in all ranks throughout the world—the denials of the liberty to expand. Mildred Averill was rebelling against it in her way as much as the Finn in his, as much as any Jew or Pole or Italian in all the crowd surging back at that minute to the dens from which they had come out. Discontent was not confined to any one class or to any one set of needs. Custom, convention, and greed had clamped our energies round and round as with iron hoops, till all but the few among us had lost the right to grow. It wasn't a question of pay; it wasn't primarily a question of money at all, though the question of money was involved in it. More than anything else, it was one of a new orientation toward everything, with a shifting of basic principles. The first must become last and the last must become first—not in the detail of precedence but in that of the laws by which we live—before men, as men, could get out of the prison-houses, into which civilization had thrust them, to the broad, free air to which they were born. The struggle between labor and capital was a mere duel between blind men. It was bluff on the surface by those on both sides who were afraid to put the ax to the root of the tree. No symbol was so eloquent to me of the bondage into which the human elements in Church and State had chained the spirit of man as the Finn's comparison of the Chinese woman's foot.

When the Floater paid me another dollar and a half that night he told me that if I worked like a dog, was as meek as a mouse, and "didn't get no labor rot into my nut" I could have Clancy's job as a regular thing. But by this time I was beginning to understand him. I have already called him a terrier, and a terrier he was, with a terrier's bark, but with a terrier's fundamental friendliness. If you patted him, he wagged his tail. True, he wagged it unwillingly, ungraciously, and with a fond belief that you didn't know he was wagging it at all; but the fact that he did wag it was enough for me.

It was enough for us all. There was not a man among the "luggers" who didn't understand him, nor among the salesmen either, as I came to understand.

"Dee ye know how to take that little scalpeen? He's like wan of thim Graaks or Eytalians that's got a quare talk of their own, but you know you can put it into our talk and make it mane somethin'. Wance I was at a circus where a monkey what looked like a little ould man talked his kind o' talk, and it made sinse. Well, that's like the Floater. He's like the monkey what can't talk nothin' but monkey-talk; but glory be to God! he manes the same thing as a man. Don't ye moind him, Brogan. When he talks his talk, you talk it to yerself in yer own talk, and ye'll kape yer timper and get everything straight."

This kindly advice was given me by Denis Gallivan, the oldest of the porters, and a sort of dean of our corps. Small, wiry, as strong as a horse, with a wizened, leathery face that looked as if it had been dried and tanned in a hot sunshine, there was a yearning in his blue-black eyes like that which some of the old Italian masters put into the eyes of saints. Denis, Bridget, and the Finn composed what I may call the permanent staff, the two others, excluding myself, being invariably restless chaps who, like Clancy, came for a few weeks and went off again. With the three workers named I made a fourth, henceforth helping to carry the responsibility of the house on my shoulders.

It was a good place, with pleasant work. Two or three times I could have had promotion and a raise in pay, but I had reasons of my own for staying where I was.

My duties being simple, I enjoyed the sheer physical exertion I was obliged to make. Arriving about seven in the morning I helped to sweep the floors, with a special sweeping of the rugs, druggets, and mattings that had lain out overnight. If there was anything to be carried from the basement to the upper floor I helped in that. Then, having "cleaned" myself, as the phrase went, I took my place in the shop, ready to pull out the goods which the salesmen panted to display to customers, and to put them back again.

For this there were always four of us in the spacious, well-lighted shop, which must have been sixty feet long by thirty wide, and I liked the dignity and quiet of all the regulation tasks. As a rule, we were on the floor by nine, though it was generally after ten before we saw a customer. During that hour of spare time we porters hung together at the farther end, exchanging in low tones the gossip of the day, confiding personal experiences, or discussing the war and the reconstruction of society. Now and then one of the four or five salesmen would condescendingly join with us, but for the most part the salesmen kept to themselves, treating the same topics from a higher point of view. The gods of Olympus did little more than enter by the main door from Fifth Avenue, cross to their offices, after which we scarcely saw them. Only the Floater moved at will between us and them, with a little dog's freedom to be equally at home in the stable and the drawing-room.

A flicker of interest always woke with the arrival of customers. They entered with diffidence, confused by the subdued brilliance of the Persian and Chinese colors hanging on our walls, by the wide empty spaces, and their own ignorance of what they came in search of.

"There's not tin women in New York 'll know the difference betwane a Kirmanshah and an Anatolia," Denis said to me one day, "and it'd make ye sorry for thim when they comes to furnishin'. Glory be to God, they'll walk in here knowin' no more than that they want rugs, and it's all wan to thim what ye puts before thim so long as it's the color they like and it lays on the ground. If this wasn't the honestest house that the Lord ever made there'd be chatin' till we was all in danger o' hell fire."

But in spite of this ignorance, we received our visitors courteously, a salesman going forward to meet all newcomers and conducting them to the row of reproduced Louis Seize cane-bottomed chairs placed for their convenience. Then it would be, "Bridget, bring that Khorassan—3246, you know, that fine specimen." And Bridget would know, and call the Finn to help him lay it out. Or it would be, "Brogan, can you find the Meshed that came in yesterday—2947? I think madam would like to see it." On this Denis and I would haul out the big carpet, stretch it at the lady's feet, listen to comments which, as Denis put it, had the value of a milliner's criticism of the make of a "floyin'-machine," and eventually carry it back to the pile whence we had taken it. I may say here that for customers we had little respect, except from the point of view of their purchasing power.

"Did ye ever see wan o' thim that could tell a Sehna knot from a Giordes?" Denis asked, scornfully. "Did ye ever see wan o' thim that knowed which rug had a woolen warp and which a cotton, or which rug 'd wear, or which 'd all go up in flock? If a woman was to boy a shimmy that 'll be in rags before it's been six toimes to the wash with as little sinse as she'll boy a rug that ought to last for a hunderd years her husband 'd be in jail for dit."

But for me, customers had one predominant interest. Among them there might be some one I could recognize, or some one who would recognize me. As to the last, I had one fear and many hopes. My one fear was that Mildred Averill or Lulu Averill might one day wander in; but as time went on and they didn't, I ceased to dread the mischance. As it also proved in the end it was the same way with my hopes. No one turned up whom I could hail as an acquaintance; no one ever glanced at me with an old friend's curiosity.

So I settled down to the routine which, though I didn't know it then, was the mental rest that, according to Doctor Scattlethwaite, I needed for my recovery. The days were so much alike that I could no more differentiate between them than can a man in prison. On eighteen dollars a week I contrived to live with that humble satisfaction of humble needs which I learned to be all that a man requires.

Little by little I accommodated myself to the outlook of my surroundings, and if I never thought exactly like my companions I found myself able to listen to their views complacently. With all three of my more important co-workers—Denis, Bridget, and the Finn—my relations were cordial, a fact due largely to their courteous respect for my private history, into which none of them ever pried. Like Lydia, Drinkwater, and every one else, they took it for granted that there was something I wanted to hide, and allowed me to hide it.

In this way I passed the end of the year 1916, the whole of 1917, and all of 1918 up to the beginning of December. Though the country had in the mean time gone to war it made little difference to us. Denis was too old to be drafted; Bridget and the Finn were exempted as fathers of large families; I was examined, and, for reasons I do not yet understand, rejected. I should have made a very good fighting man; but I think I was looked upon as of weak or uncertain mentality.

During all those months I courted the obscurity so easy to find. Between Creed & Creed's and my squint-eyed room with the fungi on the mantelpiece I went by what you might call the back ways, in order to risk no meeting with Mildred Averill or her family. Since they frequented the neighboring book store, one of the best known in New York, they might at some time see me going in or out, and so I kept to the direction of Sixth Avenue. Though I often drifted out into the midday throng of which I have spoken already there was little danger in that, because I was swallowed in the crowd. In company for the most part with Sam Pelly, I took my meals in places so modest that Lydia Blair was unlikely to run across me; and I had no one else to be afraid of.

Peace therefore stole into my racked soul, though it was the peace of death. While I had recurrences of the hope that my lost sense of identity would one day be restored to me, I dropped into the habit of not thinking much about it. I ate and drank; I had shelter and clothes. The narrow margin on which other working-people lived came to seem enough for me. Toward the great accidents of life, illness or incapacity, I learned to take the same philosophic attitude as they, trusting to luck, or to something too subtle and spiritual to put easily into words, to take care of me. If I developed any deep, strong principle of living it was along the lines of the wish that on a snowy December afternoon had led me to Meeting-House Green. I knew that the universe was filled with a great Will and tried to let myself glide along on it in simplicity, and harmony.

CHAPTER VI

On the morning of the eleventh of December, 1918, I had been in the basement helping to unpack a consignment just come in from India, as I had first done two years before. I had, therefore, not known what passed on the floor above during the forenoon, and should have been little interested had I been there. What I needed to know the Floater told me when I appeared after lunch to take my shift on the main floor with Bridget and the Finn.

"You're to go with the two lads down-stairs"—the two of our six porters who were always transient—"to this number in East Seventy-sixth Street, and show the big Chinee antique, 4792, and the modern Chinee, 3628, to a lady that's stayin' there, and explain to her the difference between them. She'll take the new one if she thinks it's just as good, and you're to show her that it isn't. She's not the lady of the house. Her name is Mrs. Mountney, and she comes from Boston. She saw them both this morning, but said she couldn't judge till she'd viewed 'em private."

It was not an unusual expedition, though it was new to me. For special customers, or in cases of big bits of business, we sent out rugs on approval or for private view, though I had never before been intrusted with the mission. I didn't wholly like the job; but we were accustomed to take both things we didn't like and things we did as all in the day's work.

At the house in East Seventy-sixth Street we found ourselves expected, the footman explaining that we were to carry our wares to the music-room and lay them out. The ladies were resting after lunch, but Mrs. Mountney would come to us as soon as she left her room. With the pleasant free-masonry of caste he confided to me, as with our burdens we made our way into the hall, that Mrs. Mountney was a nice little bit of fluff, though not so tony as he had looked for in an old girl out of Boston. When it came to class, the lady of the house, whom I thought he spoke of as Luke, could hang it all over her.

It was so long since I had been in a house of the kind that I took notes more acutely than was my habit, though my habit was always to be observant. What struck me chiefly was its resemblance on a larger scale to the last of its type I had visited. Perhaps the name Lulie had turned my thoughts backward; but there was certainly the same square hall, containing a few monumental bits of furniture because they were monumental, the same dining-room opening out of it, full of high-backed and Italian ... And then, across a corridor that ran to some region behind the dining-room, I thought I saw a stocky figure grope its way with the kind of movement I had not seen since the last time I had met Drinkwater. A door opened and closed somewhere, and before we reached the music-room I heard the distant click of a typewriter.

That I was nervous goes without saying, but there were so many chances of my fear being groundless that I did my best to dismiss it. The music-room was

simple, spacious, white-and-gold, admirably adapted not only to the purpose it served but to that which had brought us there. When our carpets were spread they made a magnificent gold spot in the center of a sumptuous emptiness.

A few minutes later the nice little bit of fluff tripped in, justifying the description. She was one of those instances, of which we saw a good many among our customers, where a merciful providence had given a great deal of money to some one who would have been quite too insignificant without it. A worn fairness of complexion was supplemented by cosmetics, and an inadequate stock of very blond hair arranged in artistic disarray in order to make the most of it. To offset the laces and pearls of an elaborate negligée by a "democratic" manner, and so put poor working-men at their ease, she nodded to us in a friendly, offhand way, saying, briskly:

"Now then! Let's see! Which is the modern one and which is the antique? I can't tell; can you?" Looking at me archly, she changed her tone to the chaffing one which the French describe as *blagueur*. "But of course you'll say you can, because that's your business. You've got them marked with some sort of secret sign, like a conjurer with coins, so as to tell one from the other, without my knowing it."

Having said this, she began to march round the two great gold-covered oblongs with the movement of a prowling little animal. Keeping my eye on the main doorway, I pointed out that while the modern piece would please the ordinary eye only the antique would satisfy the elect. There was no question but that the Indian reproduction was good. Any one who took it would do more than get his money's worth, since it would tone down with the years, while the hard wool of which it was woven would make it stand comparatively rough usage. But—didn't madam see?—the antique, made on the old Chinese looms, was of the softer, richer sheen imparted by the softer, richer wool; and wasn't the heavenly turquoise-blue of the ornaments and border of a beauty which the modern dyes had not begun to reproduce?

As I explained this and some other characteristics of rugs, I was more or less talking against time. The suspicion that had seized me on entering the house began to deepen, without my knowing why.

"Y-yes; y-yes," the little lady agreed; "it is lovely, isn't it? And I suppose that if you're buying a good thing it's better to get the—"

She paused, looking out through the great doorway into the hall. I, too, looked out, to see Mrs. Averill in a tea-gown, gazing in at us distractly.

"Oh, Lulu, do come here. This man, this gentleman, has just been telling me the most interesting things—"

She trailed into the music-room with the same graceful languor with which she had trailed into the drawing-room on the occasion when we had last met. The

two other porters and myself being negligible figures in the room, her almond eyes rested listlessly on the rugs, which she studied without remark.

"Lulu," Mrs. Mountney began again, with animation, "did you know that in Persian rugs the designs are outlined in rows of knots, and in Chinese by clipping with the scissors? *ciselé*, this ma—this gentleman calls it, and you can feel a little line! Do put your hand down."

"Oh, I'm too tired," Mrs. Averill protested, in her sweet drawling voice, "and this room's so stuffy. Mildred said she'd have it aired; but I don't know what she's mooning over half her time. She's so dreamy. I often think she ought to be in a convent, or something like that."

The little bit of fluff was more interested in rugs than in Mildred.

"Do tell Mrs. Averill—I'm staying with her—what you've just been saying about the wool. Did you know, Lulu, that Indian wool is hard and Chinese soft?" She looked again toward the hallway, where a second figure had come into view. "Mildred, do come here. There's the most interesting things—I'm so glad I went to that place this morning—and they've sent me the most interesting man—Lulu's like ice, but you're artistic."

Miss Averill, too, advanced into the room; but though I was in full view she paid me and my comrades no particular attention. It was the easier for me not to speak, or to draw any one's glance to myself, for the reason that Mrs. Mountney chattered on, repeating for Mildred's benefit the facts I had just been giving her.

"Just think of having the patience to clip with the scissors round all these designs, and it's the same in the modern rug as in the antique. Do stoop down, Mildred, and let your fingers run along the *ciseling*; that's what this—this gentleman calls it."

As the girl stooped to satisfy Mrs. Mountney, I ventured to look at her more closely. She was perhaps not older than when I had last seen her two years before, but her face had undergone a change. It made you think of faces chastened, possibly purified, by suffering. Where there had been chiefly a sympathetic common sense there was now the beauty that comes of elevation.

Luckily for me Mrs. Mountney ran on, while we three men, with the lack of individuality of employees before customers, remained indistinguishable objects in the background.

"That's the modern and that's the antique; and I'm sure no one but a rug-man could tell the difference between them. This man—this gentleman—says they can, but that's only business. Hundreds of dollars difference in the price, almost as much as between a pair of real pearl ear-rings and imitation ones. What do you say, Mildred? Would anybody ever notice—?"

"I suppose you'd be buying the best because it's the best, and not because any one would notice—"

"I should be buying it for what every one would see. What's the good of having a thing if it doesn't show what it is? I hate the way some people have of calling your attention to every fine thing they've got in the house, as if you weren't used to fine things of your own. If I've got to tell every one that that's a genuine old Chinese masterpiece before they notice it—well, it isn't worth it. But at the same time the effect is richer; and some people do know, and talk about it to other people who know—there's that to consider."

By this time I was conscious of something else.

Having got through so many minutes without recognition I was beginning to hope that, by blotting myself out, as it were, between my fellow-workmen I might finally escape detection. No one had as yet dissociated any of us from another, the very absence of personality on our part reducing us to the place of mere machines. As a mere machine Mrs. Averill and Mildred might continue to overlook me, passing out of the room as unobservant as they had come in.

But Lulu had begun a curious movement round the square of the carpets. She seemed to be studying them; though with the long slits of her Mongolian eyes her glance might be traveling anywhere. Having had the opportunity to look me in the face, she moved to where she got me in profile, afterward passing behind me and returning to her original standpoint beside her sister and her friend. Without further reference to Mrs. Mountney, she slipped her arm through Mildred's, leading her toward the grand piano, against which they leaned.

For me there was nothing to do but to stand still. A word, a sign, might easily betray me, if I had not been betrayed already. As the conversation went on, Mildred kept her back to me, but Mrs. Averill stood sidewise, so as to be able to throw me an occasional appraising glance. Apparently she was in some doubt, my position and my clothes rendering absolute certainty difficult.

But Mildred turned away from the piano at last, and without examining me directly came slowly down the long room. Entirely mistress of herself she walked with sedateness and composure. The shyness and brusqueness which had given her a kind of aura in my thoughts during the past two years seemed to have been overcome by experience. In this self-command more than in any other detail I observed a change in her.

Not till she reached the corner of the long carpet did she give me the first clear, straightforward look. That recognition did not come instantly told me that I, too, must have changed. Laborious work and a rough way of living had doubtless aged and probably hardened me. I was dressed, too, like any other working-man, though with the tidiness which our position on the selling floor exacted. A working-man in his Sunday clothes would perhaps have described me, while my features must have adapted themselves to altered inward conditions with the facility which features possess.

"Is it really you?"

She was standing in front of me now, singling me out from the two boys who had fallen a little back. She didn't offer to shake hands; perhaps she wasn't sure enough of my identity; but that the circumstances in which she found me made no difference to her was the one fact apparent. Any emotion she may have felt was expressed in the quiver of a faint smile.

"I hoped you wouldn't recognize me," was all I found to say.

"Why?"

"Oh, for all the reasons that—that almost anybody would see at a glance."

"Perhaps I'm not—not almost anybody."

"No; you're not."

"Have you been doing this ever since—?"

I nodded. "It's the job I told you I might get. I did get it; and so—"

"Have you liked it?"

"Extremely."

"Is that true, or is it just—?"

"No; it's true. I could have had better jobs. They offered two or three times to make me a salesman; you may remember that I knew a good deal about rugs already—; but I preferred to stay where I am."

"For what reason?"

"I hardly know that I can tell you, unless it was to—to—"

"To find your soul?"

"Possibly."

"And have you found it?"

"I've found—something. I'm not sure whether it's my soul or not."

All this was said within the space of perhaps two minutes, during which I watched Mrs. Averill and Mrs. Mountney, toward whom Mildred turned her back, putting their head together on a whispered conversation. That it was about me I could have gathered from their glances; but a little crow on the part of Mrs. Mountney left me no doubt about it.

"Jasper Soames! Why, that's the name—"

It was all I caught; but it was enough to put even Mildred Averill on a secondary plane.

"If you've found your soul—" she was saying.

"Oh, I'm not sure of that. I only feel that I've found—something. I mean that something has come, or gone, I'm not sure of which; only that—"

Mrs. Mountney wheeled suddenly from the piano, trotting back to the edge of the carpet, across which she spoke to me.

"Did you ever hear of Copley's great portrait of Jasper Soames?"

I nodded, speechlessly. I had heard of it. In my mind's eye I saw it, at the

head of a great staircase, a full-length figure, wearing knee-breeches of bottle-green satin, a gold-embroidered waistcoat, and a long coat of ruby velvet with a Russian sable collar falling back almost to the shoulders. A plate let into the foot of the frame bore the name *Jasper Soames*, with the dates of a birth and a death. Somewhere in my life the picture had been a familiar object.

I had no time to follow up this discovery before Mrs. Mountney began again:

"Are you one of his descendants?"

"No; but my wife is."

The reply came out before I realized its significance. I hardly knew what I had said till I heard Lulu Averill exclaim with as much indignation as her indolent tones could carry:

"But you told my husband that you were not a married man! Didn't he, Mildred?"

The situation was so unexpected that I felt myself like a bird swinging in a cage. Nothing was steady; everything around me seemed to whirl. Then I heard Mildred speaking as if her voice reached me through a poor connection on a telephone.

"Oh, that didn't matter. I knew he was married all along—at least I was pretty sure of it. What difference could it make to us?"

"It made the difference," Mrs. Averill drawled, peevishly, "that we believed him."

But Mrs. Mountney intervened, waving the others aside with a motion of the arm.

"Wait!" She looked at me again across the carpet. "If you married a descendant of Jasper Soames then it was Violet Torrance."

The mist that had hitherto enshrined two flaming eyes seemed to part as if torn by lightning. The figure disclosed was not static like that of Jasper Soames, but alive as the sky is a live in a storm. It was that of my wife as I had last seen her. My mind resumed its action at the point where its memory of Vio had been shut out.

"And," Mrs. Mountney went on, pressing her facts, "you're Billy Harrowby." I could only bend my head in assent.

"That's my name."

"Then why—why—?"

She flung her hands apart, unable to continue. Lulu Averill, moving with the tread of a tigress stalking silently, stole down from the piano to the edge of the carpet. Mildred's eyes as she still faced me were all amber-colored fire. I was like a man waking in the morning from a night of troubled dreams.

Little Mrs. Mountney dragged her laces across both the rugs to confront

me face to face, standing beside Mildred.

"Do you know who I am?"

I shook my head.

"I'm Alice Tarporley."

"Oh yes! You were a friend of Vio's before we were married. I've heard her speak of you; but you lived in Denver."

"I went back to Boston only two years ago, when poor Vio was in such trouble because you were—" She cried out, with another wide motion of the arms: "In the name of God, man, what does it all mean?"

But I couldn't go into explanations. I didn't know where to begin.

"Tell me first how Vio is—where she is."

"She was perfectly well the day before yesterday, and at your own house in Boston. But don't you know, don't you know—? Why, this is too awful! The more I think of it the more awful it becomes. Don't you know—?"

"I—I don't know anything."

She got it out at last.

"Don't you know—Vio thinks you're—you're *dead*?"

Iron clampings seemed to press me round the ribs.

"No; I didn't know that. What made her think so?"

"Who wouldn't think so? You were reported missing—and when weeks went by—and no news of you—and then, when your uniform was found on the bank of that river, near Tours, wasn't it? and your papers in the pockets—and your letter of credit, and everything— And here you are in New York, going under another name, working like a stevedore, and looking like a tramp! Why, it's enough to drive anybody crazy!"

I could only stammer: "I shall explain everything, after I've seen Vio."

"You can't explain in such a way that—" She swung toward her hostess.

"Lulu, I must go straight back to Boston to-night. There's a train that gets you there in the morning, isn't there? I hate night traveling. I never sleep, and I have a headache all the next day—but what's that when—? If Vio hears this from any one but—" She turned to me again. "Then it *was* true that you'd been seen in New York hotels?"

"Possibly; I don't know what you're referring to."

"Oh, every now and then some report went round in Boston that So-and-so had seen you in this hotel or that; but nothing of the sort has been said for a year or two, and we thought that it was just the kind of fake story that gets about. But now! Well, I must break the news to Vio—"

"Why shouldn't I break it myself? I could call her up by long distance."

"Man, if she heard your voice like that it would kill her. You don't *know*. No, I must go; there's no help for it, headache or no headache. Mildred dear,

won't you call Annette? I told her she could go to the theater to-night, but now she'll have to get our tickets, and pack!" She wrung her hands. "Oh, dear! When a man's dead, he'd better stay dead!"

Mildred slipped from the room. A suspicion began to creep over me.

"Is there any special reason for my staying dead?"

"How *can* you when you're alive? That's the important point. Vio will never forgive you for being alive—and not telling her."

"She will when she's heard."

"She's got to hear right away, and I'm going to take charge of it. You may say it's none of my business, but I'm making it mine. I've known Vio Torrance since we were tots together."

I ventured to remind her that Vio might be her friend, but that she was my wife.

"Wife!" she crowed, scornfully. "Have you treated her like a wife—to be alive all this time and never let her know! When I tell you that she's been in mourning for you and out again—positively out again— Well, you can imagine!"

"I can imagine so many things—"

But she jerked her little person away from me toward the two fellows who were trying dully to follow the scene they were witnessing without being able to seize its drift.

"Take all this stuff back again to where you brought it from. I'm not going to buy any of it. The idea of Billy Harrowby—" She repeated the name with a squeal, "*Billy Harrowby!* of all people in the world! Why, it's enough to drive me out of my senses. I suppose you don't know," she continued, switching back to me again, "that they've put a new man in your place at the Museum, over a year ago, a Frenchman; and that Vio has given them all your prints and etchings for a William Harrowby Memorial—that's what she called it—she had to do something of the sort after your tragic end, in common decency; and you considered a hero, something like Rupert Brooke and Alan Seeger, and now what's it to be—and you alive?" A dramatic gesture seemed to claim this confusion as something for which Fate had made her specially responsible. "Lulu, take me away, for Heaven's sake! I shall never look at a Chinese rug again without thinking—"

When the two ladies, with arms around each other's waist, had passed into the hallway, and out of sight, I turned to my colleagues, saying merely:

"I think we'd better roll these up and beat it."

Neither made any comment till we were in the lorry on our way back to Creed & Creed's, when one of them said in an awe-stricken tone:

"For the love o' Mike, Brogan, ain't your name—*Brogan*?"

CHAPTER VII

Two mornings later I was in Boston, sitting in the lobby of one of the great hotels. I had come by order of a telegram from my brother-in-law, Wolf Torrance. A note handed me on my arrival, late the previous evening, requested me to wait for him before attempting to see Violet. From her I had had nothing.

I had come as I was, with the hundred and thirty dollars of my savings in my pocket, but without taking the time to dress otherwise than in my working-man's best. Examining myself closely, now that I was face to face with my old life again, I could see that by imperceptible degrees my whole appearance had taken on those shades which distinguish the working-man from men in more sophisticated walks in life. Vio Harrowby as the wife of a working-man, or of any one looking like a working-man, was an inconceivable image.

My leaving New York had been made simpler for me than I could have ventured to hope. Whatever the tale told by the lads who had accompanied me to East Seventy-sixth Street, it had awed the luggers, impressed the salesmen, and reached the ears of the Olympian gods. It was not often, I fancy, that Creed & Creed's was the scene of mystery. That there was a secret about me every one knew, of course; but it had been connected with vague romantic tales of squandering the family estate, of cheating at cards, or of other forms of aristocratic misdoings. So long as I didn't put on airs, and answered submissively to the name of Brogan, this was not laid up against me or treated otherwise than as a misfortune. Now that an explanation seemed to be coming to the light the effect, for that morning at least, was to strike my comrades dumb. They stared at me, but kept at a respectful distance, somewhat like school-boys with one of their number smitten by domestic calamity. Salesmen who, except for an order to pull out or put back a rug, had never taken the trouble to notice me, came and engaged me in polite conversation, while one or two of the partners made errands into the shop on purpose, as I surmised, to get a look at me. The single moment that could have been called dramatic fell to the Floater, who came in, during the forenoon, with a telegram and a special-delivery letter in his hand. They had been sent to Creed & Creed's, since that was my only known address.

"I suppose these wouldn't be for you," was the Floater's choice of words, as

he offered them for my inspection.

The telegram was for William Harrowby, the letter to William Harrowby, Esquire.

"That's my name, my real name," I admitted, humbly.

It was natural for him to hide his curiosity under a veil of sputtering disdain.

"Thought it'd be. Never did take stock in that damfool name you give when you first come here. 'Twa'n't fit for a dog or a horse—and you goin' just as easy by the name o' Brogan. Couldn't any one *see*?"

As to what any one could see I didn't inquire, being too eager to open my telegram. Though I scarcely hoped that it could be from Vio my heart sank a little when I saw that it was not.

"Come at once. Stay at the Normandy. Wait for me before seeing Violet. Explanations expected. J. DEWOLFE TORRANCE."

The spirit of the letter was different. Bearing neither formal beginning nor signature, it was dated from the house in East Seventy-sixth Street.

"I am so glad for your sake. Though I do not understand, I have confidence. I have always had confidence—without understanding. Some day, perhaps, you will tell me; but that shall be as you please. Just now I only want you to know that almost from the beginning of our acquaintance I thought you had a wife. I can't tell you how or why the conviction was borne in on me; but it was. Possibly I was interested in you for her sake a little, with that kind of secret sisterhood which more or less binds all women together, and which is not inconsistent with the small mutual irritations we classify as feline. In any case I knew it—or I so nearly knew it as to be able to take it for granted. If you go back to your home, then, you will have more than my good wishes, you will both have them. Should there be anything to keep you apart you will have more than my good wishes still. Don't ask me why I say these things, because I scarcely know. Don't try to interpret me, either, for you are extremely likely to be wrong. In our talks together you must have seen that I am in rebellion against being bound by other people's rules of conduct, and as far as I have the courage I brave the inferences drawn from what I do. My weakness is that I have not much courage. All the same, as I want to give you a kind of blessing in this new turn in your life, I keep repeating of you some words which I think must come from Tennyson:

”Go forth, and break through all,
Till one shall crown thee, far in the spiritual city.”

This letter, too, made my leaving New York easier. Possibly it was written with that intent. "Don't try to interpret me," she had said, and I saw the wisdom of following the counsel. As a matter of fact the new turn to the wheel taxed my mental resources to the utmost.

As nearly as I could judge, those mental resources were normal again. My return to the old conditions I can only compare to waking from a drugged unconsciousness. The repair of a broken telegraphic or telephonic connection might also give an idea of what had taken place in me. Re-establishment effected, messages went simply; that was all I could say. The mental rest induced by two years of physical exertion, with little or no thought for the morrow from any point of view, had apparently given the ruptured brain cells the time to reconstruct themselves. Physiologically I may be expressing myself inexactly; but that is of no moment. What is important is the fact that from the instant when Alice Mountney said, "You're Billy Harrowby," the complete function of the brain seemed to be resumed. There was no more in the nature of a shock than there is in remembering anything else forgotten.

More difficult to become accustomed to were the outward conditions. Having accepted the habits of poverty, those of financial ease seemed alien. They were uncomfortable, too, like an outlandish style of dress. To sleep in a luxurious bed, to order whatever I chose for breakfast, was as odd for me as a reversion to laces and ruffles in my costume. There was a marvelous thrill in it, however, with a sense of trembling anticipation. A soul on the outer edge of paradise, after a life of vicissitude and stint, would doubtless have some such vision of abundance and peace as that which filled my horizon.

But before Christian arrives at the Celestial City which is in sight he is reminded that a few difficulties remain to be faced, and in some such light I regarded the interview with Wolf. He came at last, pushing round the revolving door, and standing on the threshold with a searching look in his silly, hungry eyes. Hatted and fur-coated, he had that air of divine right to all that was best on earth which was one of the qualities that, to me at least, had always made him unbearable. Perhaps because I had had the same conviction about myself I could tolerate it less in him.

Every one called him Wolf, partly because of his name, but more because he looked like the animal. With a jaw extraordinarily long and narrow, emphasized rather than concealed by a beard trimmed carefully to a point, his smile lit up a row of gleaming upper teeth best described as fangs. His small eyes were at

once eager, greedy, and fatuous; and yet there was that in his personality which stamped him as of recognized social superiority. In the same way that a picture can be spoken of as a poor example of a good school, Wolf might have been reckoned as a second-rate specimen of a thoroughbred stock. Even as he stood you would have put him down as belonging to the higher strata in any community, and in sheer right of his forebears a member of the best among its clubs.

Instead of going forward and making myself known I allowed him to discover me. It was one more proof of my having changed that more than once his eye traveled over me without recognition. It must be remembered that I was no longer seedy; I was only different. It was not the degree but the kind that put him out of his reckoning.

When in the end he selected me from the crowd it was rather as a possibility than as his very man. Coming forward with that inquiring, and yet doubtful, air which people take on when scarcely able to believe what they see, he halted with a bland, incredulous smile.

"Well!"

With feelings in no wise different from those of a man charged with a crime of which he knows himself guilty, I struggled to my feet:

"Hello, Wolf!"

Wolf's small eyes roamed from my head to my feet and from my feet to my head before he spoke again:

"So you've decided to come back."

The grin that accompanied these words was partly nervous, but partly due to his pose of taking life as the kind of joke which he was man-of-the-world enough to appreciate.

"As you see," I responded, with a sickly grin on my own part.

In some lifeless manner we shook hands, after which I asked him to be seated.

On his taking off his hat I observed that during the three years and more since I had seen him last he had grown bald, while, with something of a pang, I wondered for the first time if I should find a change in Vio.

"Why didn't you come before?"

"I should have come if I could. As a matter of fact, I couldn't."

"Couldn't—why?"

"Didn't know where to go."

"What's that mean?"

"Exactly what it says."

"That you didn't know where to—?"

I tapped my forehead. "Had a—had a—shock—or something."

His gleaming smile was saved from ferocity only by being inane.

"Went dotty?"

"If you like."

"Great Scott! But why—why didn't some one let us know?"

"They couldn't. I—I seem to have taken care of that. Perhaps I'd better—better tell you all about it, that is, as far as I know."

He nodded, taking out his cigar-case and offering me a cigar. When I declined it he took one himself, bit off the end, lighted it, and in general carried himself as if my approaching confidences wouldn't matter much. I resented this the less, knowing it to be his attitude toward every one and everything. All that I cared for was that he should be in a position to give a correct account to Violet, in case she insisted on hearing his report before seeing me.

"You remember how I came to go over and join the American Ambulance Corps in France?"

He said he did not remember it.

"Well, I didn't do it of my own accord. I—I loathed the idea. If we'd been in the war at the time of course I should have done anything I could; but we were not in the war. As a matter of fact, if Vio had only let me wait I could have been of more use in my own particular line."

"You mean what we used to call the old-woman line."

"If you choose to put it that way."

"Didn't you put it in that way yourself?"

"As a feeble joke, yes. But we'll let that pass. All I mean is that as head of the Department of Textiles in the Museum of Fine Arts I knew a lot of a subject that became of great importance when we went into the war; so that, if Vio had waited—"

"Vio," he grinned, "was like a bunch of other women who'd caught the fever of sacrifice, what? When all their swell lady friends in England and France were giving up their dear ones, they didn't want not to be in the swim. Don't think I didn't go through it, old chap. Vio was simply crazy to give up a dear one. Before she'd got you she'd been after me. When Hilda Swain drove her two sons into being stokers in the navy, and killed one of them with the unaccustomed work, I thought Vio would go off her chump with a sense of her uselessness to a great cause. Those were days when to be Vio's dear one meant to go in danger of your life."

A hundred memories crowded in on me.

"Do you think that was it? It wasn't that—that she wanted to get rid of me?"

His answer struck me oddly.

"Not a bit of it, not then. Lord, no!"

I repressed the questions these words called up, taking a minute to think

the situation over.

"At any rate, I went," I continued, with outward calm. "It was after a rather stormy scene with Vio, in which she said she thought she had married a man and not a nervous old lady."

"Oh, she said worse than that to me, lots of times, what?"

"Yes, but you weren't her husband; and you were not desperately in love with her."

"Often thought Vio was like one of those queer-mixed cocktails that'll set chaps off their nuts who'll take a tumbler of whisky neat and never turn a hair."

"There's something in that," I agreed; "but it makes the kind of woman whose contempt is the harder to put up with. When she began handing it out to me—well, I went. That's all there is to be said about it. You tell me that Vio wanted to sacrifice a dear one; and she did. I was no more fit for the job I undertook than—than little Bobby would have been if he'd lived till then."

"That's another thing. Vio should have had more children, what?"

"Ah, well! She didn't want them. When little Bobby went she said she couldn't go through it all a second time, and so— But I'm trying to tell you what happened."

"Well, go on."

I narrated my experiences in the Ambulance Corps in words that have been so often given in print that it is not worth while to repeat them. What has not so frequently been recorded, because not every one has felt it to the same degree, is the racking of spirit, soul, and body by the unrelieved horror of the days and nights. I suppose I must own to being in regard to all this more delicately constituted than the majority of men. There were others like me, but they were relatively not numerous. Of them, too, we hear little, partly because not all of those who survived like to confess the weakness, and few survived. If it were possible to get at the facts I think it would be found that among those who sickened and died a large proportion were predisposed by sheer inability to go on living any longer in this world of men. I could give you the names of not a few in whom the soul was stricken before the body was. They were for the most part sensitively organized fellows, lovers of the beautiful, and they simply couldn't live. Officially their deaths are ascribed to pneumonia or to something else; but the real cause, while right on the surface, was beyond the doctor's diagnosis.

I didn't sicken; and I didn't die; I wasn't even wounded. What happened was that at Bourg-la-Comtesse a shell came down in the midst of a bunch of us who were stretching our limbs and washing up after a night in a stifling dugout ... and some time during the following twenty-four hours I recovered consciousness, lying on my belly in the darkness, with my face buried in the damp grass of a meadow, like a dead man.

I lay for ten or fifteen minutes trying to reconstruct the happenings that had put me there, and to convince myself that I was unhurt. Except for a beast munching not far away, no living thing seemed to be near me. On the left the ruined walls of Bourg-la-Comtesse were barely visible through the starlight, while to my right a jagged row of tree-tops fringed the sky-line. In the velvety blackness in front of me the stars were dimmed by shells hanging over No Man's Land, Verey lights, darting upward, and radiant bursts of shrapnel. I remembered that our section had halted at an *abri* a little to the west of the village, and dragging myself from the ground forced my chilled limbs to carry me toward the spot where some of my comrades might be left alive.

But whether I mistook the way, or whether they had gone off leaving me for dead, I was unable to explain to Wolf. I only know that I walked and walked, and found no one. The world had been suddenly deserted. Except for an occasional horse or cow, that paused in its grazing to watch me pass, or the scurrying of some small wild thing through a hedge, I seemed the only creature astir. Dead villages, dead châteaux, dead farms, dead gardens, dead forests, dead lorries, dead tanks, dead horses, dead men, and a dead self, or a self that had only partially come back to life, were the features of that lonely tramp through the darkness.

With no other aim than a vague hope of joining up again with my section I plodded on till dawn. Though my watch had run down, and there was no change as yet in the light, I knew when dawn was approaching by a sleepy twitter in a hedge. Another twitter awoke a few yards farther on, and then another and another. Presently the whole countryside was alive, not with song, but with that chirrupy hymn to Light which always precedes the sunrise, and ceases before the sun has risen. Wandering away from the front, by instinct, not on purpose, I was now in a region relatively untouched by calamity, with grapes hard and green in the vineyards and poppies in the ripening wheat-fields.

Between eight and nine I reached a village, where I breakfasted at a wine-shop, explaining myself as an American charged with a mission that was taking me across country. Stray soldiers being common, I had no harder task than to profit by the sympathy accorded to my British-seeming uniform. So I tramped on again, and on, always with a stupefied half-idea of finding my section, but with no real motive in my mind. If I had a real motive it was in a dull, blind, animal instinct to get away from the brutality in which I had been living for the past six months, even though I knew I should be headed off and turned back again.

But I wasn't. In that land of agony I went my way unheeded. I also went my way unheeding. It was the beginning of the more or less pointless pilgrimages I made later in New York. To my anguished nervous system there was a soothing quality in being on the move. So on the move I kept, hardly knowing why, except that it was to get away from what was right behind me.

And yet I had clearly the impression that I was merely enjoying a breathing spell. I didn't mean to run away. I knew I was Billy Harrowby, and that for my very name's sake I must return to my task at the first minute possible. It was only not possible, because as I continued my aimless drifting along the roads I got farther away from my starting-point.

Absolute mental confusion must have come by such gradual transitions that I have no memory of the stages of the change. I do recall that at a certain time and place I came to an understanding with myself that Billy Harrowby had been blown to bits by a shell near Bourg-la-Comtesse, and that I, who wore his uniform and carried his letter of credit in my pocket, was no more than his astral shape stalking through a world from which he had departed. To get rid of this astral shape, to get rid of everything that pertained to the man who had passed through horrors that would turn all future living into nightmare, began to seem to me a necessary task. Only by doing this could Billy Harrowby's ghost be laid, and the phantasms that walked with it dispelled. By the time I reached Tours the hallucination had assumed the form of a consecrated duty, and to it I applied myself as to some holy ceremonial rite.

In narrating this to Wolf some of the old vividness came back to me. I saw myself again inspecting all the environs of Tours—Plessis-lès-Tours, Marmoutiers, Laroche-sur-Loire, and as far away as the junction at St.-Pierre—for suitable spots in which to lay Billy Harrowby down and become my real self. In the end I selected a small stream, the Padrille I think it is called, which flows into the Loire a mile or two beyond Plessis. There is a spot there where the stream flows through a wood, and there is a spot on the stream's bank where wood is denser than it is elsewhere.

Having selected this as the scene of Billy Harrowby's exit, the rest of my plans became easy. For two or three days I busied myself with discreetly purchasing a new outfit. I remember that it was a point of honor with me not to be too spendthrift with Billy Harrowby's cash, seeing that for the man who was to survive, anything, however modest, would be enough. Further than separating myself from the unhappy ambulance-driver who had seen such dreadful things since arriving in France I had no ambitions.

The purchases made, it was a simple matter to carry them to the bank of the Padrille and change completely. A soldier entered on one side of the Bois de Guènes, a civilian came out on the other. Neither soldier nor civilian was of interest to a people rejoicing in the news that the French had captured that morning the whole line of the Dent de la Ponselle.

From the Bois de Guènes I walked to the junction with the main line at St.-Pierre, and there the trail of my memories is lost. I have no recollection of taking the name of Jasper Soames, though I can see easily enough why I should

have done it. When it became necessary to call myself something I seized the first bit of wreckage from the past that my mind could catch hold of. The name was there as a name, even when all its associations had disappeared beneath the waves that had swept over me.

Of the interval between taking the train at St.-Pierre, probably to go southward toward Bordeaux, and my waking on board the *Auvergne* I have as yet only such fragments of memory as one retains of dreams. Even that which stands out is shadowy, uncertain, evanescent. It is without context. No one fragment is substantial enough for me to be sure of it as pertaining to a fact.

Facts began for me anew at the instant when I opened my eyes in the cabin and saw Drinkwater shaving.

"Funny, isn't it?"

Wolf did not make this observation till some minutes after I had ceased. During the interval of silence, as during the half-hour of my narrative, his grin played on me like a searchlight. As I have already said, I didn't resent this because of knowing his smile to be a kind of nervous rictus of the lips which he was no longer able to control; and yet the silly comment nettled me.

"What's funny about it?" I asked, coldly.

"Oh, nothing! Just—just the whole thing."

"If you think the whole thing's funny—"

"Oh no, not in that sense, not comic."

"What is it then?"

"Nothing—nothing! I was only wondering—"

But I didn't find out what Wolf was wondering till later. In the mean while I gave him a brief account of my doings in New York, leading up to the day when Alice Mountney had "discovered" me. When I came to that he rose, eying me all over as he had done at first.

"That's a queer kind of rig—" he began, with his everlasting jocularity.

"It's the kind of rig I've been wearing," I replied, sharply. "Good enough for its purpose. I shall get something else as soon as I've had time to go to the tailor."

"I'd go soon," was his only remark, as he left me to repeat to Vio what he could remember of my tale.

CHAPTER VIII

It was after lunch before I was summoned to the telephone, to hear Wolf's voice at the other end. Vio would see me at three. I was to understand that my being alive had been a shock to her, and therefore all this ceremonial!

At a quarter to three I started to walk across the Common to the old Soames house on Beacon Hill. It occurred to me then that if for the living it is a strange sensation when the dead come back, for the dead it is a stranger sensation still. Not till I set out on this errand had I understood how dead I had been. I had been dead and buried; I had been mourned for and forgotten; Vio had finished her grieving and returned to every-day life. For anything I knew, she might be contemplating remarriage. Alice Mountney had said that when people were dead it was better for them to stay dead; and I began to fear it was.

Beacon Hill, as I drew near it, struck me as an illustration of that changing of the old order of which all the inner springs seemed to be within myself. It was no longer the Beacon Hill of my boyhood. It was not even the Beacon Hill of the year when I went away. To those who had stayed on the spot and watched the transformation taking place little difference might be apparent; but to me, with my newly awakened faculties, it was like coming back in autumn to a garden visited in spring. The historic State House had deployed a pair of huge white wings, to make room for which familiar landmarks round about it had for the most part disappeared. All down the slope toward the level land the Georgian and Early Victorian mansions were turning into shops and clubs. The old Soames house, with occasional panes of purple glass in otherwise normal windows, was flanked on one side by a bachelors' chambers and on the other by an antique-shop. One of the few old houses in Boston still in the hands of people connected with the original owners, it had been purchased by Vio's father from the heirs of his mother's family, while Vio's trustees had in their turn bought out Wolf's share in it. Four-square, red, with a fine white Doric portico over which a luxuriant wistaria trained, it suggested, as I approached it now, old furniture, old books, old pictures, old wines, old friendships, and all the easy, well-ordered life out of which we were called by the pistol-shot of Sarajevo.

My nervousness in crossing the street and ringing the door-bell was augmented by that sense, from which I was never free, of being guilty of a stupidity so glaring as almost to amount to crime. No ex-convict returning from the penitentiary could have had a more hangdog conviction of coming back to where he was no longer wanted than I in wiping my cheap boots on Vio's handsome door-mat. If I found any solace in the moments of waiting for an answer to my ring it was in noticing that the doorway needed paint and that nothing in the approach to the house was quite so spick and span as formerly. I call this a solace only because it helped to bring Vio nearer me by making her less supremely mistress than she used to be of everything best in the world. I noticed the same

thing when the door was opened by a cheery English man-servant of sixty-odd, who was too gaily captain of his soul to be the perfect butler of the old regime.

"Couldn't see you," was his offhand response, when I had asked for Mrs. Harrowby.

"I think she'll see *me*."

"No, myte, and I'll tell you why. She's kind o' expectin' of 'er 'usband like. Excuse me."

The politeness was called forth by his shutting the door in my face, compelling me to speak plainly.

"I'm Mrs. Harrowby's husband."

The absurdities in my situation were dramatized in the expressions that ran successively over the man's face. Amazement having followed on incredulity, apology followed on amazement. As I was still too near to Pelly, Bridget, and the Finn to separate myself from the servants hall, my sympathy was with him.

"That's all right, old chap," I found myself saying, with a hand on the astonished henchman's shoulder. "Just tell Mrs. Harrowby I'm here. She'll find me in the library."

It was purely to convince Boosey, that was his name, of my right to enter that I tossed my hat on the hat-rack peg and walked to the coat-closet with my overcoat. With the same air of authority I marched into the long, dim library, where my legs began to tremble under me and my head to swim.

Perhaps because I had not yet had time to think of this room in particular, I experienced my first sensation of difficulty or unreality in getting back the old conceptions. It was not alone my head that swam, but the room. If you imagine yourself sailing through a fog and drawing an approaching ship out of the bank by sheer mental effort of your own, you will understand what I mean. In ordinary conditions you have only to watch the ship making itself more and more distinct; in my case the ship did nothing. It was as if I had to build it plank by plank and sail by sail in order to see it at all.

I could do this, even if I did it painfully. The room came into being, mistily, tremblingly, while my head ached with the effort. Taking a few steps here, there, gazing about me at haphazard, the remembered objects appeared one by one—the desks, the arm-chairs, the rows of books, the portraits, the fireplace, in which there was a slumbering fire. Over the mantelpiece hung Zuloaga's portrait of Vio, which always raised discussion wherever it was exhibited.

I had reached this point at the end of the room when a low stifled cry came from the corner by the fire.

"Oh, Billy, is this you?"

Vio had been sitting there watching me. Had I been able instantly to reconstruct the room I should have seen her instantly; but all these minutes she

[image]

All these minutes she had been observing me, with that queer, half-choked cry as the result: "Oh, Billy, is this you?"

had been observing me, with that queer, half-choked cry as the result.

I cannot tell you now how long we stared at each other, she in the arm-chair, I on the hearth-rug; but once more the new brain-cells acted sluggishly I knew that this slender, picturesque creature, swathed in soft black satin, with a little white about the open throat line, was Vio, and that Vio was my wife. But I knew it as something remembered, not as an existing fact. I knew it as a ghost might know that another ghost had married him, and that they had once lived intimately side by side.

You must not think from this that there was no emotion. There was tremendous emotion, only it was not the emotion of love after long separation. If it was that there were too many elements in it to allow pent-up passion the immediate right of way. Pent-up passion was stemmed by the realization of what my coming back must mean to the woman before me. For her I had been three years in my grave. As Alice Mountney had put it, she had been in mourning for me—and out again. It was the out again that created this thickened atmosphere between her and me. What had been all over, finished and done with she had to begin again.

And I had not come back to her as I had gone away. I had come back—entirely to the outward eye and somewhat in my heart—not as the smart young fellow of Lydia Blair's recollection, but as a working-man. The metamorphosis rendered me in some ways more akin to Boosey the butler than to my former self. I had acquired an art that made it possible for me to go into the servants' sitting-room and be at home in the company I should find there. The people in the front of the house had to some extent become to me as the Olympian gods at Creed & Creed's, exalted beings with whom I had little to do outside the necessities of work and pay. This change in me was more than superficial; and whatever it was Vio saw it. For her the meeting was harder than for me; and for me it was like a backward revolution of the years.

But after she had clung to me and cried a little, the tensivity was broken. As I analyze now, I see the impulse that urged us into each other's arms as one of memory. For her, I was the man who had been, as she was the woman who had been, for me. She, however, had the help of pity, while I was humble and overawed.

It was one of those moments when so many things begin again that it is hard to seize on any. The simplest being the easiest, she said, after having detached herself from me and got back some measure of her self-control:

"What about your things? Have you brought them?"

"The little I have is at the hotel."

Both question and answer came out absently while we looked at each other with a new kind of inspection. The first had been of the self within; now it was of the outer self. I should have shrunk from the way in which her eyes traveled over me had not my whole mind gone into the examination I was making.

Yes; she had changed, though I cannot say that it was in the way of looking older. Rather she had grown to resemble Zuloaga's portrait of her, which we had always considered too theatrical. Zuloaga had emphasized all her most startling traits—her slenderness, sinuosity, and fantastic grace—her immense black eyes, of which he alone of all the men who had painted her had caught the fire that had been compared to that of the black opal—the long, narrow face that was like Wolf's, except for being mysterious and baffling—the mouth, haunted by memories that might have survived from another incarnation, since there had been nothing in her present life to correspond to them. You could speak of her as being beautiful only in the sense of being strange, with an appeal less to the eye than to the imagination. More akin to fire than to flesh, she was closer to spirit than to fire. It might have been a perverse, tortured spirit, but it was far from the merely animal. Discriminating people called it her salvation to have married a humdrum chap like me, since, with a man of more temperament, she would have clashed too outrageously. High-handed and intense, she needed some one seemingly to yield to her caprices, correcting them under the guise of giving in.

Like others of tempestuous nature, when she was gentle her gentleness was heavenly. She was gentle in that way now.

"Sit down, Billy, and let me look at you. Why didn't you bring your things?"

"I didn't know that you wanted me to do that, or that—that we were to—to begin again."

"Of course we shall begin again. What made you think we shouldn't?"

"I didn't think so. I simply didn't know."

"Did Alice Mountney, or Wolf, tell you anything?"

There was a curious significance in the tone, but I let it pass.

"Only that you'd—you'd given me up."

"What else could I do?"

We were sitting half turned toward each other on one of the library sofas, and I seized both her hands.

"But now that I'm back, Vio, are you—are you—glad?"

Though she allowed her hands to remain in mine there was a flash of the

black-opal fire.

"It's not so simple as being glad, Billy. The word isn't relevant."

"Relevant to what?"

"I mean that you can't sum up such a situation as this by being either glad or sorry. We've other things to consider."

"But surely that comes first.

"Neither first nor second. The only question we've got to ask for the minute is what we're to do."

"But I thought that was settled—that you wanted me to come back."

"It's settled in the way that getting up in the morning is settled; but that doesn't tell you the duties of the day."

"I suppose one can only meet the duties of the day by going on and seeing what they are."

"Exactly; and isn't that our first consideration—the going on? It doesn't matter whether we're glad or sorry, since we mean to go on, or try to go on—anyhow."

Releasing her hands I dropped back into my own corner of the sofa, scanning the refined features more at my ease, for the reason that her face was slightly averted and her eyes turned to the floor.

"I don't want you to go on, Vio, if—"

"I've thought everything over," she declared in her imperious way, "and made up my mind that it was the only thing for me to do."

"Then you had thought that—that perhaps you—you couldn't."

She nodded slowly, without looking up.

"You'd made other—plans."

"It wasn't that so much; it was—it was thinking of you."

"Thinking of me—from what point of view?"

"From the point of view of—of what you've done." She glanced at me now, quickly, furtively, as if trying to spare me the pain of scrutiny. "Oh, Billy, I'm so sorry for—for my share in it."

"And what do you take your share to be?"

"The share of responsibility. When I urged you to go—"

"As it happened, I should have gone anyhow. When this country had entered the war I should have been under the same obligation as any other man."

"That would have been different. When our men were taken there was discrimination. Each was selected for what he was best fitted to do. A great deal of pains was given to that, and I can't tell you how I suffered when I saw that if I'd only left you alone you could have contributed the thing you knew most about. That's why I feel so strongly that, now you've come back—even in this sort of disguise—"

"I'm not in disguise, Vio. The way you see me—"

The motion of her long, slender hand was partly of appeal and partly of dismissal.

"I don't want to hear about that, Billy. If we're to begin again there are things we mustn't talk about. Since you've done this extraordinary thing, and I may be said to have driven you into it, I want to stand by you. Isn't that enough?"

There was so much in this little speech that I couldn't do it justice at once. All I found myself able to say was:

"Tell me, Vio: Is the extraordinary thing my staying away—or my coming back?"

Again there was that pleading, commanding gesture.

"Oh, Billy, don't. I'm willing to try to pick up the past; but it must be the past, not what's happened in the mean time." She rose with that supple grace which suggested the Zuloaga pose. "Go back to the hotel and get your things. I—I can't bear to see you looking as you are. When you're more like yourself—"

I tried to smile, but I know the effort was no more than a twisted quivering.

"You'll have to see me looking as I am for a few days yet, Vio. My kit doesn't offer me much variety."

"Oh, well—!"

She accepted this as part of the inevitable strangeness in which she had become enveloped, making silent, desperate concessions. Because of this mood I was tempted to ask for five minutes' grace in order to look over the old house.

"You'll find things rather run down," she said, indifferently. "I've no good servants any more. They said that when the war was over it would be easier to get them; but it's a month now since the armistice was signed, and it's just as bad as ever."

"From that point of view, it will probably be worse," I remarked, when about to pass from the library into the hall. "The world isn't going back to what it was before the war. You can't stop an avalanche once it has begun to slide."

She watched me from where she stood before the fire, reproducing almost exactly the attitude of the fascinating woman overhead.

"Does that mean that you've come back a revolutionist, Billy? as well as everything else?"

"N-no; I haven't come back anything in particular. I'm just like you and all the rest of the world, a snowflake in the avalanche. I suppose I shall go tumbling with the mass."

A sense of something outlived came to me as I roamed through the house which Vio allowed me to visit by myself. After two years spent in a squint-eyed room of which the only decoration was three painted fungi this mellow beauty stirred me to a vague irritation. It was not a real dwelling for real people in

the real world as the real world had become. It was too rich and soft and long established in its place. Three or four generations of Soameses and Torrances had stored its rooms with tapestries, portraits, old porcelains, and mahoganies; and for America that is much.

Over the landing where the stairway turned hung the famous Copley of Jasper Soames. For a good two minutes he and I faced each other in unspeakable communion. There was nothing between us but this stairway acquaintance, formed during the three years Vio and I had lived together; and yet somehow his being had stamped itself into mine.

On the floors above there was the same well-chosen abundance of everything, sufficiently toned down by use and time to merit the word shabby. That was the note that struck me first, and surprised me. Vio had never been what is commonly known as a good housekeeper; but she had commanded and been obeyed. What the house betrayed now was a diminution of the power of command. Doubtless money didn't go as far as it used to; and there was a new spirit in the world as to taking orders. I thought again of the garden revisited in autumn. The old house might be said to have fulfilled its long mission, and to be ready to pass away with the age of which it was a type.

To go into my own room and find it empty and swept of every trace of my habitation would have been a stranger experience than it was if every experience that day had not been strange. I looked into the wardrobes; I pulled open the drawers. There was not a garment, not a scrap of paper to indicate that I had ever been alive. Not till I saw this did I realize the completeness with which Vio had buried me.

And not till I saw this did I realize that Vio herself was up against the first big struggle of her life. She had never hitherto faced what might be called a moral situation. Her history had been that of any other well-off girl in a city like Boston, where money and position entitled her to whatever was best in the small realm. American civilization, like that of the Italy of the Middle Ages, being civic and not national, the boundaries of Boston, with its suburbs and seaside resorts, had formed the limits of Vio's horizon. True, she had spent a good deal of time in Europe—but always as a Bostonian. She had made periodical visits to Newport, Bar Harbor, Palm Beach, and White Sulphur Springs—but always as a Bostonian. Once she had traveled as far on the American continent as California—but still as a Bostonian.

Boston sufficed for Vio, seeing that it was big enough to give her variety, and swell enough to permit her to shine with little competition. Competition irked her, for the reason that she despised taking trouble. With the exception of a toilet exact to the last detail of refinement, her life was always at loose ends. She rarely answered letters; she rarely returned calls; she never kept accounts; if

she began a book she didn't finish it. Adoring little Bobby during the months of his brief life, she found the necessities of motherhood unbearable. That she was as a rule picturesquely unhappy was due to the fact of having nothing on which to whet her spiritual mettle. Like a motor working while the motor-car stands still, she churned herself into action that got nowhere as a result.

But now for the first time in her life she was face to face with a great, big personal problem. How big and great the problem was I didn't at the time understand. All I could see was that she was meeting her baptism of fire, and that I was the means of the ministration.

Pushing open the door between her room and mine I received again the impression of almost awesome privilege I had got on our return from our honeymoon. I had never been at my ease in this room; it was Vio's sanctuary, her fastness. It was a Soames and Torrance sanctuary and fastness, and to it I had only been admitted, not given its freedom as a right. Possibly the feeling that always came to me on crossing its threshold, that I stepped out of my own domain, betokened the missing strand in the tie that had bound Vio and me together.

It had been a trial to me that she should be so much better off than I. Not only did it leave the less for me to do for her, but it created in her a spirit of detachment against which I chafed in vain. Out of the common fund of our marriage she made large reserves of herself, as she might have made reserves—which she did not—of her income. Our beings were allied, but they were not fused. For fusion she had too much that she prized to give away. In such quantity as I could give she made return to me; but having so much more than I to give, her reserves became conspicuous. Of what she withheld this room was the symbol. It was never my room. My comings and goings there had been made with a kind of reverence, as if the place were a shrine.

The only abiding note of my personality had been my photograph at the head of Vio's bed. There was a photograph there now, but I saw that the frame was different. Mine had been in a silver frame; this was in red-brown leather. If it was still mine...

But it was not mine. It was that of a colonel in an American uniform, wearing British and French decorations. Big, portly, handsome, bluff, with an empty left sleeve, he revealed himself as a hero. He was a hero, while I ... It occurred to me that death was not the only means of giving Vio her freedom, and that I ought to tell her so.

To do that I was making my way down-stairs with the words framing themselves on my lips.

"Vio," I meant to say, "if you don't want me back, if anything has happened to make it best for me to go away again forever, you've only to say the word and I'll do it."

But while I was still descending she swept into the hall. Her movements were always rapid, with a careless, commanding ease. She was once more the Zuloaga woman all on fire within.

"How long do you think it will be, Billy, before your tailor can make you look as you ought to?"

I paused where I was, some three steps above her. "It may hardly be worth while to consider that, Vio—"

"Oh, but it is," she interrupted. "If we're going to put this thing through we must do it with some dash. That's essential."

"Why—why the dash?"

"Because there's no other way of doing it. Don't you see? If you just come in by the back door—" She left this sentiment to continue in her own way. "Alice Mountney is going to give a big dinner and invite all your old friends."

My heart sank.

"Is that necessary?"

"Of course it's necessary. It isn't a matter of preference. As far as that goes it will be as hard for me as for you. If I took my own way I should never—" Once more she left me to divine her thought while she added, firmly: "It has simply got to be done. We must make people think—"

"What?" I challenged, when she paused, not apparently from lack of words but from fear of using them. A suspicion impelled me to say in addition, "How much did Wolf repeat to you of the story I told him?"

Her answer was made with the storm in the eyes that was always my warning of danger.

"As much as I'd let him. I didn't want to hear any more. I never shall. That part of it is closed. I've told you already that I accept the responsibility, and I do. You mayn't think it, but I have a conscience of a kind; and I know that if it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have done this thing; and so— But there we are again. There we shall always be if we allow ourselves to discuss it. You're my husband, Billy; I'm your wife. We can't get away from that, whatever has happened—"

"We could get away from it, if you preferred."

"What I prefer," she declared, with her old-time hauteur, "is what I'm asking you to do. If I didn't prefer it I shouldn't ask for it. Go back to the hotel and get your things. Go to the tailor and get more. Your room is waiting for you. It will be the next room to mine, just as before with only the door—"

"The closed door, Vio?"

"Between us," she finished, ignoring my question. "If other things arrange themselves we can—we can reopen it—in time."

So we left it, since it was useless to go on. That she should consider my mental lapse so terrible a disgrace was a surprise to me; but as I so considered it

myself I could not blame another for taking the same point of view. After all, a man should show a man's nerve. Thousands, millions of men, had shown it to the limit and beyond. I hadn't; that was all that could be said about it. How could Vio, how could any one else, regard me as other than abnormal?

As she was making so brave an attempt to put all this behind her, it became my duty to help her. This I could do most easily by deflecting the conversation to the large family connection, as to which I was without news. She gave me this news as we stood at the foot of the stairway, or while I got ready to go out again.

It was a relief to learn that none of my brothers or sisters was in Boston. George, who was older than myself, was on General Pershing's staff, and had just been heard of from Luxembourg. Dan, my junior, had the rank of lieutenant-commander and was somewhere in European waters. Tom Cantley, who had married my sister Minna, was working on the War Trade Board in Washington, and he and Minna had a house there. Their eldest boy, Harrowby, had been killed at Château-Thierry, but as far as any one ever saw Minna hadn't shed a tear. Ernestine, my unmarried sister, being one of the founders of the Flag Raising League, had patriotic duties which took her all over the United States. Her last letter had been from Oklahoma or Spokane, Vio was not sure which, but it was "one of those places out there." At any rate, they were all a credit to a name the traditions of which I alone hadn't had the spirit to live up to. Vio didn't say this, of course; but it was the inference.

It was the inference, too, with regard to a host of cousins of the first, second, and third degrees, by blood and by marriage, who would have made a small army in themselves. Some were Vio's kin, and some were mine; some by the chances of Boston intermarriage were related to us both. Not one of them but had been modestly heroic, the women not less than the men. Some had given their lives, some their limbs or eyesight; all, their time and money. Even Wolf and Vio had subscribed to funds till reduced to what they considered indigence. It was a distinguished clan; and I its one pitiable member.

CHAPTER IX

Going back to the hotel, I had my first pang of regret for having waked up on that midnight at Bourg-la-Comtesse. It was the same reflection; the dead were so much wiser in staying dead. I guessed that during the weeks when I was missing

Vio had mourned for me with a grief into which a new element had come when my clothes were found on the bank of the Padrille. That was a mistake, that my clothes should be found there. A missing man should be traced to a prison or a hospital, or remain gloriously missing. He should have no interval of safety in which to go in bathing, a hundred miles from the spot on which he had last been seen alive, not even to be drowned. There was a mystery in that which might easily become a flaw in a soldier's record, and which to a woman as proud as Vio would be equivalent to dishonor. That there should be a question of the kind with regard to her own husband...

So I began to do justice to the courage she displayed. Rising to the occasion in a way I could only call magnificent, she sank herself, her opinions, and her plans—I called them plans to avoid a more definite word—to meet the imperative in the situation. What lay in the back of her mind I didn't dare inquire, notwithstanding the signs that betrayed her.

And yet the more splendid her gesture the deeper my humility at having to call it forth. It made me like a man, once strong and active, reduced to living on the doles of the compassionate. I could never be independent again; I could never again have the mental freedom of one as to whom there is nothing unexplained. By a process of bluff I might carry the thing off; but to that I felt an unspeakable aversion. It was not that I was unwilling to second Vio; it was incapacity. Having been guilty of the indiscretion of waking at Bourg-la-Comtesse, I began to regret the long, dull, peaceful routine of Creed & Creed's.

I do not assert that these things were as clear in my mind on that day as they are on this; but they were there confusedly. Every impression I received that afternoon was either confused and painful or strikingly vivid, as to one waking from an anesthetic.

Of those more vivid one in particular stands out in my recollection.

Returning from the hotel with my suit-case and bag—the same with which I had landed from the *Auvergne*—I heard a man's voice in the drawing-room upstairs. The deep, soft tones told me it was not Wolf's.

"Mrs. 'Arrowby said as you was to go right up, sir," Boosey informed me, relieving me of my bags. "I 'ear as you was a prisoner in Germany, sir," he continued, while making his way to the coat-closet with my coat. "That's why I didn't know as it 'd be you when you come this afternoon. Might I ask, sir, if they throwed beer in your face, or anything like that?"

With one foot on the stairs I looked after the waddling figure retreating down the hall.

"Who told you that I was a prisoner?"

"Mr. Wolf's man, sir; but"—I am sure there was a veiled taunt in what followed—"but if you wasn't, sir, or if it's a secret—"

I lost the rest as he became engulfed in the closet, but I had heard enough. Wolf had taken his own way to protect the honor of the family.

It was not easy to enter the drawing-room and face one of Vio's friends; but it was the sort of thing to which I must learn to steel myself. Moreover, it might be one of my own friends come to welcome me back. Vio had informed me that Wolf had taken steps to keep any mention of my "discovery" and return out of the papers; but we were too well known in Boston not to have the word passed privately. To any friend's welcome there would be unspoken reserves; but that I must take for granted and become accustomed to.

But, as it happened, it was not a friend of mine; it was the colonel of the photograph, who had apparently dropped in for a cup of tea—and something more. What that something more might be I could only surmise from Vio's way of saying, "Here's Mr. Harrowby now." They had seemingly discussed me, it had seemingly been necessary for them to discuss me, and taken a definite attitude toward me. That my wife should do this with a man who was a stranger to me, that the circumstances should be such that it was a duty for them to do it, was the extraordinary cup of gall given me to drain. I drained it while Vio went on, with that ease which no one knew better than I to be sustained on nerve:

"Billy, I want you to know Colonel Stroud. He's just got back from France, and has been explaining to me how the Allies are to occupy the Rhineland. Our men are already reaching Mayence and Coblenz, and he has heard, too, that the President arrived this morning at Brest. I suppose it will be in the evening papers."

So we were launched in talk that couldn't hurt any one; and if my feelings were wounded it was only by drawing conclusions. They were the easier to draw from the fact, as I guessed, that Vio directed the talk in such a way that I could read between the lines.

What I gleaned from the give and take of banalities that dealt on the surface with the current gossip of the armistice was that Vio and her colonel had been intimate before he went to France, and now that he was back with medals and only a right arm, the friendship had taken the turn to which such friendships are liable. That he was one of the Strouds of the famous Stroud Valley in northern New York put him into the class with which people like ourselves made social alliances. When Vio, in the early days of her supposed widowhood, had met him at Palm Beach there was nothing to prevent their being sympathetic to each other. How far that sympathy had gone I could only conjecture; but it was easy to see it had gone pretty far.

As to what did not come so directly to the surface, vague recollections began to form themselves in my mind. I seemed to remember the Stroud Valley Strouds as a family with a record. Of the type which in America most nearly resembles the English or Irish country gentleman, they made the marrying of

heiresses and the spending of the money thus acquired almost a profession. Horsy, convivial, and good-looking, they carried themselves with the cheery liveliness that acknowledges no account to be given to any one; and when they got into the divorce court, as they did somewhat often, women as well as men, they came out of it with aplomb. I seemed to recall a scandal that a few years before had diverted all the clubs....

But I couldn't be sure that this was the man, or of anything beyond the fact that the central figure of that romance had been a Stroud Valley Stroud. That this particular instance of the race had had a history was stamped all over him; but it was the kind of history which to a man of the world imparts fascination. It was easy to see that he had "done things" in many lines of life. A little the *beau mâle* of the French lady novelist, and a little the Irish sporting squire, he was possibly too conscious of his looks and his power of killing ladies. A bronzed floridness, due partly to the open air and partly to good living, was thrown into striking relief by the silver hair and mustache not incompatible with relative youth. He couldn't have been much over forty.

His reception to me was as perfect as if regulated by a protocol and rehearsed to the last shade. There was nothing in it I could complain of—and yet there was everything. A gentleman ignoring a disgraceful situation of which every one is conscious would have carried himself with just this air of bland and courteous contempt.

Perhaps it was to react against this and to assert myself a little that I ventured once to cross swords with him. We had exhausted the movements of troops on the Rhine, the possible reception of the President in Pans, and he had given the Peace Conference six months in which to prepare the treaty for signature.

"Then we shall see," he laughed, in his rich, velvety bass.

He brought out the statement so emphatically that I was moved to ask:

"What shall we see?"

"What Mrs. Harrowby and I have been talking about, the end of all this rot as to the war having created a new world."

"That's putting the cart before the horse, isn't it?" I asked, maliciously. "The war didn't create the new world; the new world created the war."

Vio's exquisite eyebrows went up a shade.

"Does that mean anything?"

"Only that the volcano creates the explosion; not the explosion the volcano. Given all the repressions and suppressions and injustices, the eruption had to come."

"The eruption had to come," the colonel declared, hotly, "because the Germans planned it."

"Oh, that was only a detail."

"You might call the whole war only a detail—"

"I do."

"I don't get you," he said, stiffly, leaning forward to place an empty cup on the table in front of Vio.

In her I read something surprised that didn't, however, disapprove of me. Thus encouraged, I went on. If I hadn't thought these things out in the monotonous, unoccupied hours at Creed & Creed's, my stunned brain would not have been master of them now.

"I only meant that the war was but one of the forces, one of the innumerable forces, which the new world in the making—it isn't made yet by any means—has put into operation. If a house collapses it shatters all the windows; but you can't say that the shattering of the windows made the house collapse."

I could see by his stare he was literally minded.

"But what—what house is collapsing?"

"The house all round us, the house of this particular form of civilization. It's sliding down. It's been sliding down for years. You might say that it began to slide down as soon as it was put up, because it was wrongly constructed. A building full of flaws begins to settle before they get the roof on, and though it may stand for years the ultimate crash is only a question of time. War came as soon as our building began to split; the building didn't begin to split because the war came. It was splitting anyhow."

"That seems to me—" he sought for a sufficiently condemnatory word—"that seems to me sheer socialism."

"Oh, I don't think it is. The Socialists wouldn't say so. It isn't anything in particular. It's just—just fact."

"Only?" Vio smiled, with her delicate, penetrating sarcasm.

"Only," I echoed. "But as we belong to a world that doesn't like fact it isn't of much importance."

Bewilderment brought a pained expression to the handsome, rather stupid, countenance.

"What the—what on earth do you mean by that?"

"Only that we've a genius for dodging issues and shutting our eyes to what's straight before us."

"Do you mean the ruin straight before us?"

"Not necessarily, Vio. The collapse of this particular form of civilization wouldn't mean ruin, because we'd get a better form. I suppose it's coming into existence now."

"I don't know about that," the colonel objected. "As far as I see, things are pretty much the same as they've always been, and they're getting more so."

"I suppose none of us sees more than we have our eyes open to. Things of

the greatest importance to us happen, and we don't know that they're going on."

"I hope that that kind of song and dance isn't going on—the breakdown of our civilization. It wasn't for that we gave 'em hell at Château-Thierry."

"Oh, none of us knows what anything is for, except in the vaguest way. All we can do is to plod ahead and follow the thread of flame."

"Follow the thread of what?"

I was sufficiently master of myself to indulge in a mild laugh.

"That's just an expression that's been in my mind during the time when I've been—been floundering about. Name I invented for—for a principle."

In this, however, he was not interested.

"Yes, but your collapsing house—"

"It may not come down altogether. I'm neither a prophet nor a prophet's son. All I can see is what I suppose everybody sees, that our civilization has been rotten. It couldn't hold together. It hadn't the cohesive strength. Perhaps I was wrong in saying that it was falling down; it's more as if we were pulling it down, to build up something better. It's our blind instinct toward perfection—"

But refusing to listen to any more, he got up to go. A brave man in the presence of enemies of flesh and blood, intellectual foes frightened him. At the first sound of their shells he rushed for his mental dugout which he burrowed in the ground of denial. "I don't believe that" and "All tommyrot" seemed to him shelters from any kind of danger.

But the main point to me was that I had in a measure not only held my own but got on to superior ground. I had been able to talk; in doing so I had got him at a slight disadvantage. The bit of self-respect inspired by this achievement enabled me to play the host and accompany him to the door with the kind of informal formality to which I had been so long unaccustomed.

And in performing this small duty I made a discovery. As he preceded me down-stairs I remembered seeing the back of his head once before. It was the kind of head not easily forgotten. Moreover, I had seen it in circumstances that had caused me to note it in particular. Where and when and how were details that did not at once return to me; but I knew that the association was sinister.

As I returned from my mission in showing him to the door I heard Vio speaking.

"Come in here, Billy. There's something I want to say."

She was still behind the tea-table, pensive rather than subdued, resolute rather than unhappy.

"I liked your talking like that," she began at once, without looking up at me. "It's—it's the way we shall have to play the game."

A box of cigarettes stood on the tea-table. I took one and struck a match, the usual stage-trick for gaining a little time.

"What game do you mean?" I asked, when I had carefully blown out the match and deposited it in an ash-tray.

"What game can I mean but—but that of your coming back?"

"Oh, is that a game?"

"Only in the sense of giving us something to play. We can't just—just live it."

"Why can't we?"

With a quick movement she was on her feet, flinging out her hands.

"For all the reasons that I should think you'd see." She came and stood on the hearth-rug, confronting me. "Billy, I wonder if you have the faintest idea of what I'm doing for your sake?"

"I've more than the faintest idea, Vio. Some day, when we're able to talk more easily than we are as yet, I shall tell you how grateful I am. Just now I'm—I'm rather dazed. I have to get my bearings—"

She, too, had taken a cigarette, lighting it nervously, carelessly, puffing rapidly at the thing and moving about the room.

"And there's another thing," she began, taking no notice of what I was trying to say; "I don't mind your talking as you did just now, so long as it's—as it's through your hat; but if it isn't—"

"I can't say that it is."

"That's just what I was afraid of. In the places where you've been—I don't want to know anything about them," she interjected, with a passionate gesture of the hand that held the cigarette, "but in such places men do pick up revolutionary ideas, just as they do in prisons!"

"I don't know that it's a question of getting revolutionary ideas, Vio, so much as it's one of living in a revolutionary world."

"And that's what I want to warn you against. It won't go down, Billy, not from you."

"Why not from me, in particular?"

"Oh, why do you make me explain things? Isn't it perfectly clear? If you're coming back among your old friends you'll have to be, after what's happened, more—how shall I put it?—more conservative, more like everybody else—than any one. *You* can't afford to have wild ideas, because people will only say that you're trying to drag us along the way you went yourself."

I renounced this discussion to ask the question that was chiefly on my mind.

"Vio, who's that man that just went out?"

She threw me a look from the other side of the room.

"You heard. He's—where can you catch on? He's Emmy Fairborough's brother."

"Wasn't there—wasn't there a divorce?"

"Emmy's? Yes; Lord Fairborough and she are divorced, but what difference does that make?"

"I wasn't thinking of Lady Fairborough. I forgot she had been a Stroud. I meant—I meant him."

"Oh, he? Yes, I think he was."

"Divorced?"

"Yes, divorced. What of it?"

"To whom had he been married?"

"How should I know? It was to—to some low creature, an actress or something, the sort of thing men do when they're young and—and—"

"And wild?"

"Wild, if you like. Why are you asking?"

But I was not sure of being ready to tell her, so many things had to be formulated first. To gain more time I lighted another cigarette, and she spoke while I was doing it. Holding her own cigarette delicately, as if examining its spark, she said, with a staccato intonation that emphasized each word:

"Billy, you remember what I said earlier this afternoon? I can go back to our past and try to pick it up. I can't go back to anything that comes after that past and—and before to-day. Do you understand? It's more than three years since they told me your section was blown to pieces at Bourg-la-Comtesse. Most of your comrades were found—and buried. You were missing; but missing with very little hope. As the weeks went by that little hope dwindled till there was none. Then came the news that—that all that time you had been—alive."

"And I suppose that Wolf told you..."

"He told me a story, or as much of it as I could listen to. But that's not what I meant to speak about now. I want to say that—that I bury all that, deep, deep; only that I can't do it unless you consent to bury—"

"Everything there's been on your side. Is that it, Vio?"

"I shall ask no questions."

"Not even if I'm ready to answer them?"

"Not even if you're ready to answer them; but I shall expect you not to ask questions of me."

"So that between us there will be a gulf of silence."

She inclined her head without speaking.

"But why, Vio? Why?"

She swept up to me, throwing away her cigarette, and laying both her hands on my shoulders.

"Because, old boy, I'm your wife, and I'm trying to help you. I'm trying to help you because—because—"

Her nearness, the scent of her person, the black-opal mystery and fire were

like hypnotic enchantment.

"Because you used to—to care for me a little, Vio? Is it possible that—that I can think that?"

She nodded.

"That's part of it, of course. I don't forget it. But what I remember more is what I've told you already, that, whatever you did, I sent you to do it. Now, if there's expiation to be made, I come in for that as well as you."

"So that we make it together?"

"So that we make it together."

Having already been bold I grew bolder. Lifting my hands to my shoulders I laid them on hers.

"And will you—will you let me kiss you on that, Vio?"

"Once," she consented; "but—but don't—don't touch me."

PART III

CHAPTER I

So we began what Vio called the expiation, and what to me was no more than the attempt to persuade our friends that they didn't know what they knew. This, according to Vio's calculations, could be best achieved by never for an instant showing the white feather of an uncomfortable conscience. Our assurance was to be something like the Stroud aplomb on emerging from the courts of bankruptcy or divorce. To be unaware of anything odd in one's conduct helped others to be unaware of it, too. A high spirit, a high head, a high hand carried one through difficult situations regardless of the strife of tongues.

I didn't think it necessary to remind Vio that the strife of tongues could go on even if we didn't hear it. Nothing else was possible when Wolf's fatuity blew the trumpet and beat the drum if the clamor showed signs of dying down. It wasn't that he told the truth, but that he told lies so easy of detection. Alice Mountney did tell the truth as far as she knew it; but where she didn't know it she supplied the deficiency by invention. That those so near us should be in conflict naturally called for comment, especially when Vio refused to let me speak.

For the first few weeks I was too busily occupied to think of what any one was saying, seeing that the details I had to arrange were so unusual. Of the steps taken to become a living citizen again, and get back my property from my heirs, I give no account further than to say that they absorbed my attention. My standing in the community I was thus unable to compute till we were into the new year.

By this time I had taken part in a number of family events on which I shall touch briefly. At Christmas we had gone to Washington to spend the festival with Minna and Tom Cantley. There we had met Ernestine, in one of the intervals of her flag-raising, and on the way back to Boston my brother Dan's ship had unexpectedly arrived in New York. A series of domestic gatherings had therefore taken place, at all of which Vio had worked heroically. As she had generally hitherto ignored my family's existence this graciousness was not without its effect. Where she did so much for my rehabilitation, those close to me in blood could hardly do less than follow her example.

They followed it almost to the letter. That is to say, none of them asked me any questions, presumably wishing to spare both themselves and me embarrassment. Once or twice, when I attempted to speak of my experiences, the readiest plunged in with some topic that would lead us away from dangerous ground. If I yielded to this it was because speaking of myself at all was the deliberate exposure of nerves still raw and quivering. I could do it, but I couldn't do it willingly.

Between Minna and myself there had never been much sympathy, largely because I was of the dreamy temperament and she of the sharp and practical. That I should make beauty a career in life, and take advantage of the fact that our father had left me a modest sufficiency to give my services to a museum of fine arts, shocked her to the heart. A man should do a man's work, she said, not that of an old Miss Nancy. When I pointed out that many of the manufacturers in New England, whose work had to do with textiles, came to me for advice, she replied that she didn't believe it. Her attitude now was that I had done no worse than she had always foretold and any one might have expected.

Ernestine, to do her justice, was as tolerant of me as she was of any one who wasn't a flag. The Flag having become her idol and she its high-priestess, she could talk of nothing else. The nation had apparently gone to war in order that the cult of the Flag should be the more firmly established; and all other matters passed outside the circle of her consideration. She knew I had been dead and had somehow become alive again; but as the detail didn't call for the raising of a flag she couldn't give her mind to it. As she could give her mind in no greater measure to Minna's canteen-work or Vio's clothes, I profited by the generous nature of her exclusions.

For Dan, when I met him, I hardly existed, but that might have been so in any case, as we had never been really intimate. Recently he had been working

with English naval officers and had taken on their manners and form of speech.

"Hello, old dear. Top-hole to see you looking so fit. I say, where can I find a barber? Got a mane on me like a lion."

That was our greeting, and the extent to which our confidences went. He sailed for Hampton Roads without a word as to my adventures.

This he did, I am sure, in a spirit of kindness. They were all moved by the spirit of kindness, and the axiom of the less said the better. I confess that I was mystified by this forbearance, and a little hurt. Though I had been a fool, I had not been a traitor; yet every one treated me as one. I should never have spoken of my two years of aberration of my own accord; yet when all avoided the subject, as if it opened the cupboard of the family dishonor, I resented the implication.

It was Tom Cantley with whom I was most at ease, perhaps because he was not a blood relation. A big, genial, boresome fellow, he found me useful as a listener. His rambling accounts of the doings and shortcomings of the War Trade Board, and what he would have accomplished there if given a free hand, I pretended to follow, because it left me free to pursue my own thoughts. As he never asked for comments on my part, being content when he could dribble out his own, the plan worked well.

And yet it was Tom who awakened me to the true meaning of my situation. That was on the day we left Washington, in the station, as Vio and I were about to take our train. Vio was ahead with Minna, when Tom suddenly clutched me by the arm.

"Say, old sport; what about clubs? Boston clubs I mean. I suppose you're a member of the Shawmut and the Beacon Hill just as before you went away. No action has ever been taken in the matter as far as I've heard. But I wouldn't press the point, if I were you, not for a while yet. Later ... when everything blows over ... we can ... we can see."

I nodded speechlessly. It was the most significant thing that had been said to me yet.

"Yes," I assented, weakly. "When everything blows over we can see."

What I saw at the minute was that if I attempted to resume my membership in either of my clubs there would be opposition. My case was as grave as that; though why it should be I hadn't an adequate idea. Annoyed hitherto, I became deeply troubled and perplexed.

Nevertheless, when we arrived in Boston again it was to experience nothing but the same widespread kindness. True, it was largely from relatives or from friends of Vio's as admired her pluck. The tragedy of her life being plain, those who appreciated it were eager to stand by her; and to stand by her meant courtesy to me. I could be invited to a dinner to which I went under my wife's banner; but I couldn't be admitted to a club where I should stand on my merit as a man. The

distinction was galling.

Equally so I found my position with regard to Colonel Stroud. He made himself our social protector, filling in what might be considered unoccupied ground and defending anything open to attack. He did this even in our house. Without usurping my place as host, he fulfilled those duties which a companion performs for an invalid lady, passing the cigars and cigarettes after dinner, and seeing that our guests had their favorite liqueurs. Though our friends came nominally to lunch or dine with Vio and me, it seemed in effect to be with Vio and him. Every one knew, apparently, that he and she had been on the eve of a romantic act, which my coming back had frustrated. Something was due them, therefore, in the way of compensation; and considering what I had done they had the public sympathy.

That my mind was chiefly on this situation, however, I cannot truthfully say. I thought of it more than incidentally, and yet not so much as to make it a sole preoccupation. More engrossing than anything personal to myself was the plight of the world and the future immediately before us. With the gathering of the Conference round the table of the Quai d'Orsay, the new world, of which one of the phases had been war, was entering on still another phase even more momentous. To the mere onlooker, supposing oneself to be an onlooker and no more, it would be an exhibition of the grandeur and impotence of man on a scale of spectacular magnificence. The January of the armistice will be remembered as a month of dramatic occurrences illustrating the yearnings, passions, and fatalities of the human race with an almost theatrical vividness. In its very first days the old era sighed itself out in the death of Theodore Roosevelt, while on the soil over which the Cæsars had ridden in their Triumphs, a New World citizen and President was hailed as the herald of an epoch altogether new. Almost at the same moment, blood was flowing in the streets of Berlin, working up about the middle of the month to the assassination of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembourg. The Americans in Paris, having secured on one day the right of way for their League of Nations, the antiphon of opposition burst forth from Washington on the next.

Events like these, and they were many, were as geysers springing from a caldron in which the passions and ideals of mankind were seething incoherently. The geysers naturally caught the eye, but if there had been no boiling sea they would not have spouted up. More than the geysers I watched the boiling sea, and that I saw all around me.

That others didn't see it, or saw it as less ebullient, made no difference to me, for the reason that I had been in its depths. Vio didn't see it; Wolf didn't see it; Stroud didn't see it. Of my family, only Tom Cantley had vague apprehensions of what he called "labor unrest"; but this he regarded as no more than a whirlpool

in an ocean relatively smooth. In Boston generally, as probably throughout the Union, the issue was definite and concrete, expressing itself in the question as to whether America would back a league of nations or would not. That was the burning topic of debate; but to me it seemed like concentrating on the relative merits of a raft or a lifeboat when the ship is drifting on the rocks. That our whole system of labor, pleasure, religion, finance, and government was in process of transformation I had many reasons for believing; but I couldn't speak of that without being scouted as a Bolshevik, or laughed down as pessimistic.

I mention these circumstances in order that you may see that nothing personal could be wholly absorbing. His exact social status means little to a man on the deck of a ship that any minute may go down. His chief concern is to save himself and his fellow-passengers, with natural speculation as to the haven they will find when the rescued have scrambled to the shore.

Thus, during that month of January, I saw myself as the victim of circumstances that mattered less than they might have done had we not been on the eve of well-nigh universal change. The life I was leading with Vio was not satisfactory, but even that was not permanent. The thread of flame, I was convinced, had not led thus far without meaning to lead me farther still, and I counted on that to show me the way. I counted on that not merely in my own affairs, but in those of our disintegrating world. We should not be impelled to pull down our present house till the materials were at hand for building up a better one. Vio, Wolf, Stroud, and the bulk of the American people were right in not fearing disaster, though wrong in not anticipating a radical shifting of bases. Their desperate clinging to worn-out phases of existence might be futile; but the futility would become apparent in the ripeness of time. It was not an aspect of the case that troubled me.

What did trouble me was Vio's relation to Stroud. It troubled me the more for the reason that in proportion as the vapors cleared from my intelligence I saw myself with my old rights as her husband. The old passion was back with me, with the old longings and claims, even though she disregarded them. According to the judgment I was beginning to form, she disregarded them the more for seeing that her efforts to re-establish me in Boston hadn't been successful. As far as she could positively carry me, I went; but I could cover no ground by myself. The minute I was alone, I was let alone, simply, courteously, but unanimously dropped. It was the sort of general action it is useless to reason with or fight against; and Vio saw it. There came a day when I drew the conclusion that she was giving up the struggle, and that the offer I had meant to make on the first afternoon of my return would be accepted if renewed. I was not sure; she was not communicative, and the signs were all too obscure to give me more than a vacillating sense of guidance. My general impression was that she didn't know

the way she was taking, while Stroud was sure of it. As an adroit player of a game of which she didn't know the elementary principles, he was leading her on to a point at which she would have to acknowledge herself beaten.

This, in the main, I could only stand by and watch, because I was under a cloud. It was a cloud that settled on me heavier and blacker as January passed and February came in. The world-seething had its counterpart in the seething within myself. There were days when my inner anguish was not less frenzied than that of Germany or Russia, in spite of my outward calm. I was still following Vio from house to house, with Stroud as our guide or showman; but the conviction was growing that I must soon have done with it. Not a day nor an hour but seared my consciousness with the fact that he was the man whom Vio loved.

"This is not a life," I began to tell myself, bitterly. It became my favorite comment. I made it when I got up in the morning, and when I went to bed at night. I made it when Vio and I engaged in polite conversation, and when she informed me of our engagements for the day. I made it when I entered other people's drawing-rooms, and when other people entered ours. A life was a reality; a life was work; a life involved above all what Mildred Averill called production. When one didn't produce there was no place for one. There was no place for me here. With Pelly, Bridget, and the Finn I had touched the genuine, the foundational; in lugging carpets I had done work of which the usefulness was in no wise diminished by the fact that any other man could have done it just as well. In my room with the fungi, on my eighteen dollars a week, I had slept soundly and lived complacently, in harmony with whatever was basic and elemental. It began to dawn in me as a hope that perhaps the windings of the thread of flame would lead me back to what was a life, with a new appreciation of its value.

And then one day, when I was on the stairs of our own house, coming down from the third to the second story, I saw Lydia Blair standing on the landing, outside of Vio's door. Boosey was beside her, and she was taking a parcel from his hands.

"Hello, kid," she said, nodding in my direction. "Thought I should see you round here some day. Wonder I didn't do it before." She addressed Boosey, with another nod toward me. "He and me were at school together. Weren't we?" she continued, with her enchanting smile, as I reached the lowest step.

"Yes," I managed to gasp, "the school of adversity."

"And a mighty good school, too, for a sport. Do you know it?"

"But, Lydia," I began, "what in the name of—?"

"Sh-h! Don't swear," was all she said, as taking Boosey's parcel she opened Vio's door. Going in softly she closed it behind her.

Once more Boosey's expression dramatized my situation. That the master of the house in which he exercised his functions—even such a master as I—should

be called "kid" by a girl like Lydia created a social topsyturvydom defying all his principles. For perceptible seconds he stared in an astonishment mingled with disdain, after which he turned on his heel to tell the news in the kitchen.

But I was too puzzled by Lydia's reappearance to tear myself away. What had she to do with Vio? How did she get the right to go in and out of Vio's room with this matter-of-course authority?

In a corner of the hall, beside the window looking over the Common, was an armchair in which Vio often sat when taking her breakfast up-stairs and glancing over her correspondence. I sank into it now, and waited. Sooner or later Lydia must come out again.

This she did, some twenty minutes later, dainty and nonchalant.

"Lydia," I cried, springing to my feet, "what in the name of Heaven are you doing here?"

"You see."

The parcel she had taken from Boosey was now undone, revealing some three or four pairs of corsets. Laying the bundle on the table Vio used for her breakfast-tray the girl began to roll the corsets neatly.

There were so many questions I wanted to ask that I hardly knew where to begin.

"How long have you been coming to—to see my wife?"

"Oh, not so very long, a month perhaps."

"Did you know I was here?"

"Why, sure."

"Is that what brought you?"

She glanced up sideways from her work, with one of those glances she alone could fling.

"Well, you *have* got a nerve. Suppose I said yes?"

"Who—who told you where to find me?"

"Who do you think?"

"Miss Averill?"

"No; it wasn't Miss Averill. As far as I can make out little old Milly doesn't give you a second thought, now that she knows you're in the bosom of your family."

"Is that true?"

"Why, of course it's true. Did you want to think she was pining away?"

"Well, who did tell you?"

"Why should I want any one to tell me? Ever since I've been with Clotilde I'm always on the lookout for new customers. I get a commission on every pair."

"But it wasn't for the commission you came to see Mrs. Harrowby."

"Well, what was it for then?"

"That's what I want you to tell me."

"How much did you tell me when you disappeared from the Barcelona over two years ago?"

"I told you as much as I could tell any one."

"You didn't tell me your name was Harrowby."

"I didn't know it."

She swung round from her work with the parcel. "You didn't—what?"

I tapped my forehead. "Shell-shock. I'd—I'd forgotten who I was."

A flip of her slender hand dismissed this explanation, as she resumed her task.

"Ah, go on!" And yet she veered back again, with a dash of tears in her blue eyes. "Say, kid, I know all about it. You needn't try to put anything over on me. I know all about it, and I'm sorry for you. That's what I want to say. Do you remember how I used to tell you I was your friend, and that Harry Drinkwater was your friend, too? Well, we are—even now. There's something about you we both—we both kind o' took to. I don't know what it is, but it's there. It was there when I thought you might be a swell crook; and if I didn't mind that I don't mind—this. The only thing I'm thinking is that you're up against it awful thick; and so I told Dick Stroud that whoever shook you the sad hand of farewell I'd be on the spot as the ministering angel."

There were so many points here that I could only seize the one lying, as it were, on top.

"So you—you know Dick Stroud?"

She had gone on with her work again.

"*Know* him? Well, I should say!"

"Have you known him long?"

"Known him ever since ... Say, I'll tell you when it was. It was after we all came back on that ship together, and I was still doing the stenog act for Boydie Averill, before I got Harry back on the job again. Well, one day *that* guy floated in, towed by little Lulu. He sure is her style for fair, or he used to be before he went to France."

"Did—did Mrs. Averill introduce him to you?"

"He didn't wait for that. He introduced himself with a look. I didn't need a second one before I'd read him like a headline. When I started to go home that evening he was waiting at the corner to take me in a taxi."

"Did you let him?"

"Sure I let him. It was a ride. When he asked me to dinner at the Blitz I let him do that, too. You saw us. Don't you remember that nut? that's what you called him afterward."

It came to me, that sleek mass of silver, distinguished and sinister at once.

"So that was he!"

"That was Dick, sure thing!"

"You call him Dick?"

"What else would I call him when he wants me to? But that's giving him away."

"Giving whom away?"

Vio had come out of her room without our having heard her. In a tea-gown of black and gold she stood before us in an almost terrifying dignity.

That is, it was almost terrifying to me, though Lydia was equal to the situation.

"Oh, madam, I didn't know you heard. Mr. Harrowby was just kidding me about Colonel Stroud."

"Indeed!" Moving forward with the air of an astonished queen, Vio seated herself in the armchair. "But why should Mr. Harrowby be—what was the word?—kidding you about anything?"

"Oh, we're old friends. Ain't we?" She turned to me for corroboration.

"Very good old friends," I said, with some warmth.

"Really! And you never told me."

"Madam never asked me. She never asked me if I knew Colonel Stroud, either. How could I tell that she wanted to know?"

"Oh, but I don't want to know. I'm only interested—" she looked toward me—"that you and—and this young lady should be so—so intimate."

"I hope madam doesn't mind."

"Let me see," Vio began to calculate. "It's about four or five weeks since Mrs. Mountney sent you to me."

"And Mrs. Averill had sent me to her. You see, madam, I get a commission on every pair, and so—"

"And so it was a good opportunity to—"

"To improve myself. Yes, madam."

Vio's brows came together in a frown. "To ... what? I don't understand you."

"You see, madam, it's this way. I've only taken this corset job to—to get an insight. I'm not really a saleswoman at all. I'm an adventuress."

It was the only moment at which I ever saw Vio nonplussed.

"Oh, you are!" was all she could find to say.

"Well, not exactly yet; but I'm going to be. Only, if you're an adventuress you've got to be a swell adventuress. There's only one kind, and it's that. But you see, madam, I've never had enough to do with ladies to be the real thing; and so when Clotilde put me on to this corset stunt, I thought it 'd give me a chance to study them."

"To study—ladies?"

"Yes, madam. An adventuress has got to be that much of a lady that she can put it over on a duchess or she might just as well stay out of the business. Any boob in the movie line would tell you that."

"You interest me," Vio said, almost beneath her breath.

"I generally interest people, madam, when I get a-going. Colonel Stroud says that if I was to go in for—"

"That's not what I want to hear. Tell me if—if your studies have taught you what you wanted to know."

Having completed her package, Lydia stood in the attitude of a neat French maid in a play.

"It's the model, madam. That's where the trouble is. An adventuress has got to be ... well, just so. Did madam ever see Agnes Dunham as the Russian Countess in 'The Scarlet Sin'? Well, she's it, only she's too old. She must be thirty-five if she's a day. I don't know how many times I didn't go see her; but I couldn't be that old, and then she talked with a French accent, so that settled it. Colonel Stroud said that if I was ever going to do the thing there was only one woman in the world—"

"He took a professional interest in you, then?"

"Oh, my, yes; professional and every other way. Still does. Awful kind he can be when he likes; but when he doesn't like! My!"

I was sorry for Vio. With bloodless lips and strained eyes she sat grasping the arms of her chair in the effort to keep her self-mastery. Had I loved her less I could have been glad of this minute, because it was giving me what might be called my revenge. But I loved her too much. It was clear to me, too, that I loved her more than I ever did. My return had been a shock to her, and she had made a strenuous effort to be game. She *was* game. She had not fallen short of the most sporting standard, except in matters over which she had no control.

"Stroud is always like that," I endeavored to smile, "giving every one a helping hand. He mayn't be the wisest old dog in the world, but no one can say that he isn't kind and faithful."

As it happened I had better have kept quiet. Vio sat upright, all the force of her anger turned upon me.

"Has this girl been anything to you?"

"Yes, madam; a mother."

In her endeavor to control herself Vio uttered a hard pant, eying the girl up and down.

"Oh? Indeed? You're young to be ... a mother!"

"Only a little younger than you, madam; and not half so beautiful. Madam knows that any woman worth her salt is mother to any man down on his luck. I

don't care who he is, or who she is."

"Thank you for the information. I hope Mr. Harrowby has appreciated your maternal care."

"Well, he did and he didn't, madam. Just when I thought he was going to buck up he—he cleared out, and I thought he must be dead. Now, I find that—"

"That he's alive. If you had come to me I could have told you that—that clearing out was his specialty. You might say he had a genius for it, if you weren't compelled to call it by another name."

I took a long stride toward her.

"Vio, do you mean anything by that?"

"What should I mean but—but the fact? You're a mystery to me, Billy, just as you've evidently been to—to this young lady. At the very minute when we hope, as she so picturesquely puts it, that you're going to buck up, you—you clear out. You must have a marvelous eye for your opportunities in that respect. That's why I say it is like genius. No one who didn't have a genius for clearing out, still to call it that, could so neatly have seen his chance at Bourg-la-Comtesse!"

"Vio!"

I don't know what I was about to do, because with my own shout ringing in my ears I became aware that Lydia had caught me by the arm.

"Oh, kid, please don't!"

"Yes; let him." Vio's face was strained upward toward me, but otherwise she hadn't moved. "Men who run away from other men are always quick to strike women."

My arm fell. I bent till my face was close to hers.

"When did I ever run away?"

Her hand was thrown out in the imperious gesture of dismissal I had seen two or three times already.

"Please, Billy! We won't go into that. You'll—you'll spare me."

"Vio, you believe *that*?"

She inclined her head slowly.

"That I was a—a coward—a deserter?"

She inclined her head again.

"And that I—" the whole plan spread itself out before me—"that I pretended to commit suicide in order to cover up my tracks?"

Once more she bowed her head relentlessly.

"You *believe* that?"

"Billy, I know it. Every one knows it. I've stood by you right up to now. But now—" she rose with a kind of majesty from which I backed away—"now that you've brought this woman here, into my house, where I've been fighting your battles— Oh, Billy, what kind of a man are you to have—to have a wife like

me?”

I made no attempt to respond to this. I could only stand amazed and speechless. Perhaps a minute had gone by, perhaps two or three before I found myself able to say:

”All right, Vio. Since it’s—since it’s that way, and with all the other things—”

But I couldn’t go any farther. There was another speechless passage of time, during which we could only stare at each other, regardless of the white and wide-eyed spectator of the scene. Turning abruptly, I walked down the long hall toward the door of my own room. As I did so Vio said nothing, but Lydia uttered a little broken cry.

”Oh, kid, *I* don’t believe it; Harry Drinkwater doesn’t believe it either. Nobody will believe it when they’ve had a word with me.”

But I didn’t thank her. I didn’t so much as look back. It was only by degrees that I learned, too, what the two women said to each other when I left them alone together.

I was packing in my room when Boosey brought me a letter. As letters had for so long been to me a thing of the past I took it with some curiosity, recognizing at once the hand of my friend Pelly.

DEAR SOAMES,—I suppose I ought to call you Mr. Harrowby now, but it don’t somehow come natural. Soames you were to me and Soames you will be till I get used to the other thing, which I don’t think I shall. I write you these few lines to let you know that I am well and going just the same as ever, though I miss our old times together something fierce. Would like to know how you are, if you ever get time to write. Expect you are having a swell time with all the gay guys in Boston. Friends say that Boston is some sporty town when you get with the inside gang, which I don’t suppose you have any trouble in getting. Miss Smith has no one yet for your old room, which is all repapered and fine with a brand-new set of toadstools, real showy ones. Mrs. Leeming is sure some artist, and a nice old girl besides, when she doesn’t cry. Had a very nice time at Jim’s the other night; just a quart between him and Bridget and me; nothing rough-house, but all as a gentleman should. Bridget could come, as his wife was away burying an uncle at Bing Hampton. Hope you found your wife going strong as this leaves mine at present. Had a very nice letter from her the other day, and answered it on the spot telling her to be true to me and may God bring her and me together again after this long parting. Now no more from

your friend, S. PELLY. Write soon.

It is impossible to tell you of the glow that warmed and lighted me on reading

these friendly lines. They were all the more grateful owing to the fact that if Pelly believed of me what Vio and every one else believed, as quite possibly he did, it would have made no difference. Of the things taught me in my contact with the less sophisticated walks in life, the beauty of a world in which there is comparatively little judging was the most comforting. There were all kinds of jealousies there, bickerings, sulkings, puerilities, and now and then a glorious free fight; but condemnation was rare. The bruised spirit could be at peace in this large charity, and in the spaciousness of its tolerance the humiliated soul could walk with head erect. Its ideals and pleasures might be crude; but they were not pharisaical.

If I had any doubt as to my plans I had none any longer. The instinct that urged me back to the room with the new set of toadstools was like that of the poor bull baited in the ring to take refuge amid the dumb, sympathetic herd of its own kind. I asked only to be hidden there, to live and work, or, if necessary, die obscurely.

Not that I hadn't had a first impulse to try and clear my name; but the futility of attempting that was soon apparent. I had nothing to offer but my word, and my word had been rejected. In the course of the two or three hours since the scene with Vio and Lydia, while I had gone to the station to secure a berth on a night train for New York and dined at a hotel, I had come to the conclusion that the effort to explain would be folly. The mere fact that my doings between Bourg-la-Comtesse and the *Auvergne* were still blurred in my memory would make any tale I told incoherent and open to suspicion. In addition to that Vio knew, Wolf knew, and others knew that I had not offered my services to the Ambulance Corps of my own free will, while my letters had painted my horror of the sights I witnessed with no thought of reserve. My supposed suicide being ascribed to remorse, the discovery that I was alive and well and in hiding in New York—

No; the evidence against me was too strong. The one witness who might say something in my favor, Doctor Scattlethwaite, had himself not believed me. He could say that the claim I was putting forth now I had put forth two years previously; but there would be nothing convincing in that.

Besides, and there was much in the fact, I wanted to get away, to get back among those who trusted me, and to whom I felt I belonged. If the thread of flame had led me to my old life it was only to show me once for all that there was no place for me in it. Knowing that, I could take hold of the new life more wholeheartedly and probably do better work there. Already new plans were springing to my mind, plans which I could the more easily put into operation because of having some money at my disposal. Mildred Averill would help me in that and perhaps I could help her. If Vio secured a divorce, and I should put no obstruction

in the way of that—

But Vio herself came into my room with the calm manner and easy movement which in no wise surprised me, as she was subject to such reactions after moments of excitement.

"What are you doing, Billy?"

She seated herself quietly.

A coat being spread before me on the bed, I folded the sleeves, and doubled the breasts backward.

"I'm packing."

"What for?"

"Because I'm going away."

"When?"

"To-night; in an hour or so."

"Where to?"

"New York first."

"And then?"

"I don't know yet. Possibly nowhere. I may stay in New York. Probably I shall."

"And not come back here any more?"

"That's my intention."

"What are you doing it for?"

Taking the coat I had folded I laid it in my suit-case.

"I should think you'd see."

"Is it—is it because of—of what was said this afternoon?"

"Partly."

"Not altogether?"

Pulling another coat from the closet I spread it on the bed.

"No; not altogether."

"What else is there?"

"Oh, nothing that you'd be interested in. I—I just want to get away."

"From me?"

"Only in the sense that—that you're part of the whole."

"The whole what?"

"The whole life. It's not a life for me any more."

She did not deny this or protest against it. For a minute or more she said nothing, though as I crossed the room from the bed to the closet for more clothes I saw in the glass that she furtively dashed away a tear. Yesterday I would have been touched by that; but now that I knew what she believed of me, what she had been believing of me during all the weeks since I had come home, my heart was benumbed. Besides, if she was in love with Dick Stroud there was no reason

for my feeling pity.

I had begun on collars and neckties when she said:

"What kind of a girl was that who was here this afternoon?"

[image]

I had begun on collars and neckties when Vio said, "What kind of a girl was that who was here this afternoon?"

"You must have seen something of her for yourself. I understood from her that she'd been coming to see you."

"She's been here three times. Alice Mountney sent her, and I believe Lulu Averill sent her to her. I had no idea that she had anything in her mind than just to sell this new kind of corset."

"And had she?"

"Didn't she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me. If she's said anything to you, I don't know what it can be."

"She's not—she's not crazy, is she?"

"I shouldn't think so. Why do you ask?"

"Then she's extremely peculiar."

"We're all that in our different ways, aren't we?"

"I don't know now whether to take her seriously or not."

"What about?"

"About—about—Dick."

I went on with my packing without answering.

"What do *you* think?" she asked, at last. "I suppose you have an opinion."

"On what point?"

"The point she brought up ... as to her knowing him ... so well."

"I've no opinion about that. I know she knows him ... very well indeed. At least, I take it for granted."

"What makes you do that?"

"Oh, just having seen them together."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I have done that? Men don't—don't give each other away."

"Then in his knowing her there was something to—to give away."

"Evidently."

"Then what about your knowing her yourself?"

"That was different."

"Different? How?"

Since she was pressing the question I decided not to spare her.

"I didn't wait for her at a street corner as a form of introduction."

Expecting the question, "And did he?" I was surprised that she should make it. "And would it be discreet to inquire what your form of introduction was?"

"I was presented to her in all propriety by a blind boy named Drinkwater, you heard her mention him, who was my cabin-mate on the *Auvergne*. He and Miss Blair and I, with some other people, happened to sit at the same table."

"And have you no interest in her besides that?"

"Yes: she's been a very good friend to me. I haven't seen her for two years and more; but that was my fault."

"So I understand."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That if you had no interest in her she had an interest in you, strong enough to—to impel her to make my acquaintance."

"With some good end in view, presumably."

"With the end in view of giving me the information that—that she knew Dick."

"And do you call that taking an interest in me?"

"What do you think yourself?"

Once more I declined to give my impressions. Where Stroud was concerned I had nothing to say. Now that Vio knew something of the truth concerning him I wished not to influence her in any way. The matter seemed oddly far away from me. The tie between Vio and myself being broken in fact, as it soon would be in law, I preferred to leave the subject of my successor where it was.

"Why do you say," she began after a brief pause, "that this is not a life for you any more?"

"Because it isn't."

"But why isn't it?"

"For one reason, because I don't like it."

"Oh!" She was not expecting this reply and it displeased her. "What's the matter with it?"

"For me, everything. But it's nothing that you would understand."

"I suppose I could understand if you explained to me."

"No, you couldn't. Or, rather, I couldn't. The language isn't coined that would give me the words to tell you. It's not the facts of the life I dislike; it's the spirit of it."

"Is there anything wrong with the spirit of it?"

"I'm not saying so. I merely dislike it for myself. For me it's not a real life any more. I belong to—to simpler people with less complex ideas."

"Less complex ideas about what?"

"About honor for one thing." In my goings and comings round the room I paused in front of her. "Among my friends, my real friends, you can be a coward or a deserter, just as you could be a murderer or a thief, and no one would pass judgment upon you."

"And is that ... a virtue?"

"I don't know anything about its being a virtue; but it is a consolation."

As I stood looking down on her she said, softly:

"Have I passed judgment upon you?"

"You've been a brick, Vio: you've been a heroine. The only difference I should note between you and the people to whom I'm going back is that you've suppressed your condemnation, and they didn't feel it."

"Did they ... *know*?"

"I can't tell you what they knew, for the reason that it wouldn't have mattered. They knew there was something wrong with me, that I was hiding something, that I was probably an outcast of good family; but they gave me a great, big affection to live in, and thought no more about it. You've given me—"

There was an extraordinarily brilliant flash of her dark eyes as she lifted them to mine.

"What?" she interjected. "Have you any idea of what I've given you?"

"You've given me," I repeated, "the great, big affection to live in, but with something in it that poisoned the air. I'm grateful to you, Vio, more grateful than I can begin to tell you, especially as I know now what you've been thinking all the time; but you can easily understand that I prefer not to live in an atmosphere laden with—"

"If we purified that, the atmosphere? What then?"

"It still wouldn't be everything. When I say I don't like the life, it isn't just because it's cast me out; it's because for me—mind you, I'm not speaking of any one else—it's become vapid and—and foolish, and—and a throwing away of time."

"And what do you find among the people you—you call your friends that's more worth while?"

"That's what it's hard to tell you. I find the simple and elemental, something basic and fundamental that the new crisis in existence is telling us to discover and—and rectify. You remember what I said a month or more ago to Stroud, that our building was collapsing?"

"Yes; and I hoped you were, as people say, talking through your hat."

"Well, I wasn't. The building is coming down, right to the foundations. Only the foundations will remain."

"They're awfully crude foundations, aren't they?"

"Exactly. That's just where the trouble is. The bases of our life are ugly and

unclean, and so we've turned away and refused to look at them. I'm going back, Vio, to see what I can do to make them less ugly, less unclean, and more secure to build on. How *can* we erect a society on foundations that already have the element of decay in them before we've added the first layer of our superstructure?"

Rising, she went to a window, leaning against it as if tired, and looking out into the darkness.

"But what can you do, all by yourself?"

"Very little; but a little is something. It isn't altogether the success or the failure that I'm thinking about; it's the principle."

"Oh, if you're going to live by principles—"

"We've got to live by something. When the world is coming down about our heads."

"If it's doing that, one man can't hold it up."

"No; but a good many men may. I'm not the only one who's trying."

"I never heard of any one trying it like that ... by going back to the foundational, as you call it."

"Oh, I think you have. The Man who more than any other has helped the human race did just that thing. You're strict about going to church on Sunday."

She was slightly shocked. "I presume you're not going to try to be like Him."

"Perhaps not. I may not aim so high. I'm only pointing out the fact that going back to the foundational and beginning there again was His method. Others have followed it, a good many. All the work connected with what we call Settlements—"

"I never could bear them."

"Possibly; but that isn't the point. I'm only saying that in their way settlement workers have been feeling out the special weakness of our civilization, and doing their best to meet it. I suppose our politicians and clergymen and economists have been doing the same. The trouble with them is that they so generally nip the symptom while leaving the root of the disease that they don't accomplish much."

"Did you accomplish much yourself when you were—?"

"I didn't try. I didn't see what I was there for. It's only since coming back here that I've begun to understand why I was led the way I was."

Half turning round, she said over her shoulder:

"Do you call that being led?"

I replied with a distinctness which I tried to make significant:

"Yes, Vio; I call it being led. I didn't see it till I got back here; and even here I didn't see it till—till this afternoon. And now—now I've done with all this. I've done with the easy, gentlemanly life of spending money and being waited on.

I'm not saying it isn't all right; it's only not all right for me. I've got something else to do. There was a time, you know it as well as I do, when a poor man was an offense to me, and an uncultivated person an abhorrence. I was a snob from every point of view, and I was proud of being one. And now—"

Pulling down the shade and turning completely round, she stood with her back to the window.

"Yes, Billy? And now?"

"It's no use. I can't tell you. I couldn't explain if I used up all the words in the dictionary. It's just a tugging in my heart to get back where—" I had a sudden inspiration. "Read that," I said, taking Pelly's letter from my pocket.

She stood under the central bunch of electrics while I closed the suit-case and fastened the straps. Having finished the letter, she handed it back to me.

"Well?" I asked.

"It's just—just a common person's letter, as far as I see, and rather coarse. Boosey might have written it, or Miles, the chauffeur."

"And that's all you see in it?"

"What more is there to see?"

"That's just it. That's just where the inexplicable thing lies. I see, or rather I feel, a tenderness in it that probably no one could detect but myself. Even the reference to drinking—"

"The quart."

"Yes; the quart. You've got to remember how small the margin for pleasure is in a life like Sam's, and how innocently he and Bridget and Jim can do what they had much better let alone. They're not vicious; they're only—how shall I say?—they're only undeveloped. We're not such saints ourselves, even with our development; and when all civilization has bent its efforts, church and state together, to keep their minds as primitive as possible so that they'll do the most primitive kinds of work, you can't blame them if they take their pleasures and everything else primitively. We've got to have another educational system."

"But they say our educational system is very good as it is."

"As far as it goes; but we still have one system for the rich and another for the poor, and we shall never get equality of mind till we have equality of educational opportunity. But that's only a detail. It all hangs together. As far as I'm concerned, it sums itself up in the urging that takes me back among simple people because—because I love them, Vio; that's the only word for it, and in their way they've loved me."

She crossed the room aimlessly.

"Other—other people have—have loved you, as you call it, who—who mayn't have been simple."

"Y-yes. But—but in the cup they handed to me there were bitter ingredients.

In the cup I'm talking of there was only ... love. It was a blind, stumbling, awkward, mannish love, if you like; but it was ... love. It was the pure, unadulterated thing, as unconscious of itself as the air is. The girl who was here this afternoon is an example of it. For anything I know, she was an idiot to have come; but she came, poor soul, because she thought—"

"Well, what did she think?"

"That if Dick Stroud were out of the way I should have a better chance with you."

She was still moving aimlessly about the room, picking up small objects and putting them down again.

"She said—she said he'd been tagging around after her, it's her expression, for nearly three years."

"To my practically certain knowledge that is so."

"She said, too, that she could marry him if she liked, but that she didn't want to."

"I don't know anything about that."

"If she went with him at all, she said, it would probably be ... without marriage, as she didn't wish to be bound to him."

I looked up in curiosity.

"And did she say there was any possibility of her going with him at all?"

"I think she did. That's what made me think her touched in her mind or crazy. She said she hadn't decided, or something like that; but as she was going to be an adventuress she had to begin some time, and perhaps it might as well be with him as with any one else. She spoke as if it rested entirely with her to take him or throw him away."

Again I decided to be cruel.

"It very likely does."

She was standing now by my dressing-table, and as if my words had meant nothing to her she said:

"Aren't you going to take your hair-brush?"

"Oh, I was forgetting to put it in. Thanks."

When I went for it she was holding it in her hand.

"What a queer, cheap-looking thing! Where on earth did you get it?"

"I suppose it was at Tours, with the other things, when—"

"Oh yes! I remember." She moved toward the door. "Your other brushes, the ebony ones with the silver initials, that I gave you before—before we were married, are here. They were with the things found on the bank of that— They forwarded them to me. Shouldn't you—shouldn't you like them?"

"Thanks, no. This sort of common thing suits me better."

I was doing the last things about the room. She was standing with her hand

on the knob of the door, which was half open.

"And when you're back in New York, Billy, doing that kind of thing you talk about, shall you be all alone?"

A second's reflection convinced me that it was best to be clear about everything.

"At first."

"And later?"

I pulled open a drawer from which I knew I had taken all the contents.

"You mean when we're both ... free?"

"Suppose I put it ... when *you're* free?"

"Oh, then there may be ... some one else."

"Some one ... I know?"

I delved into another drawer, hiding my face. "Some one you may have heard of; but I don't—I don't think you know her."

When I had pushed in the drawer I raised myself; but I was alone in the room. Ten minutes later I had left the house without a good-by on either side.

On the door-step, in my working-man's costume, and with the everlasting bag and suit-case in my hands, I looked up at a starry, windy sky, with the trees of the Common tossing beneath it.

"My God, what an end!" I cried, inwardly.

But, as far as my knowledge or purpose went, an end it was.

CHAPTER II

Noble intentions being easier to conceive than to carry out, it is hardly surprising that on settling again in New York I found myself "let down." The sense of adventure was out of it, while that of the mission had crept in. The old friends were still the old friends; but if my intercourse with them was not less spontaneous it was certainly more self-conscious. Back in my squint-eyed room, with the new paper and the more showy set of fungi, the knowledge that I was there because I chose to be there, and not because I couldn't help it, marked all my goings and comings with a point of interrogation.

In some measure, too, it was a point of disapproval. That is to say, those who welcomed me back took me somewhat in the spirit of a "returned empty."

"Why, yes, of course, if you want it," was Miss Smith's reply to my request to

have my old room back again; but her intonation was not wholly that of pleasure. "We thought, my sister and I, that your social duties in Boston would restrict your movements for the future."

I had pricked their little bubble of romance, and they were disappointed. That one who had been their lodger was now with the Olympian gods was a tale to be told as long as they had a room to let, and to every one who rented one. I saw at once that I couldn't ask them to believe that I had come back of my own free will. The very magnitude of my hopes compelled me to be silent with regard to them.

"Punk!" was Pelly's comment, when I braced myself to tell him I had found home life disillusioning.

That was across the table of the familiar eating-house, as we took our first meal together. I was obliged to explain myself for the reason that in the back of his mind, also, I read the conviction that I hadn't "made good." Compelled to be more primitive than I should have liked, I had to base my dissatisfaction on the grounds of physical restriction rather than on those of divine discontent.

"Some of them Boston women will put the lid on a man and lock it down," he observed further. "Punk, I call it. Well, now that you've broken loose, and with your wad, I suppose you'll be givin' yourself a little run."

I allowed him to make this assumption, thankful that he should understand me from any point of view; but it was not the point of view of our former connection. That a man should be down on his luck was one thing; but that, having got on his feet, he should deliberately become a waster was another. In any light but that of a reversion to low tastes I could never have made Sam see my return to the house in Meeting-House Green. For low tastes he had the same toleration as for misdemeanors; but he did not disguise the fact that for a man who had got his chance he considered them low tastes.

At Creed & Creed's I received a similar tempered welcome.

"Sure here's Brogan," Bridget called out to the other men, on seeing me enter the cavern where four of them were at the accustomed work of sweeping a consignment that had just been unpacked. Burlap and sheepskins were still strewn about the floor, so that I had to restrain the impulse to pick things up and stack them.

Perhaps I can best compare my return to that of a spirit which has passed to a higher sphere and chooses to be for a short time re-embodied. Denis, the Finn, and a small wiry man, a stranger to me, all drew near to stare solemnly. My visit could only be taken as a condescension, not as a renewed incorporation into the old life. From that I had been projected forever by the sheer fact of not having to earn a living in this humble way.

"Aw, but it's well you're lookin'," Gallivan said, awesomely.

"And why shouldn't he be lookin' well," Bridget demanded, "and him with more butter than he's got bread to spread it on?"

"It's different with us," the Finn said, bitterly, "with no butter and not enough bread, and more mouths to feed than can ever be filled. I'll bet you Brogan doesn't think of them, now that he's got his own belly full."

It seemed to me an opening.

"Well, suppose I did? Suppose I'd come back to hand down some of the butter?"

"Aw, cut it out, Brogan," the Finn laughed, joylessly. "I was only kiddin' you. We don't pass the buck, none of us don't. What you got, keep; and if you don't, then the more fool you."

In Denis's yearning eyes were the only signs of remote comprehension in the company.

"Sure ye don't have to pass the buck just because y' ask the saints to pray for ye, do ye? Pray for us, Brogan. Ye've got nothing else to do."

It was another opening.

"I wish I had, Denis. I've found that I don't know how to loaf. If you hear of anything—"

He nodded, with beatified aspiration in his leathery old face.

"Aw, then, if it's that way you feel, the Holy Mother 'll find ye something, Protestant though y' are, just as sure as she showed ould Biddy Murphy, and her a Protestant too, that me mother knew in Ireland where there was two-and-sixpence lyin' in the mud, and she with the rent comin' due the next mornin': This is the new Brogan," he continued, with a wave of his hand toward the dark, wiry man, who responded with a grin. "He can't talk our talk hardly not at all, not no more than the monkey I used to tell you about. A Pole he calls hisself; but I nivver heard of no such nation as that till I come to this country. We nivver had them in Ireland at all—at all. There was Ulster men, and Munster men, and men from the County Monaghan; but I nivver heard tell of no Poles. Do you think they's have sows like us? Or would they be like them Chinees and Japansey men?"

"For Gawd's sake, here's the Floater," Bridget warned, softly, and every man got back to his work.

Back at their work they had no time for further conversation; and in some way, impossible for me to tell you in words, I felt myself eliminated from their fellowship. They would always be friendly; but the knowledge that I was bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh, which had once been the outcome of a common need, was no longer theirs nor mine. I could look in at them in this non-committal way as often as I chose; but I should never get any farther.

Something of the sort was manifest when I next met Lydia Blair. Our stand-

ing toward each other was different. Little as she had understood me before, she understood me less in this new rôle than in any other.

"You sure are the queerest guy I ever met," she said, at one time in the course of the evening. "I sometimes wonder if you're all there."

But that was after I had been foolish enough to try to make her see my point of view toward life, and failed. Before that she had been sympathetic.

Our first conversation had been over the telephone, when I had called up Clotilde's to ask if Miss Blair had returned from Boston.

"Miss Blair at the 'phone," was the reply. "Who's this?"

Somewhat timidly I said I was Mr. Harrowby, repeating the name twice before she recognized it as mine. Having invited her to dine with me and go to the theater I got a quavering, "Sure!" which lacked her usual spontaneity.

"You don't seem pleased," I said.

"Oh, I'm pleased enough. I'm only wondering if—if you are."

"Why shouldn't I be, when I've asked you?"

"Well, I put my foot in it for fair, didn't I?"

"You mean in Boston? Oh, that was all right. I know you meant to do me a good turn; and perhaps you've done it."

"Oh, I *meant* to; but I sure did get a lesson. My mother used to tell me to keep my fingers out of other people's pies; and I'm going to from this time on."

In the evening, seated opposite me at the little table at Josephine's, with the din of a hundred diners giving us a sort of privacy, she told me more about it.

"You see, it was this way: He'd always been talking to me about this rich young Boston widow he'd met at Palm Beach, trying to get my mad up."

"What did he say of her?"

"Well, the sort of thing he *would* say. He's a good judge of a woman, you must admit; and he thought she was about the classiest. It was when I began to tell him what I wanted to be that he sprang that on me, said she was the model for me to study, and that when it came to the dressy vampire Agnes Dunham wasn't in it.

"Did he call this—this Boston lady a dressy vampire?"

"Oh, he didn't mean that. It was only that for any one who wanted to be a dressy vampire she was a smart style. A vampire mustn't look a vampire, or she might as well go out of business. The one thing I criticized in Agnes Dunham in 'The Scarlet Sin' was that a woman who advertised herself so much as an adventuress wouldn't get very far with her adventuring."

"I see. You'd go in for a finer art."

"I'd go in for pulling the thing off, whatever it was; but that's not what I want to tell you. To go back to what he was always saying about this Boston lady, it made me crazy to see her. In the corset business I'd got intimate with a good

many society women, and most of them were gumps. For one good vampire there were a hundred with the kick of a boiled potato. That made me all the crazier to see, and I thought about it and thought about it. Then, one day, Harry called me on the 'phone to say— fxsYou see, he's living with the Averills, and when that Mrs. Mountney— Well, when he told me who you were, and that the lady wasn't a widow any more than I am, well, I simply laid down and passed away. To think that *you*, the fellow we'd been putting down as a mystery and a swell crook—"

"What did you put me down for then when you found out?"

"We didn't get a line on it all at once. That was later. Mrs. Mountney told Lulu, and Dick Stroud told me, and so—"

"Did you all believe what you heard?"

"It was pretty hard not to, wasn't it? after the queer things you'd been doing. There was just one person who stuck it out that it wasn't true; and that was little Milly. She didn't say much to the family; but to me she declared that if all the armies in France were to swear to it, she'd still know there was some mistake. She's another one I can't make out."

"What can't you make out about her?"

"Whether she's got a heart in her body, or only a hard-boiled egg."

"Oh, I fancy she has a heart all right."

"I used to fancy the same thing, or rather I took it for granted; but ever since— Well, she just stumps me."

She reverted to her errand in Boston and what came of it.

"It wasn't till I began to hear of what was going on there that it seemed to me—" the veil of tears to which her eyes were liable descended like a distant mist—"that it seemed to me a darned shame."

"What seemed to you a darned shame in particular?"

"Well, first that Dick Stroud should be pulling the wool over any other woman's eyes, especially a rich one, and then that he should be upsettin' your apple-cart when you'd had so much trouble already. After that it all came easy."

"What came easy?"

"Getting to know Mrs. Harrowby, and all the rest of it. The first once or twice I didn't see how to bring in Dick Stroud's name without seeming to do it on purpose; but after I met you in the up-stairs hall, why it was just natural. Say, you copped a peach when you got married; do you know it?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've got eyes in my head; and, say, she's the one I saw you with that time I told you about, ever so long ago, and it must have been in New York. I suppose some guy had taken me to a swell restaurant to blow me in for a dinner; but anyhow she was the one. The minute I saw her back I knew there were not two such *speaking* backs in the world. As for me modeling myself on her, well,

an old hour-glass pair of stays might as well try to be Clotilde's Number Three Coar Pearl. And, say, she's some sport, isn't she? When I told her more about Dick Stroud and me, after you'd gone away that afternoon, she never turned a hair. Mrs. Mountney says she was going to marry him if you hadn't turned up, and even now he's hoping to marry her; but when I let her have the whole bunch of truth, she took it like a rag doll will take a pin-prick. Never moved a muscle, or showed that it wasn't just my story, and not a bit her own. Of course I took my cue from that—it was my line all along—and was just the poor working-girl telling her life history to a sympathetic lady, just as they hand it out in books; but she carried the thing off something swell. In fact, she made me more than half think—"

"What?" I questioned, when she held her idea suspended there.

"I don't believe I'll tell you. There are things a man had better find out for himself; do you know it?"

"I sha'n't find out anything for myself," I said, "because—because I've given up the fight."

She stared at me with eyes wide open in incredulous horror.

"You've given up the fight for a peach like that! Well, of all the poor boobs!" Leaning back in her chair she scanned my appearance. "I thought there was something wrong when I saw you got up like that. You can beat Walter Haines, the quick-change man, when it comes to clothes, believe *me*. What have you got on now?"

I explained that it had been my Sunday suit during the time I had been working at Creed & Creed's.

"Then for Gawd's sake go and take it off, before we start for the theater. I'll wait for you here. You can go and come in a taxi. I've been looking at you all along, and thinking it must be the latest wrinkle from Boston. Boston *has* funny ways, now hasn't it? And so—"

It was here that I ventured on the exposition of my new scheme of life, getting no appreciation beyond the question as to my sanity quoted above. Later in the evening as, after the theater, I drove her back to Miss Flowerdew's in a taxi, she summed up the situation thus:

"Look-a-here! I never did take stock in that bum story of your being a quitter on the battlefield; but now I sure will if you walk out and hand the show over to Dick Stroud. Why, he's worth two of you! Look how he sticks! He'll get *me* one of these days, just by his sticking, if I'm not careful; and when it comes to a woman like that— Why, I'm ashamed to go round with such a guy. And say, the next time you ask me to dinner, you'll not be got up like the bogie-man dressed for his wife's funeral. You'll look like you did the other day in Boston, or the first time I saw you, or it will be nix on little Lydia."

Drinkwater's tone was similar and yet different. It was different in that while his premises as to "sticking" coincided with Lydia's, his conclusions were not the same.

Perhaps he was not the same Drinkwater. More than two years having passed since I had seen him, I found in him more than two years of development. A crude boy when last we had met, association with a man like Averill, combined with his own instinct for growth, had made him something of a man of the world not the less sympathetic for his honest pug-face and his blindness. The fact that he asked me to dine with him at his university club was an indication of progress in itself.

He gave me his confidences before I offered mine, sketching a career in which stenography figured as no more than the handmaid to a passion for biological research. From many of the details of research he was, of course, precluded by his blindness; but his methodical habits, his memory, and his faculty for induction had more than once put Averill on the track of one thing when looking for another. It was thus that they had discovered the *ophida parotideae* while experimenting for the germ of the Spanish influenza. Incidentally, his salary had been creeping upward in proportion as he made himself more useful.

"And Lydia's been a wonder," he declared, his face shining. "Talk about sticking! The way that girl's stuck to me in every kind of tight place! Always thinking of other people and how to pull them out of the holes they get into! In the Middle Ages she'd have been a saint. Now she's just an up-to-date New York girl."

By the time he had finished this rhapsody I was ready to tell him a part of my own life tale, on which I found him more responsive than any one I had met. As to my mental misfortunes in France he accepted the narrative without questioning. When I came to what I painted as domestic conditions outlived on both sides he passed the topic over with the lightness born of tact. You see it was an altogether older and more serious Drinkwater with whom I had to deal; and yet one not less enthusiastic.

I discovered this when, with much misgiving, I hinted at the task to which I wished to dedicate anything left in my life.

"You've got it, old boy," he half shouted, slapping his leg. "There are three or four big jobs through which we white Americans have got to save our country, and among them the free play of class-contribution is almost the first. Say, these fellows that go jazzing about class welfare get my goat. Class co-operation is what we want; and it's what classes come into existence to give. You can't suppress classes, not yet awhile at any rate, in a country full of inequalities; but what we can do is to get the classes that form themselves spontaneously to take their gifts and pass 'em on to each other. Each works out something that another

doesn't, and so can benefit the bunch all round. Say, Jasper, you'll hit the nail of one of our biggest national weaknesses right on the head as soon as you've learned how to do it."

"Yes, but the learning how to do it is just where the hitch seems to come in. I've been in New York three weeks and I'm just where I was when I came."

"Say, I'll give you a line on that. Do you know how a young fellow in a country town—I don't know anything about swell places like New York—becomes a barber?"

I said I didn't, that I had never given a thought to the subject.

"Well, he doesn't learn, and nobody ever teaches him. He just sits round in the barber shop, brushing hats and hanging up overcoats, and wishing to the Lord he *was* a barber, and all of a sudden he *is* one. He's watched the shaves and hair-clips, hardly knowing he's been doing it, but wishing like blazes all the while, and at last it comes to him like song to a young bird. Now you've got to sit round. Sit tight and sit round. Wish and watch, and watch and wish, and the divine urge that turns a youngster into a barber, because that's what he's got his heart on, will steer you into the right way. This isn't going to be anything you can learn, as you'd learn to drive a motor or dissect a dead body. It won't be a profession, it'll be a *life*, that'll show you the trick. Don't try to hurry things, Jasper; and don't expect that three weeks or three months or three years are going to make this mum old world fork you out its secrets. Just stick, and if you don't do the thing you're aiming at you'll do another just as useful. Why, the doctor was going to chuck all his experiments on the influenza bug when I persuaded him to keep at it; and so he discovered the thing that scientists have been after since Dockendorff thought he'd tracked it down as long ago as 1893. All *sticking!*"

CHAPTER III

I confess that I was comforted by these hearty words, and braced in a determination that was beginning to splutter out. Drinkwater's divine urge was not unlike my own thread of flame and Denis's Holy Mother, who was a light even to the feet of Protestants. It was the same principle—that of a guide, an impulse, an illumination, which our own powers could generate when lifted up to, and associated with, the universal beneficence. I decided to take to formula, "Wish and

watch, and watch and wish," as the device of my knight-errantry. As a matter of fact, by the sheer process of wishing I secured a secondary position for myself in the textile department of the Metropolitan Museum, while by that of watching I found that one of Bridget's boys and two of the Finn's had aptitudes highly worth developing right along this line. It wasn't much; but it was a beginning in the way in which I hoped to go, and might lead to something more.

In all this time, as you can imagine, Vio was my ruling thought, and guessing her intentions my daily occupation. Since she presumably wanted a divorce, there were doubtless grounds on which she could secure one by going the right way to work; but as to whether she was doing this or not nothing had yet been said to me. Nothing was said to me of any kind. I had not written to her, nor had she to me; and my other communication with Boston was only through my bankers. Even that was growing more irregular since I had changed my business address to Meeting-House Green.

What I was chiefly seeking was forgetfulness. Lydia had reproached me with being a "poor boob" in giving up the struggle for Vio's love; but Lydia hadn't known the wound Vio had inflicted. The more I thought of that the more I felt it due to the dignity of love to attempt neither explanation nor defense. On mere circumstantial evidence Vio had believed me guilty of the crime she would probably have rated as the blackest in the calendar. I couldn't forgive that. I had no intention of forgiving it. The more I loved her the less I could forget that she had returned my love in this way. The most chivalrous thing I could do, the most merciful toward her, and the most tender was what I was doing. I could leave her without a contradiction, so justifying tacitly whatever she may have thought, and putting no restraint on her future liberty of action.

I said so to Mildred Averill when we talked it over about the middle of March. I had not intended to renew this connection unless a sign was made from the other side; but it was given in the form of a line from Miss Averill begging me to come and see her in the apartment she had taken for herself in Park Avenue, where at last she had a little home. Knowing that my duties kept me at the Museum on week-days she had fixed the time for a Sunday afternoon.

It will be remembered that we had met in the previous December, so that I found little change in her now. As I had noticed then, she had grown more spiritual, with an expression of restfulness and peace.

"That's because I don't struggle so much," she explained, in answer to my remark on this change; "I don't fight so much. I'm not nearly the rebel I used to be."

"Does that mean that you've made up your mind to let things go?"

"No; to let things come. That's what I wouldn't do before. I wanted to hurry them, to force them, to drag them along. I begin to see that life has its own

current upward, and that we succeed best by getting into it and letting it carry us onward."

"But doesn't that theory tend to take away one's own initiative?"

"I don't know that initiative is any good if it's directed the wrong way. Did you ever watch a leaf being carried down-stream? As long as it's in the current it goes swiftly and safely. Then something catches it and throws it into some little side-pool or backwater, where it goes fretting and swirling and tearing itself to pieces and never getting anywhere. Well, it's something like that. I was in a side-pool, lashing round and round and churning my spirit, such as it is, into nervous irritations of every kind, making myself the more furious because my efforts were to no purpose."

"And how did you get out into the current again?"

"By wishing, in the first place. It began to seem to me such a foolish thing that, being given all the advantages in the world, I could do nothing but frustrate them. I was like a person with a pack of cards in his hand, not knowing how to play any game. I longed to learn one, even the simplest; and I think it was the idea of the simplest that saved me."

"I'm not sure that I get that, the simplest."

"Oh, it's nothing abstruse or original. I suppose it's no more than the accepted principle of doing the duty that's nearest. Hitherto, I'd felt that nothing was a real duty but what was far away. Then I began to see that right under our own roof— You see, Boyd and Lulu weren't very happy, and I'd been leaving them to shift for themselves while I tried to do things for people like Lydia Blair and Harry Drinkwater, and a lot of others who were perfectly well able to take care of themselves. So I began to wonder if I couldn't ... and to wish.... And it's so curious! The minute I did that the things I could do were right there just as if they'd been staring me in the face for years, and I hadn't had the eyes to see them."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, hardly worth naming when it comes to words. Not big things, little things. If Lulu wanted something she couldn't find in New York, a particular sort of scarf or piece of music, no matter what, I'd tell Boyd and he'd send for it; and, of course, you see! Or if Lulu said anything nice about Boyd, which she did now and then, I'd make it a point of telling him. That's the sort of thing, nothing when you come to talk about it, and yet in practice— That's what I mean by the simplest, the easiest, and most natural; and so I formed a kind of principle."

"Do you mind telling me what it is?"

"Only that, whoever you are, your work is given you; you don't have to go into the highways and hedges to look for it. That queer boy, Harry Drinkwater, gave me the secret of it first. I asked him one day how it was that, in spite of all

his handicaps, he managed to get on so well. He said he had only one recipe for success, which was wishing and watching, and watching and wishing. He said there was no door that wouldn't open to you of its own accord if you stood before it long enough with that Sesame in your heart. I remember his saying, too, that in the matter of work, desire—desire that's not wrong, of course—was our first point of contact with the divine, since the thing that we urgently wish to do is the thing by which we re-express the God who has first expressed Himself in us. The most important duty, then, is to find out what we really want, and then to wish and watch. Most of us don't know what we want, or, if we do, we're not clear enough about it, and so we get lost in confusion, like travelers in a swamp. Of course he said it all much more quaintly than I'm doing it; but that was the gist, and it helped to put me into the line of thought in which I've—I've found content."

"That is, you analyzed first what it was you really wanted to do."

"Exactly; and I discovered two things: first, that I didn't want anything half so much as to help—I've told you that before—unless it was the happiness of the people to whom I was nearest. I found, too, that if I began at the beginning and followed the line of least resistance I'd get farther in the end. Up to that time I'd begun in the middle, and so could get neither backward nor forward, as I used to complain to you."

Having thought this over, I said:

"You're fortunate in having the people to whom you're nearest close enough to you for—for daily intercourse and influence."

There was distinct significance in her response.

"Perhaps I'm fortunate in never having turned my back on them as long as they were in need of me. Do you remember how I used to want a home of my own? Well, something kept me at least from *that*. Whenever I came face to face with doing what I've felt free to do at last, there was always a second thought that held me back. If Boyd and Lulu had had children it would have been different. But Lulu didn't want any till—till lately, and so I felt that something was needed to ease the grinding of the wheels between them. I did recognize that. But now that they've got the little boy—"

"Got a little boy?" I said, in astonishment.

"Why, yes. Didn't any one tell you? Two weeks old to-day, and such a darling! One day he looks like Lulu, and the next like Boyd, and they're both as happy as two children. That's why I've felt free to be my own mistress, to this extent, at least. Things do work out, you know, if you'll only give them half a chance, and stop fretting. That's another thing," she smiled; "it came to me one day in church when they were reading the Psalms, though I'd often heard the words before without paying them attention. *'Fret not thyself, else shalt thou be*

moved to do evil. I suppose people worried three thousand years ago just as we do to-day; and had to be told not to. Well, I've tried not to *fret myself*, and I've got on, oh, so much better."

She was so serene that as I passed my cup for more tea I ventured on something from which otherwise I should have shrunk:

"I'm a little surprised that in your analysis of the things you really wanted you've forgotten the one most people crave for first."

She took this with her customary simple directness.

"Oh no, I haven't. It's only that something seems to have been left out of me that—that I don't demand it as much as many other women; and then—it's hard to put into words—the conviction has come to me that—that whenever I'm ready for it I shall get it. I'm not ready for it, yet." Her amber eyes rested on me with the utmost truthfulness. "It's odd; but I'm not. The very fact that I don't demand it yet, some women, you know, are like that, and I suppose some men, but that very fact shows that it's wiser not to congest one's life by tackling too many things at a time. The one thing I'm growing certain of is that it all depends on oneself as to whether or not the windows of heaven are open to pour us out blessings, and that whatever I want, within reason, I shall get in the long run."

It was partly this theory of life, and partly a sense of assurance and relief, that led me on to talk of my personal situation. As Drinkwater had done, she dismissed my mental misfortunes as incidental, interesting pathologically, but not morally decisive. As to my return to New York after having actually found my way home I felt obliged to give her some explanation. It was while I was doing this that she asked, as if casually:

"Do you like Colonel Stroud?"

"No," I said, bluntly. "Do you?"

"I can see that he has a sort of fascination ... for other women." She nodded, more thoughtfully, "I don't trust him."

"Neither do I."

"I thought not. That's what makes me wonder—"

She hesitated so long that I was compelled to say:

"Wonder, what?"

"Perhaps I had better not go on."

"Please do."

"I only will on condition that you authorize me."

"I authorize you to say anything you choose."

"Well, then, since you *don't* trust him, I wonder how you could expose any woman to—to his influence."

"Oh, but I don't. The—the events all took place while I was away, and I've no control over them."

"No control, perhaps; but there are other things in life besides control."

"I know that; but what things, for instance, do you mean?"

"Oh, lots of things." She looked about the room as if not attaching much importance to her words. "Love, for one."

"But in this case love has to be counted out."

"Can you ever count out love? I thought that was the one permanent factor in existence, though the skies were to fall."

"It may be a permanent factor, and yet have to remain in abeyance."

She laughed.

"Nonsense! Who ever heard of love remaining in abeyance? You might as well talk of fire remaining in abeyance when it's raging, or water when it's bursting a dam, or any other element in active operation. If I loved any one, no matter how little, I should want to save them from a man like Colonel Stroud."

"In spite of the fact that you'd been considered guilty of—"

"Oh, what does it matter what any one thinks of so poor a thing as oneself? I mean that oneself *to oneself* is so very unimportant."

"Oh, do you think so?"

"Of course I know that there are other points of view, and that from some of them oneself *to oneself* is the most vital of all considerations. But in the detail of what other people think of one—"

"Even when the other people are those of whom you think most in all the world?"

"Let us think most of them then. Don't let us think most about ourselves."

"Do you suppose I'm thinking most about myself now? I assure you I'm not."

She laughed again, not lightly, but rather pitifully.

"I must leave you to judge of that."

CHAPTER IV

I did judge of it, all through that spring, coming more and more to the conclusion that I was right. It was not the only occasion on which Mildred Averill and I talked the matter over; but it became at last a subject on which agreeing to differ seemed our only course. The time came when I remembered with an inward blush that I had once feared that this clear-eyed, well-poised girl, who had really found

herself, might be in love with me. What her exact sentiment toward me was I have never been able to name further than to put it under the head of a "deep interest." Had circumstances been in our favor that interest might at one time have ripened into something more; but from that she was saved by the instinct which told her that, in spite of my assertions, as to which she nevertheless didn't charge me with untruth, I was a married man.

One more detail I must add concerning her.

On a Saturday afternoon in early May I had gone to her to talk over the great news of the day, that the peace terms had been handed to the enemy at Versailles. It must be remembered that she was the one person, outside my colleagues in the Museum, with whom I could discuss the topics nearest to my heart. With Pelly, Bridget, the Finn, and even with Miss Smith, I had friendly arguments as to the League of Nations and similar matters of public concern; but they rarely went beyond the catchwords of the newspapers.

"My dear father," Miss Smith would say, gently, "who was an eminent oculist in his time, Doctor Smith, you may have heard of him, used to say that his policy was to keep this country out of entangling alliances. That was his expression, entangling alliances. I always think of it when I see foreigners."

"From awl I hear," Bridget informed me, "this here League o' Nations they make so much talk about is on'y to help the English to oppress Ireland."

"Will it bring down prices?" the Finn demanded, if ever I spoke of it with him, and when I confessed that I couldn't be sure that it would, he dismissed the theme with, "Then that's all I want to know."

"Punk, I call it," was Pelly's verdict, "unless Lloyd George is for it; and whatever he says goes with me."

This being the scope of my conversations on the subject it became a special pleasure to air my opinions with one who, while not always agreeing with me, took in such matters the same kind of interest as myself.

We were, therefore, in what is called the thick of it when a shuffling and laughing were heard from the hall. Suspending our remarks to look up in curiosity we saw Lydia come in leading Drinkwater. From the festive note in their costumes Miss Averill leaped to a conclusion.

"No!" she cried, as the two stood giggling sheepishly before her tea-table. "You *haven't*?"

"We *have*."

The statement was his.

"I talked him into it," Lydia declared, laughingly. "He didn't want to, but I was afraid that if I didn't tie him by the leg he'd fly the coop."

"But," I asked, "what about your great career?"

"Oh, well, I've put that off a bit. I can always take it up again. Anyhow,

you never heard of an adventuress who wasn't married. She doesn't have to stay married; but a single woman who's an adventuress gets nowhere. The Russian countess in 'The Scarlet Sin' had been married twice, first to a professor—that'd be Harry—and then to a count. I can begin looking forward to the count right now, because Harry is what you may call a thing of the past."

When they giggled themselves out again, to go and give the news to some one else, Miss Averill said, whole-heartedly:

"Well, I'm glad!"

Thinking of Vio and Stroud I asked why.

"Because Lydia is safe for a while anyhow."

"Didn't you think she was safe already?"

"Not wholly. There was *some one*."

"Some one she liked?"

"No, some one she didn't like. That was the funny part of it. But about four or five months ago she came to me with so incoherent a tale that I couldn't make anything out of it. There was a man, a gentleman she said he was, who wanted her to go off with him; and to save some one else she began to think she ought to do it. I really can't tell you what it was, because I couldn't get it straight; only there was a wild, foolish, lovely idea of self-sacrifice in it, and now it's over. *He* won't get her; and if ever any one deserved an exquisite thing like her it's Harry Drinkwater. He can't see how pretty she is, of course; but he gets the essence of beauty that is more than physical."

We dropped the terms of peace and the League of Nations and frankly discussed love. I had already told her that for me, notwithstanding all the conditions, there was no woman in the world but Vio.

"And for me," she laughed, "there's—there's Lohengrin." My expression must have betrayed my curiosity, because she went on: "Haven't I told you that it's all a matter for ourselves whether the blessings of existence are ours or not; and what blessing is greater than a good husband when one wants one? When Elsa was in need of a defender she went down on her knees, a method of expressing her point of view, and he came right out of the clouds. There's always a Lohengrin for every woman born, and there's always an Elsa for every man, and whether or not they find each other largely rests on their understanding of the source from which Elsas and Lohengrins come."

"And you're sure of your own Lohengrin?"

She answered with a laughing air of challenge:

"Perfectly. Whenever I give the right call I know he'll be on the way."

But this optimism didn't weigh with me. Knowing all I did of love and life, the simple performance of simple tasks began to seem to me the most satisfying food for men. From nearly all of those whom I have quoted I made the synthetic

gleaning of bees in a garden of flowers, building my own little cell for my soul and storing it.

I needed such a cell. As May passed and June came in there was much in the trend of public life to make those, who had yearned and hoped and looked forward, cynical. The splendid spiritual freedom for which people had given their efforts and their sons was plainly not to be achieved. If the human race had moved higher it was not directly apparent at Versailles or anywhere else in the world; while in America, the home of the ideal, the land in which so many of the heart-stirring watchwords had been coined, passion, selfishness, distortion, extortion, and contortion were the chief signs of the new times. North of us Canada, hitherto so tranquilly industrious, was threatened with internal convulsion; south of us Mexico, which some of us had hoped was pacified, was prey to new distress. For me, to keep my sanity amid all this conflict of forces, a little secret temple of my own became a necessity, and to it I retired.

It wasn't much. Having built my shrine with what I had harvested from Drinkwater, Lydia, Mildred Averill, and the rest, I hid myself there with some half-dozen disciples. They were Bridget's boy, the Finn's two sons, and three or four of their chums whom they had brought in. Not only did their young affection give me something I sorely needed in my inner life, but I had the hope that, building on them, I was doing something for the future. Grown men and women were beyond my endeavors. These fresh souls, with their nearness to God, understood my faltering speech, which fell so far short of the ideas I was trying to interpret.

They were simple ideas, connected with practical beauty. That is, with the Museum as what we called our clubhouse, all man's treasures of material creative art were ours. These we were taking in their order, beginning with my own specialty of all things woven, from the crudest specimens of ancient linens up to the splendors of the tapestries, and going on to kindred and allied crafts. Not only art was involved in this, but history, biography, travel, romance, and everything else that adds drama to human accomplishment. To me, with the big void in my life, it was the most nearly satisfying thing I knew to reveal to these eager little minds something of the wonders with which the world was full; to them, with their ugly homes, cramped outlooks, and misshapen hopes, it was, I fancy, much what the marvels of the next world will be to those accustomed to the dwarfed conceptions of this.

Saturday afternoons were the days of our reunions, and we came to the last in June. It was a fatal day, the 28th, marking the fifth anniversary of the tragedy through which the new world began to dissociate itself forever from the old. As contemporary history was a large part of our interest, with the development of man's efforts stage by stage, the occasion naturally came in for comment.

On that particular day we were in the great room, which, as far as I know, has no rival in any other museum in the world, where the whole history of ceramic art is visually unfolded in order from the crude, strong products of the Han, Tang, and Sung dynasties in China, up through the manifold efflorescence of European art to such American works as that of Bennington, Cincinnati, and Dedham, which may be the forerunner of a new departure.

We had come to that section of the room where were displayed the first representative pieces brought back from the East by merchants and ambassadors, and so voyages of discovery were in order. Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama and the Dutch, English, and Portuguese explorers had been discussed, and I was in the act of giving to my boys the story of the origin of delftware as an attempt to reproduce in abundance what the Oriental traders brought over only in small quantities. The specimens of delft being on shelves but little above the floor, I was crouched in a half-sitting position, with the lads hanging over my shoulders. Not till I had finished this part of my exposition did I rise, to find on turning that a lady was looking on.

Recognition on my part lagged behind amazement. Tall, slender, distinguished, dressed in black, and somewhat thickly veiled for a day in June, it was the sort of apparition to make a man doubt the accuracy of his senses. Before my lips could frame a word she held out something toward me, saying simply:

"Billy, I came to bring you this."

The boys fell back, knowing by instinct that the moment was one of dramatic significance to me and looking on overawed.

What I had in my hand I saw at once to be nothing but a copy of one of the New York papers that appear in the afternoon. That it contained some announcement affecting me went without saying, and a half-dozen terrors crowded into my mind at once. Without my knowing it she might have got a divorce; she might have got a divorce and remarried; she might have lost her money; I might have lost mine; some one near to us might be dead.

I held the paper stupidly, staring at her through the veil, and opening the journal without seeing it. When my eyes fell on the first page it was entirely a white blankness, except for a single word in enormous letters:

PEACE!

My eyes lifted themselves to hers; fell to that one word again; lifted themselves to hers once more. She stood impassive, motionless, waiting.

"So—so they've signed it," was all I could find to stammer out.

"Yes; they've signed it. I—I thought you might like to know."

"Of course." Further than this superficial fact, I was too dazed to go; but I knew I must get rid of the boys. Turning to Patsy Bridget, I said, "Patsy, could you take the other boys home and see them safely to their doors?"

"Sure!" Patsy answered, with the confidence of fifteen.

"Aw, we don't want no one to take us home," the elder of the Finn's boys protested. "Me and me kid bruvver go all over N'York. Don't we, Broncho?"

Another lad spoke up.

"I come from me aunt's house in Harlem right down to East Thirty-fourth Street all by meself and me little sister."

It was Vio who arranged the matter to every one's satisfaction. With her right hand on one boy's shoulder and her left on another's she said, in a tone of quiet authority:

"You see, this is the way it is: The war is over at last. They've just signed the peace treaty, and I've come to tell Mr. Harrowby. But now that we've got peace we've got to go on fighting, only fighting in a better way and for better things. Now, you're a little army, with Mr. Harrowby as your commander-in-chief, like Marshal Foch. But under him you're all officers, according to your ages. Patsy is the general, and you're the colonel," she continued to the elder Finn boy.

"Aw, no, he's not, miss," one of the other lads declared, tearfully. "I'm older'n him. He's only twelve goin' on thirteen, and I'm thirteen goin' on fourteen."

This, too, was adjusted, and with a dollar from Vio for ice-cream sodas, the general traped out, followed by colonel, major, captain, and lieutenants, each keeping to his rank by marching in Indian file. I had never before seen Vio in this light, and something new and human that had not entered into our previous relations suddenly was there.

Left alone with her, I was in too great a tumult of excitement to find words for the opportunity.

"How did you know where to find me?" was the question I asked, stupidly.

"Miss Averill told me. She said you'd be here with your boys, and she thought you'd told her you'd be doing this particular subject. I went through some of the other rooms first."

"I didn't know you knew her."

"I didn't till—till lately. I was interested in making her acquaintance because of things Alice Mountney said, and you said."

"What did I say?"

"Oh, nothing of much importance, except for showing me that—that—she was the one."

"What one?"

"The one you spoke of ... the ... the last evening. That's ... that's what made me come to New York, Billy, to see if I could do anything ... to ... to help out."

"To help out how?"

"Oh, Billy, don't make yourself dull. You know that nothing can be done unless I, or you, or one of us, should take the first step."

I asked, with a casual intonation:

"How's Stroud?"

Fire flashed right through the thickness of the veil, but she answered in the tone I had taken:

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since—since that girl—"

"She's married."

"Oh, is she? I hope it's to some one—"

"It's to some one as true-blue as she."

"She is true-blue, Billy. I see that now. She—she must be to have wanted to do what she did for ... a woman like me, who—"

She took a step or two toward one of the cases, where she pretended to examine the luster of a great Moorish plaque.

"She's an erratic little thing," I said, finding it easier to talk of a third person rather than of ourselves, "all pluck, and high spirit, and good heart, harum-scarum, and yet a great deal wiser than you'd think."

She turned round from the plaque without coming nearer to me.

"I just want to say that the things she told me, the things she pretended to betray, were things I knew more or less already. I'd been coming to the same conclusions for myself, only I hadn't quite reached them.... And then you came back, and everything was so strange ... after I'd been in mourning for you ... and given those prints as a memorial in your name! I wish—" I detected something like a sob—"I wish you could make some allowances for me, Billy."

The minute was a hard one for me, but I stood my ground:

"I make all allowances, Vio; I've no hard feelings whatever."

She advanced toward me by a pace.

"Then will you do this for me? If I can find a way to—to give you your liberty will you—will you marry Mildred Averill, and—and be happy?"

Though my heart was going wild I know my eyes must have been cold as I said:

"I can't promise you that, Vio, for a double reason. First, I'm not in love with her; and then she's not in love with me."

"Oh, but I thought she was. Everybody says so."

"Who's everybody?"

"Well—well, Alice Mountney."

"I can see how Alice Mountney might make that mistake; but it is a mistake,

Vio, and please let my saying so convince you. I'll be quite frank with you and say that I thought so once myself. I'll even go so far as to say that at one time, if everything had been different, it might have happened. But—but everything was as it was, and so— Well, the long and short of it is that there's nothing in it, and I must beg you to take that as decisive."

"Then—then, who is it?"

"No one. I've found my work, a very humble work, as you've just seen."

"A very fine and useful work."

"I hope so; and I'm not—not unhappy, specially."

She moved along the line of cases, as if carelessly examining the contents.

"What's that?" she asked, coming to a pause.

Obliged to go close to her, I was careful not to touch so much as the surface of her clothes.

"It's just a cup and saucer, Ludwigsburg, an old Rhine valley factory now extinct. They liked those little fancy scenes."

"It seems to be a woman pleading with a man, doesn't it?"

"It looks like that. It probably means nothing beyond a bit of decoration."

"And he seems so implacable, while she's down on her knees, poor thing!" She looked round at me. "Are you busy here still?"

"Oh, there are always things to do. Why?"

"I thought you might walk back to—to the hotel with me."

I took out my watch, though unable to read the time even when I looked at it.

"I'm so sorry, but I'm afraid—"

"Oh no, you're not." There was a repetition of the catch in the tone that suggested a sob. "Billy, aren't we—aren't we going to be friends?"

I couldn't soften toward her. I felt no springs of forgiveness.

"Why should you want to be friends with me?"

"Because I can't help it, for one thing," she cried; "and for another—" Turning away wearily she began to move toward the door. "Of course if you don't want to, I can't urge it, and so must learn to get along by myself."

Something in the last phrase prompted me to say:

"Is there anything specially wrong?"

"No; only everything specially wrong. If you had come back to the hotel with me I could have told you."

"Can't you tell me now? Is it about—about Stroud?"

"Oh no, Billy. Can't you forget about that? I have. He's dropped out of my existence. That was all a mistake, like the other things."

"What other things?"

"All the other things." She pointed to the big word "PEACE" staring at us

from a chair to which I had thrown the newspaper. "Look at that. Doesn't it make all the last five years seem unreal, like a nightmare after you've got up? Well, that's the way I feel now ... about ... about—"

"About me?"

"Of course. I never should have thought it at all, only that Wolf and Dick Stroud, and even the military authorities— But at heart I *didn't* believe them—"

"Do you mean that—?"

She nodded without waiting for me to finish the question.

"But I want it very plainly, Vio."

"I'll tell you as plainly as you like, Billy, but—but not now. I'm too worried."

"But what about? Is it—?"

"Oh, everything!" she burst out, desperately. "Money for one thing. Didn't you see how shabby the house was, and run down?" The sobs began to come freely now, and without restraint. "And—and Lulu Averill has a little boy, a perfect darling, and our little Bobby—"

"I'll go back with you to the hotel," I said, quietly, "only, don't—don't cry here, with people coming in and out."

She dried her eyes, drew down her veil, and took her sunshade from a corner. Picking up the paper she had brought, I folded it and slipped it into my pocket. I began to wonder if it might not prove a souvenir.

On the way to the main exit we passed through a corridor lined with cases of old silver.

"Do you think your boys would like a day with those things?" she asked, with the slight convulsion of her throat that a child has after tears.

"I'm sure they would."

"I could—I could take them, some day, when you didn't want to go, if you'd let me. It's one of the few things I know something about."

"I'm afraid it would bore you."

She paused for just an instant. "Bore me? Billy, nothing will ever bore me again so long as you—you let me—"

As she could say no more we resumed our walk.

Out in the open a boy rushed up to us, a Slavic creature with huge questioning eyes.

"Peace, mister! Peace, miss! Buy one! Great historic 'casion!"

They were like doves, all up and down the avenue, white, fluttering, bearing the one blessed, magical word. They were in motor-cars, carriages, and on the tops of omnibuses—all white, all fluttering, all blessed, and all magical. Up and down and everywhere the cry burst from hundreds of raucous little throats:

"Peace! *Peace!* PEACE!"

"It's like coming out into a new world, isn't it?" I said.

"It is a new world, for me. Do you remember saying that day when you first came home that the new world made the war? Now it's made something else, in which it seems to me there'll be just as much struggle called for, only with a difference. Then the hard things were done to break us down; now they may be just as hard, only they'll be to build us up. The East isn't farther from the West, is it, than these two motives? I've never wanted to build up anything in my life; but now I feel as if—"

Once more we walked silently among the doves, listening to that throaty, lusty cry that was sheer music:

"Peace! *Peace!* PEACE!"

We had come to that avenue in the park sacred to little boys and girls, when she said:

"He's a darling, Lulu Averill's baby; and they—quite understand each other—now."

This second reference prompted me to give her a long sidewise look, but she did not return it.

"Perhaps—" I ventured.

"Oh, Billy!"

It was barely a sigh, but for the minute it was enough for me, as she pressed forward, with veiled profile set, like one gazing into the future.

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE THREAD OF FLAME

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