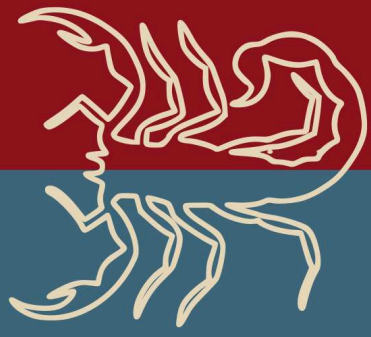
THE Scorpion



Anna Elisabet Weirauch

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SCORPION ***

THE SCORPION

BY ANNA ELISABET WEIRAUCH

The Scorpion

Translated from the German by
WHITTAKER CHAMBERS

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I

Frankly, I desired to make Myra's acquaintance because of her evil reputation.

It was from Aunt Antonia that I first heard of her. Aunt Antonia was a very pious and respectable lady, and lies and slander were alien to her. She saw things with a sharp eye, but saw them from a set viewpoint.

According to her tale, Myra had even as a child exhibited a peculiar propensity to lying and stealing. In school she was considered stupid and lazy. As a young girl, she had run around with a remarkable woman, a fashionably dressed sharper, with a decidedly masculine manner. Misled, perhaps, by this friend, she had stolen her father's silver service and pawned it. After a fit of downright insanity during which she tried to strangle her aunt, who had been the motherless child's faithful guardian, she was dispatched to her Uncle George in a small town. There she stole everything not nailed down, very skillfully forced her uncle's desk and, appropriating a large sum of money, fled.

Her father, a mental man of a most sensitive nature, did not long survive this news: he died of a stroke.

Myra's mother had died in giving her life. "Luckily," as Uncle George was wont to say bitterly.

But Myra did not share his opinion. She had a fantastic notion of what a mother is, and believed that her own mother's premature death was the cause of all the misfortunes in her life.

For my part, I cannot say which view is correct. Certain it is, that Myra's childhood would not have been as dismal and joyless as under Aunt Emily's bony fingers; at

the same time, even the gentlest of mothers' hands could not have saved her from the bitterest struggles of her life. And when I recall the latter, I understand Uncle George's "luckily" quite well. Doubtless he had a clearer picture of his sister than Myra could possibly have had.

Little Myra was not to go to school; her father, Franz Rudloff himself ordered it so. He had an almost morbid fear of anything that suggested "the common people." It seemed to him as if his cool, high-ceilinged home would be contaminated with the exhalations of poorly ventilated class-rooms, as if his quiet walls would re-echo to hundreds of shrill voices, to hundreds of trampling feet, were he to send his daughter to school.

So a governess came to the house.

Aunt Emily was in secret opposition from the first. She had gone to school, and school had not harmed her in any way. Quite the contrary.

She was absolutely opposed to the idea that anybody in this world should have anything better than she had or had had. One of the few pleasures she permitted herself in life was that of "impartial justice," as she called it. That is to say, if anyone is getting along undeservedly well, he must be made to suffer for his unmerited good fortune by some heavy blow of fate.

Other people have another name for this type of pleasure.

Aunt Emily was "against" the teacher. But Aunt Emily was much too much of a model to object when the master of the house expressed a desire. She knew that in such cases she must submit in silence. Not that poor Franz would ever have *demanded* it of her. Oh dear no! But it was the proper thing to do. So she pinched the corners of her mouth a little tighter and submitted in silence.

The teacher had such wavy, wayward hair that the brown curls refused to be laid flat and were always fluttering about her face. Moreover, she had the

disposition which, according to the proverb, goes with such hair. All the men who had played a brief or a lengthy rôle in her life declared she would have made a ravishing lover. She was somewhat less qualified to educate a little girl.

Aunt Emily had not chosen her. That had been quite definitely Franz Rudloff's and Myra's concern. One thing father and daughter had in common—all their senses thirsted for beauty and harmony. They put a premium on externals, as Aunt Emily expressed it.

The governess, the "young lady," had such a charming, girlish face, such gentle gestures and such a beautiful, vibrant voice.

But it was no sense of personal interest that attracted Franz Rudloff to the "young lady." It was simply that if he must take a stranger into his house, he preferred that she be an agreeable creature. Perhaps he was, to a degree unsuspected by himself, heartily sick of a disagreeable one.

Myra's case was different. She had never in all her life seen any human soul that so appealed to her. All her eager child's heart, which neither love nor tenderness had ever filled, went out toward this stranger, this stranger who took her into her arms, who brushed the hair from her forehead with her gentle hands while her voice caressingly called her "darling" and "pet." The prospect of having this person always near her was an inconceivable, a delirious joy.

She did not beg her father. Myra Rudloff never could beg, not even if it were a question of her life.

But when her father asked her if the "young lady" should come, she said, "Yes." And the "young lady" came. But Aunt Emily pinched the corners of her mouth tighter and submitted in silence.

In the next three or four years, while the "young lady" remained in the house, Myra experienced all the tortures

of unhappy love.

For the first few months everything went splendidly. That is the most unhappy part of an unhappy love—it always begins with an extravagant happiness.

The “young lady” was very fond indeed of Myra, and Myra was very fond indeed of the “young lady,” and they studied together and played together and went for walks together. It was a glorious time. But like all glorious times, of brief duration.

Surely some fiend suddenly cast the former lieutenant of hussars, von Hanston, in their path, that very lieutenant of hussars whom the “young lady” had loved ardently from the time when she was not a young lady at all, but was called Frieda Ellert and went to the seminary and danced at her first balls in the city where she was born.

This former lieutenant of hussars had no very clean record behind him. He had had to leave the service on account of debts, and had since tried his hand at a little of everything. He referred to his present occupation only in very ambiguous, albeit in very high-sounding, terms.

But that in no sense prevented the flame from kindling again in the “young lady’s” bosom, or Myra, “sweet little Myra, who was as good as gold,” from being a nuisance who was continually in the way.

At first, Myra was simply cross when her “brother” paid the “young lady” a visit and the child was sent to her bedroom, because the “young lady” could not receive a gentleman in a room where there was a bed. Later they changed all that.

It was enough to make anybody cross. And if the visits had continued and Myra had continued to be shut out, and if that cold, unfriendly tone which was habitual with the “young lady” these days, had continued, too, Myra’s burning love might have changed very quickly to hate—and all would have been well.

But the devil alone knows, that same devil who had washed up von Hanston on Victoria Louisa Square one morning, what von Hanston had up his sleeve. Some private worries, no doubt, or debts or another little love affair—at any rate, the "young lady" presently began to feel aggrieved, and to mope and to weep all night.

That was too much for Myra.

Myra Rudloff did not cry easily. She did not believe that a human being could cry unless he were suffering the extremes of agonized despair. Therefore, she would have torn her heart out of her breast to comfort anyone who was crying.

So when Frieda wept for her lieutenant of hussars, Myra suffered all the torments of Hell.

At first, since the "young lady" did not want to wake the child, she wept softly; in fact, wept herself to sleep in a quarter of an hour. But when she observed that Myra woke up, or perhaps did not dare go to sleep, and made an effort to remain awake, listening to every breath, then she felt quite free to give vent to her grief and let herself be comforted.

At the sound of the first sobs, Myra would jump out of her little bed and run in her bare feet across the bare floor. Then she would crouch at the "young lady's" bedside and weep and shiver, and comfort her with her sweet, delicate child's voice, and her gentle and good child's hands.

And the "young lady" permitted herself to be caressed and comforted while she braced her feet against the foot of the bed, bent back her head, tore the pillows with her nails and cried, "The dog! The scoundrel! I can't stand it any longer! I'll die! He's killing me!"

By the time that these scenes took place, Myra had already known for some while that these outbursts referred to the "brother," and that this "brother" was no brother at all.

She felt such a furious torment of hatred against the man that she often pondered with fierce intensity how she could manage to do away with him.

These “nights of memories and of sighs” were bad. But they were by no means the worst. The worst was that the gentleman would appear again the next day and be received between laughter and tears, with open reproaches and hardly dissembled tenderness, and Myra would be sent to her room.

Then Myra would grind her teeth and dig her nails into her palms, and give way to the most torturing rage.

Myra was capable of much rudeness on these occasions. It was not her way to show sorrow when she was suffering. She preferred to be rude. Hence it is quite understandable that there were times when the “young lady” was furiously angry at her.

Had Myra been able to tell how she felt inside, she would have wept and said, “I love you and I am jealous. Doubly jealous because your love is bestowed on a man who torments you and whom you pretend to despise. I suffer because I have to love a creature who has so little pride and character.”

Myra went into the room, *her* room that she was not permitted to enter while that hated “scoundrel” was sitting there. She entered without knocking, she carried her head very high and set her tiny foot down very firmly.

She laid her books and notebooks on the table, opened the ink-well with a bang and pretended to be looking at the clock. She really was, but she was still so small that she had some difficulty in telling the time.

“I have a lesson,” she said.

“That scoundrel” sneered contemptuously and excused himself.

“How dare she do such a thing?” the “young lady” hissed at her.

Myra strove to think of some hateful reply, and she succeeded.

"My father doesn't pay you simply to keep that 'scoundrel' sitting here all the time!" she said.

The "young lady" would have liked to strike her. But she shrank from the menacing gravity of the child's pale face.

Never had anybody dared strike Myra Rudloff, although many may have felt the temptation.

The "young lady" caught her by the arm and shook her. She gripped the child so tightly that the pressure of her fingers was visible several days afterward as five blue marks on the tender skin.

If Myra had blue marks on her arm once, she had them a hundred times, or welts on her shoulders, or scratches on her hands. Had she wanted to complain, help was assured. If she had just once showed Aunt Emily the traces of one such scene, instead of anxiously hiding them, "that person" would have gone for good. Myra knew this but did not want to do it. Hence she had to fight her battle through single-handed.

When Frieda perceived that the child was superior to her, she changed her tactics. Myra must no longer be treated as an enemy, she must be made a confidante. Everything must be poured forth to Myra's silent, little heart, all the joys and sorrows of this affair, and a whole mass of rubbish, besides.

Myra had to stand watch, Myra had to convey letters and carry on telephone conversations, and Myra was showered with kisses and caresses. Another child might have been quite happy in this state of affairs. Myra continued to suffer.

The difficulty probably lay in the fact that she detested the man so much. If it had been someone she liked, she might have accommodated herself more readily to the situation.

Sometimes, when the “young lady” was in a mood to belabor her heart’s dearest, she would take the child on her knee and swear to leave that terrible man. Then amidst tears and oaths everything would be promised.

“Yes, my darling, yes, my angel, he shall never cross that threshold again, the dirty dog! I have you, my pet, my comfort, I will live for you alone!”

For Myra these were moments of an agonized bliss.

But they were only moments, for all that, for when the telephone rang, or when a letter came, or when they met the gentleman “accidentally” in the public gardens, everything was forgotten again.

Myra comprehended that here was something against which she could do nothing. She comprehended darkly that she had no right to demand a human being entirely for herself, because she was a child. And she burned with a desire to grow up quickly, quickly, in order to possess what she loved, wholly and solely.

Then came that strange business with the silverware.

One night the “young lady” gave Myra the keys to the silver closet and a shallow leather-covered case. Myra was to return the case to the closet. The “young lady” had borrowed it secretly because her bridegroom wanted to see the pretty silver.

Myra wanted to see, too. She teased so long that the “young lady” opened the case. There were the thick, shiny spoons, row on row, each in its groove in the dark blue velvet. Not one was missing.

Myra felt an irresistible pleasure in stealing down the long hall, as silently as a cat, groping her way in the dining-room without turning on the lights, cautiously unlocking the closet without the key’s grinding or the door’s creaking, laying the case in its place and looking up again. Then she had to suppress her joy with an effort as she flew into the “young lady’s” arms and let herself be praised.

This first attempt was only an introduction. With astonishment and admiration Myra discovered the workings of the pawn system. It was quite miraculous—all one needed to do was lend silver or jewelry in order to receive a whole heap of money. And in a short time you received your things back again unharmed. Indeed, they were not even used during that time, as the "young lady" replied assuringly to Myra's questions, with a laugh. It was a wonderful arrangement.

It was so lovely to lie in bed at night and chatter and nibble candy. But candy was so terribly dear. Therefore, from time to time, the silver was "lent." It did the silver no harm, and the secrecy with which it had to be taken and returned was a real lark.

But once the big case was sent away and did not come back again. It was gone so everlastingly long that nobody gave a thought to it any longer.

Then it occurred to Aunt Emily during house-cleaning one day to have all the silver counted over and cleaned. Aunt Emily knew to a fork-tine just how much silver was in the household. But Aunt Emily was much too much of a model to depend upon her memory in matters so tremendous. On the inside of each door in the sideboard was tacked a little slip of rice-paper on which was written in Aunt Emily's eminently distinct and legible hand:

Contents

A leather case with 12 soup spoons, monogram L. R.
A wooden case with 12 dessert spoons, monogram G. v. S.

With the help of these lists she established beyond a doubt that one case was missing.

Myra was not even frightened when she heard Aunt Emily's shrill, excited voice and the weeping of the affronted maid. She was simply happy to be able to

straighten out the situation. Thank heaven! Else poor Bertha would very likely have been suspected of stealing! Myra entered the room and said quite coolly and somewhat proudly, “You don’t need to be upset, Aunt. The silver is safe. I pawned it!”

As a result of the next few days’ events, it gradually dawned on Myra that she had done something which, in the opinion of the others, she was not justified in doing.

The house-maid told everybody who would listen to her that honest people were accused of stealing in her house because the “little brat” had “snitched” the silver and taken it to the pawnbroker.

The fat old cook wept and wrung her hands in lamentation.

Aunt Emily went about as if horror had turned her to stone. Tears came to the eyes of Myra’s father whenever he looked at his unhappy child. A children’s specialist even appeared on the scene, bearing the fearful and uncanny title of “psychiatrist,” and subjected Myra to a long examination.

And the “young lady” stormed and wept and screamed at her, calling her an “idiot” and an “imbecile,” and kicked and scratched her, then fell on her knees before her, declaring she was a “little saint,” and imploring her “to keep quiet.”

Myra “kept quiet.” But as she did not know what it was she should keep quiet about, she kept quiet about everything. She let them question her gently or angrily, during inquisitions that lasted for hours. She let them shake her, beseech her, let them lock her in her room—she would not talk. Her silence became a wall about her. She could no longer have broken it, had she wished.

But the “young lady” had to leave anyway. Whether she was an accessory or innocent, it was clear that no child could be so abandoned if its education were in good hands.

The “young lady” left. And Myra suffered all the mortal pangs of separation and loneliness.

II

Myra was sent to school.

But since they had deprived her of her “young lady,” she avenged herself by refusing to learn anything.

It was more than a year before her defiance gradually wore down. Then it was too late to make up what she had lost. Nor did she want to. She did not make the slightest effort to catch up. But neither was it any longer worthwhile to resist. She did what was demanded of her because it was less troublesome to learn the bare rudiments than to be always listening to long scoldings and admonitory harangues.

She grew incredibly fast at this period and was always tired.

* * *

When she finished school, she stayed at home for a few years and bored herself. She took the usual piano lessons and practised the prescribed number of hours. But she had no inborn musical talent, though she did have an exaggerated sensitiveness, so that she suffered from the shortcomings of her own playing, without the ability, or even the determination, to make up her deficiencies.

During these years her moods alternated like sun and showers in April. She longed to be dead, or to come of age, to be alive in another century, or some other part of the earth, to be a nun or so beautiful as to ravish the entire world.

These were years barren of incident. So barren that Myra seldom recalled them, and if the conversation

turned on anything that had happened during these years —a journey, a birth or a death among their acquaintances, or some public occurrence—she always had to think for a long time when it could have happened and how old she had been. On the other hand, she possessed an amazing memory for the period when people and things began to glide swiftly past her because she connected them with those days that stood like memorials in her mind—before or after Olga's death, when she was together with Olga or separated from her.

The moment when her life really began—with hundreds of roaring voices, with a full, singing, swinging motif that was never again to be mute, but would sound now in the major, now in the minor, now from all the violins and celli, now from a single complaining oboe, in a thousand intricacies, a thousand nuances, until the closing chord—that moment was when Olga Radó opened the door at Consul Moebius', and walked into the room.

There was nothing to be said, on the whole, against the Moebiuses. It was an acquaintance that Aunt Emily herself had cultivated. There were two daughters, Fannie and Emmie, both younger than Myra, both reddish blondes, very precise about their clothes and hair, and both so marvellously insignificant that after watching them for weeks, it was impossible to tell whether they really were pretty or homely.

The degree of their relationship with Olga Radó is no longer possible to ascertain. When she first appeared and everybody was raving about her, it was always—"Our cousin." Later every recollection of that relationship was completely effaced from the Moebius' mind.

Olga herself had never made much use of this "relationship" with Consul Moebius, in good days or in bad. She would never have visited the house had she not been begged three separate times.

Myra, the Moebius girls and Erika Hanneman formed a

little circle. They met once a week and did needlework or read French plays, taking different parts. It bored Myra to tears, she never listened when the others read and always managed to miss her cue.

One such Wednesday afternoon in April, the four girls were again sitting on their white-lacquered chairs in the elegant young ladies' room when the door opened, and Olga Radó entered.

She must accidentally have left another door open behind, too, for with Olga a breath of air as fresh as a puff of wind swept through the room. The window, which was ajar, flew open, the white mull curtains blew out and fluttered, the pages of the books rustled, the flies buzzed up around the light, while some hand in the sky tore a tatter of cloud from the face of the sun: a dazzling brightness and a cool breeze filled the room to its darkest corner.

Then the door closed with a loud bang, the window creaked to, the curtains fell back into the room like sacks, and a new cloud blotted out the sun. But none of these things did Myra Rudloff perceive, for she could do nothing but gaze at Olga Radó, could not take her eyes or her mind from her—not for a long, long time.

Olga was very tall and very slender. Her face was beautiful and boldly chiselled. Her smooth, rich, dark hair exposed much of her high and admirably modelled forehead. Her thin black brows drew together at the top of her nose, which gave her sharp, metallic-gray eyes an almost threatening expression. Her speech was crisp and hard. But her voice had a deep, soft, cello quality. It made a striking contrast.

There was something in her manner of dressing which pleased Myra without her being able to define it. One could not dispose of it with a word like "tasteful" or "elegant" or "smart." Myra felt dimly—"That is how I should like to dress."

Myra felt her throat go dry and her heart throb wildly when her turn came to read. She had never been so nervous in school no matter how unprepared she had come. Every word seemed a snare to her. She would mispronounce everything and make a fool of herself, irrevocably. It was really a crime to know so little French. She would go to her father tomorrow and ask him to let her take French lessons. He would be overjoyed to have her come to him with such a request.

She was relieved when she had stammered her few lines. Then came Erika's turn, and then Fannie again, with all the pathos at her command.

When they were all standing again, putting on their hats in front of the mirror, Myra noticed with an inexplicable joy that she was almost as tall as Olga Radó, much taller than the three fair, plump misses.

In a trio they descended the stairs and walked part of the way together. Erika Hanneman did most of the talking.

From time to time, Olga Radó said, "Isn't it?—No!—Indeed—Oh!—No?"

Myra was silent.

At last Erika Hanneman said good-bye and turned to the left.

Olga and Myra walked briskly side by side in silence for a while. Myra should long ago have turned off if she wanted to take the shortest way home. She observed with some concern that she kept right on going, but she was much too happy to stop now that Erika Hanneman had finally left them: the air seemed to have become purer and one could stride along more freely. It was a joy to keep up with this lovely, regular pace, and she comforted herself with the thought that nobody knew where she lived anyhow, and that she had just as much right on the street as anybody else.

Myra glanced at every house with a certain anxiety:

was it at this one or the next that Olga Radó would stop with a hasty good-bye, and the heavy door close behind her, leaving the street barren and lonely?

But at last they had reached a house in front of which Olga Radó suddenly halted.

"My home," she said, "if you can call a boarding-house home. But after all, what can you call home? Are you familiar with the Pension Flesch?"

"I don't know any boarding-houses."

"Lucky girl! You live with your parents?"

"With my father."

"Oh, the house is quite nice. I have lived in worse. Drop in once in a while and have a look at my cubbyhole!"

"I'd love to."

* * *

That "love to" was no mere manner of speaking. For the next few days and nights Myra pondered how she should contrive to accept this invitation and visit Olga Radó.

Once she actually started out. Then she returned because she thought it better to announce her call by telephone. But then again, it did not seem proper to disturb Olga by a telephone call. She would rather write. But that gave the matter such importance and formality, deprived it of all its chance, its accidental character. And then if she received a polite refusal, all possibility would be gone of making a further attempt. But if she simply went up and did not find Olga at home, she could leave her card with a few words—and wait for a reply.

She went, went as far as the house, but again she did not go in. She walked up and down the street and stood for a long time, lost in thought, in front of a few utterly uninviting shopwindows. It might well happen that Olga Radó would leave the house at this time, or better yet, might be returning home and would ask Myra to come in

with her.

In addition, Myra cultivated her relations with the Moebius girls with a touching zeal. She invited them to her house as often as Aunt Emily permitted, she went to see them as often as she was asked. And she found occasion to phone them a hundred times in order to make various arrangements. She borrowed books that had to be fetched and returned, and withal made such lavish efforts to be amiable that the consul's wife was quite charmed with her, and was never weary of impressing on Aunt Emily how much Myra was changing for the better. To which Aunt Emily commonly replied by a silent, all but offended shrug of her shoulders.

This went on for weeks. But Myra did not lose patience. It was enough for her to hear from time to time a remark let fall—"as Olga always says" or "Olga likes that so much." It was enough, in fact almost too much, to hear Fannie say, "Olga was up for a moment last night, I thought she looked very bad!" Or to have Emmie, who at this time was conceiving something like a mild passion for Myra, observe, "Myra has such remarkably beautiful hands, almost as beautiful as Olga's...."

Ah, it was even enough to hold the little black dog on her lap and laugh and call it "Sophonisba," a pet name Olga had given it.

All this afforded hope and suspense for days. It was at this time, that Myra began to find life beautiful again.

She did not know why.

III

One evening—the girls were again sitting together in the twilight—because they could chat better that way than in the glaring lamp light, there came a shrill ring of the bell, and a few moments later those deep, vibrant tones that sent a thrill of terror into Myra's very heart sounding from the next room.

She knew that voice perfectly, but she was afraid she might be mistaken. She wanted to ask, "Isn't that Olga?" but was afraid of receiving the answer "No." And more than all else, she was afraid that that conversation in the next room might stop, that the door might open, and she would hear too late, "Olga just dropped in for a moment."

But the voices did not stop. They grew louder, drew nearer, the door was thrown wide open of a sudden, and in the frame stood the tall apparition of Olga Radó, in bold relief against the yellow light flooding the next room, like a silhouette on a golden background.

"Do you want to have tea with me tomorrow, children?" she called into the dark room. "Somebody has just sent me some Kugler's confections."

The Moebius girls shouted for joy.

Emmie pushed forward a chair and wanted Olga to sit down, but she declined and did not take her hand from the door-knob.

"No, no, children, I haven't a moment's time. But be there promptly tomorrow, at four, or half past at the latest, I have to go to the opera in the evening."

Myra did not move. When the door opened she had uttered a semi-audible "Good evening." Now it seemed

obtrusive to call attention to herself. Perhaps, Olga had not even seen her in her dark corner. Perhaps, too, she did not want to see her. It would have been understandable. But something hurt her at the thought.

"Won't you come, too, Miss Rudloff? If you have nothing better in the offing. You are heartily welcome."

"I should love to," said Myra, and went pale with pleasure.

* * *

Olga received her guests with what appeared to be cordial and genuine pleasure. It seemed inconceivable to Myra that this woman should not wrap herself in cold hauteur as in a coat of mail.

The girls could not restrain their amusement at the ingenious darkness.

"Yes," said Olga, "I wanted to present my cubbyhole in the best light. And the best light is the least light possible."

Myra was urged to sit in a deep easy-chair.

"Yes, you must make yourself at home with us. After all you are our guest of honor, you are the oldest! You are probably still proud of the fact, but when you are as old as I am, it ceases to be a compliment."

In all her life Myra had never felt as much at home as in the easy-chair.

In front of her, Olga was crouched on a low taboret. The inevitable cigarette was already between her fingers and she clamped it in her teeth whenever she needed her hands free to pour tea or pass the cake.

When a lull occurred in the conversation, she brought out a box of photographs she had taken on various trips, or a book with Dulac illustrations, or a magazine with pictures of the latest screen stars.

Again Myra was conscious of a feeling of pain. It was all she could do to answer yes or no to the conversation.

“She is making such a dreadful effort to entertain us,” she thought. “But in reality, we’re a bore and a burden to her. As soon as the door has closed behind us, she’ll draw a long breath and say, ‘Thank God!’ I can hardly blame her. But why did she ever invite us?”

She had the greatest desire to go, simply to free Olga Radó from this visitation. At the same time, she felt that if she tried to break away with some excuse or other, and they questioned her and pleaded with her, and all their attention was focussed on her, she would be unable to keep back the tears which were even now threatening and smarting.

She was almost glad, and yet deeply unhappy, when Olga suddenly glanced at her watch and said, “I’ll have to throw you out, children, sorry as it makes me. I have to dress quickly as possible—the time passed so dreadfully fast.”

* * *

Myra spent a whole week in aimless promenades, practised the piano at home and studied French, and when she had practised and studied for half an hour, would throw herself on the divan and stare at the scrap of blue sky netted with silvery telephone wires which she could see from where she lay. Then her thoughts would fly hither and yon—how glorious it would be to understand all the languages in the world, or to master some instrument perfectly, or to have a wonderful voice, or to be ravishingly beautiful. But since one never could attain to any of those things, perhaps it would be pleasantest to be dead.

Then there would come pressing duties which compelled her to go down Motz Street. And since one had to pass *the* house, it was natural that one should walk a little slower, gaze up at the windows and peer down the street.

And since one was in town and wanted to go home, one might just as well go down Motz as Kleist Street. And since one went out to get a little fresh air, it was the most natural thing in the world that one should sit down on a bench on Victoria Louisa Square and watch the children playing.

Every day Myra stood in front of a shop-window containing gloves, ribbons and laces, and stared in profound thought at the display—because at the back was a mirror, and in this mirror she could watch the door of the house opposite.

Every time the door opened, Myra started.

Once when Olga Radó emerged from that door, Myra scarcely recognized her. Olga wore a loose cloak, both hands were thrust in her pockets and she had no hat. She ran, rather than walked, two houses farther down to the mail-box, and dropped a letter.

Myra hurried across the street to intercept her on her return. Her heart was throbbing so that she had to gasp for breath. With the extreme speed of thought she decided on a hundred different courses and instantly rejected them again. She would say something to Olga. She would pass her with a silent greeting. But suppose she were not recognized! She had better say something to her. But what?

While she was still crossing the street, Olga had seen her and waved her hand.

“Hello, Myra! Were you going to call on me?”

“Not exactly,” said Myra paling with excitement. Perhaps this was a further stupidity, perhaps she should have said yes.

“Yes, exactly.” Olga hooked her hand in Myra’s arm. “Come up for an hour. Or shall you be neglecting something? No? Well, then, fine! Wait, I must see my friend at the corner and buy me some cigarettes. Will you come, too?”

Never in all her life had Myra seen such a charming tobacco shop as this at the corner. Never had any individual pleased her so much at first sight as this white-haired, simpering little man, with the withered, trembling hands, from whom Olga Radó bought her cigarettes.

Olga sat at the broad diplomat's desk of black stained oak, her legs crossed in a Luther chair, leaning somewhat forward, both elbows resting on the high arms.

Myra sat facing her in the easy-chair. She felt a little strained as at an examination. Something went tense deep within her, so that she gritted her teeth and said to herself, "I will pass this test, I will pass it."

For a while all went well. They talked of the Moebius girls and of Erika Hanneman and Olga's aunt, the consul's wife. And Myra told about her life at home, about Aunt Emily and the beautiful days of her childhood.

Suddenly Olga said, "Tell me frankly, how do you come to be friends with my so-called cousins?"

"I don't know," said Myra, "Aunt Emily...."

"I don't mean to say anything against them," said Olga quickly, "they are as good as gold. But aren't you bored to death in this perpetual round?"

"Yes," Myra replied, "but I'm always bored, anyway."

"Why, how dreadful!" said Olga really shocked. "I'd rather be dead than be bored. Don't you really know anybody but Fannie and Emmie and Aunt Emily?"

"No," Myra hesitated. "It's probably my own fault. I've never had a friend. But then I've never wanted one."

"It is not so easy," Olga reflected. "Usually we miss our best friends by a century or two. We know some by reading about them or seeing their pictures. But that is all, of those who will be born after us, we know nothing. That is why I so envy people who create. They can greet those who come after us. They can keep themselves alive in pictures, words or deeds. Yes, in deeds, too. It is like a cry. Thus I am, thus I was, love me! And if in their own

lifetimes they have never found anyone—perhaps in a hundred years, or maybe two hundred, somebody will be born who will love them as they desired to be loved. Who will understand them as they desired to be understood. We poor creatures—once we're dead, we most certainly will never be loved again. Not for as long as ten years after, ah, not even for ten months. Sometimes I would like...."

Her eyes were very dark and menacing under her furrowed brows.

She broke off and began again in another one. "Do you know, there are a great many very congenial people of the Renaissance. We should have lived four or five centuries sooner. I should certainly have been friends with Margherita Sforza. I have just read a wonderful story about how she held her brother's possessions when Julius Caesar was sent against them."

Myra felt a tempest in her brain which was not unlike vertigo. Renaissance—that was a familiar idea. Her mind made some kind of hazy connection with the name Sforza.

But—"Julius Caesar," she muttered to herself, disconcerted.

Olga laughed. "No, no, not the great one! Julius Caesar of Capua. Some stupid, little princeling or other. You don't need to know him."

"Ah," Myra sighed with sincere feeling, "there's so much that I don't know, that I have to learn."

"Oh, well, it won't be so dreadful," said Olga. "You know Queen Jeanne, don't you?"

"Which one?" asked Myra quite at sea. "I know the Queen of Navarre's stories...."

"But not herself, I trust," said Olga in fun. "Besides, she was a Margueritte. But you don't know the Sforza?" She asked it as tenderly, as encouragingly, as if she were talking to a child whom she did not wish to hurt.

"I don't know ... no ... and yet...."

"Well, what *do* you know about her?"

"Nothing," said Myra disconcerted. "Only the picture by Rubens—the little girl with the liverwurst...."

Olga listened for a moment with her eyebrows lifted as if she were recollecting. Then she laughed loudly and merrily, more merrily than Myra had ever heard her laugh. But, strangely enough, her amusement did not wound Myra, although she was surprised at this failure on her part to be hurt. It was so nice, to see Olga Radó laugh so heartily. Even if one's self was being laughed at.

"You poor child!" cried Olga still laughing. "What must your mind look like! Ah, I should like to introduce some order there for a change!"

"Do," said Myra fervently. "Please, please, do!"

For a moment Olga's face grew serious and thoughtful.

"No, no," said Myra, immediately terrified, "that's just impertinence on my part. After all, you're not our governess!"

"Child!" said Olga, leaning forward suddenly and laying her hand on Myra's. "Are you really so sensitive? But you have no reason to be. Do you want to learn to read with me? There is nothing more I can do for you. But come up and study, won't you? Come up here to me as often as you wish until you are bored."

"I never will be!" said Myra as if she were taking a sacred oath.

"But you know, before we can really dig into anything, you will have to make a general survey. First you'll have to work your way through a history of the world. Shall I give you Schlosser? Here are eighteen volumes. One volume after the other. Yes, my child, Heaven won't help you this time! If you can't do more, at least you can read a round hundred pages a day, that's all. And when you're finished, every three or four days you'll come up and exchange your book for another and we'll have tea and

chat a little. Like the idea? Shall we make it a go?”

That is the way it began.

And that is the way it went along for quite a while.

With passionate zeal Myra read the books that Olga Radó lent her. And when she had put down the book, her face ablaze, it would seem to her as if Olga sat in front of her, holding a long conversation with her. On every page there was something, something horrible or beautiful, something strange or incomprehensible, something which she must tell Olga or question her about.

And sometimes she really did have these conversations, sometimes she did say what she had it in mind to say, what she had resolved to tell Olga—but very seldom.

It was a peculiarly surprising and delightful fact, of which Myra was probably always conscious, but which was not clear to her until much, much later—one could not steer a conversation with Olga Radó.

So strong were her moods that they created an atmosphere in a room so that it was impossible to partake of any other feeling than hers. And whoever was not sensitive to this, whoever did invoke another mood than that with which wood and glass and air and silk seemed softly to vibrate, called forth a screaming dissonance.

Myra felt this sometimes, later on, when strangers entered the room. She herself never called forth, not even at the very beginning, the slightest discord, because she was quiet, because she effaced herself in order, half unconsciously, and yet almost anxiously, to intercept every vibration that quivered in the air.

It was half unconscious only at first, that is. She felt herself so abysmally small and stupid that she hardly dared have an idea of her own in Olga’s presence. Later, when her healthy nerves had been stretched fine and thin to the breaking-point, she mastered the art consciously. She used to say sometimes, in fun, “You must have gone down the street in a very bad humor today. The houses

are still making faces at you behind your back!”

It was the third or fourth time that Myra had been up. Olga was lying on the divan, smoking so incessantly that the blue clouds had difficulty in escaping out the window.

Myra sat in her easy-chair, reading Jean Paul aloud to her. “Others, too, at least the reader and myself, would have been affected by this transparent night with which April was closing, the vast stillness on which the drum-taps beat, that longing for one’s beloved with which the morrow again restores a barren heart and a shattered life remove;—these things would have filled us both with a gentle tremulousness and dreams....”

“Please stop!” said Olga, pressing her hand to her temples. “Don’t be angry, but I can’t stand that today. Be a good girl, up there you’ll find Walt Whitman—on the top shelf—more to the right. But never mind, don’t bother. Go to my dressing-table, you’ll find a silver brush there. No, the one with the handle. Let me have it, will you?”

Obediently, Myra fetched the brush.

Olga took it from her without rising and beat a mighty tattoo against the wall with the back; after a short pause, a second and a third.

Myra laughed. “Must you have the brush for that?”

“Yes,” said Olga. “It’s my telegraph instrument. After long years of experience, proved the best. What else can I use? The ink-well is no good. A book makes no noise, and besides, I don’t like to treat it so....”

Meanwhile there came a knock on the door.

“Come in, come in, come in,” called Olga.

The door was partly opened and a man’s blond head peered in.

“Ah, a caller?” said a high, thin, husky, and yet not unpleasant, voice.

“Come in, Peterkin,” said Olga, “it’s only Myra.”

Her words sent a wonderful feeling of happiness through Myra. They gave her a certain justification, a sense of being at home in this room, where simply to be tolerated was a pride and joy.

The little man, who insinuated his delicate and deformed body through the door, knew her, was aware that it was she who was “just Myra”—that is to say, that she was not a mere caller, not a stranger, but somebody who belonged there, who would not be in the way. One was as good as alone.

All Myra’s sympathy darted out to the young man. Perhaps, if he had been a more commanding, more handsome youth, she would have experienced some feeling of jealousy toward him. But he was anything but handsome, in spite of his gentle blue eyes and his exquisitely manicured hands.

Myra loved him from the very first, in the same way she had loved the tobacconist at the corner, with an almost real affection.

This first meeting was the beginning of a faithful friendship that was to last for years.

Otto Peterkin was, on the whole, not inclined to overestimate himself or the fascinations which his person was likely to exert—and yet, may there not have been moments during which he thought Myra’s feeling for him to be of a different quality than her love for the little tobacconist?

“Peterkin,” said Olga, “fetch your fiddle and play us something.”

“All right, what?” said Peterkin.

“Something nice. Nothing is too good for this little girl.”

Peterkin played. Played what they both loved best, Olga and he, and which he would not, could not have played, had there been someone listening for whom it was “too good.”

Myra sat perfectly still. It seemed to her as if the notes bore her onward like a gently flooding stream, on and on, everything was left behind, the drab and dirty city, the crowds of carping, clawing people—all were outdistanced, grew smaller, vanished in the haze. But the air was ever clearer, ever purer, the water ever deeper, the shores more lovely, more free. An island appeared, the low-hanging branches of its flowering trees were lapped by the lifting waves.

That day, for the first time, Myra came home late for supper. The long, agitated and irate lecture with which Aunt Emily received her, made her feel as if someone had thrown dirty water on her. She shuddered with loathing, but she felt no pain.

IV

On Olga Radó's writing-table was a beautiful box of heavy, angular crystal with a smooth silver cover. It was almost always empty, for the cigarettes were smoked so fast that it was almost no use to take them out of the original package.

One evening, Olga again took the last of the twenty-five from her pack.

"Oh, dear, what a shame! Myra do look on the desk. Of course, there isn't one there either! What an imbecile I am!"

"I'll run down quickly and get you some."

"No, don't, I won't have you running downstairs for that. Wait, give me my case, there must be a few left in it."

Olga was lying as usual on the divan, and she now sat up, tugging keys, handkerchiefs and letters from her pocket; finally she opened the case.

"Hurrah! By a wise economy we can hold out till tomorrow! Have one?" She proffered the open case.

"No," said Myra, "I'll be very nice and decline, otherwise they won't last till morning."

"Angel!" said Olga, snapping the clasp. "My one consolation is that you don't care much anyhow."

"May I look at the case?" asked Myra.

"There it is, my angel." Olga handed it to her. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Myra turned the smooth, reflecting gold with careful hands. "Incredibly beautiful. I'm simply wild about that broad low design. But why the crab? Is it a heraldic beast?"

“My coat of arms!” said Olga, laughing. “Our family device. It signifies that ‘like the crab we would go backward.’”

“It’s not a crab,” said Myra, hesitantly, blushing.

“No? Who told you so? But in any case, it is unfortunately, not a very useful or agreeable creature. It’s a scorpion.”

“Ooh!” said Myra. “Why such a monster? From some special preference?”

“Yes,” said Olga. “Someone had this case made for me because I once said that the scorpion is the most decent creature on earth. It is my favorite animal.”

“You’re not serious?” cried Myra, shocked.

“Oh, but I am. Yes, I am quite serious—about the scorpion. Do you know that it is the only animal in the world that commits suicide? It does not let itself be slowly tortured to death by human curiosity and cruelty. It struggles like a mad thing, and when it knows that it is no longer possible to save itself, it kills itself. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Olga had sat up. She was gazing at Myra out of great, dark eyes. Her beautiful pale features were set in a strangely anguished, yet heroic, expression.

Myra was shocked. “And you?” she said, clasping Olga’s hand with an involuntary movement. “Is that why you took it for your device?”

Olga smiled, a kindly, gentle smile.

“Little stupid,” she said, “that has another significance altogether. I must be a scorpion because I have a poison sting. Because my wits must be ‘like scorpion stings.’ Someone who loved me once declared it was so. And declared, too, that if I were driven to an extremity, I would turn my sting against myself and kill myself. I do not know if it is true or not. I get no particular pleasure out of thinking about myself. But that is how this person saw me. And so he had this case made for me. See!” She

opened it. The little rubies of which the scorpion was formed were set *à jour*: the device was visible on the inside also. And right under it was engraved her name—Olga Radó.

Myra scolded herself furiously, but she could not help it—her heart was filled to bursting with furious jealousy of this stranger who loved Olga Radó and gave her gold cigarette cases.

"A beautiful hand-writing," she said distractedly.

"It isn't mine," said Olga. Slowly she closed the case and with a gentle gesture laid its smooth surface against her cheek.

"It is so beautiful. I love it so. And I am so glad that I *can* love it. It was a parting gift. And it was a very beautiful parting."

Myra was on fire with a torment of aversion.

"A beautiful parting!" she said bitterly. "Are there such things?"

Olga sat up abruptly. "Yes, Myra," she said with real fervor. "And there should be more, many more. It is a misfortune that people do not understand how to part from one another. Learn it, Myra, learn it in time."

"No," said Myra obdurately, "I'll probably never learn. Let people to whom love is only a game make a game of parting."

"Myra," said Olga earnestly, "you are a child! Do you think that it is any proof of a great love, for me to cling to someone till he is sick and tired of me? I would rather die a thousand deaths than become a burden to someone whom I love. It is an art to begin, though I believe that any individual can conquer any other individual, and the beginning will always be beautiful. But the end will always be a horrible, bitter, hateful torture. It is a great art, indeed, to know how to end. At the right time. And in the right way. Learn, Myra, learn it in time."

Their silence lasted so terribly long. Yes, she must rise

now and go. But it seemed to her as if the chair were holding her tight, or the gray wall above it on which her eyes were fastened. She felt that the moment she rose, the tears would start from her eyes. That must never be. She strove to set her mind on something else, on something quite remote. She wanted to go to the theatre next week. She had been very happy at the prospect. But actually, the nicest part of going to the theatre or a concert was to sit here afterwards and discuss what she had seen and heard. That could no longer be. Not next week. Never again, perhaps.

The silence in the room took away her breath. If only Olga would say something. Anything. Scold her, humiliate her. It was so cruel of her simply to say nothing.

Myra made an attempt to get up. Her movement was imperceptible, but she felt it in every muscle. At the same instant, those painfully retaining lids could no longer hold back the constantly welling tears; they quivered, were closed, and the heavy drops oozed forth.

Myra was terribly ashamed of herself. Something inside her made itself small. She would have been so glad to make her exterior body small in the same way, to bend down, to hide her face. But she did not dare move. She did not want to attract attention by the slightest movement. Perhaps Olga's thoughts were far away and she had not even noticed her.

The tears splashed on her hand. She did not dare dry them.

Suddenly she shrank together with a pang. She heard the divan creak and the soft rustling of a dress. Olga was on her feet. She heard an infinitely gentle, soft voice at her side. "Myra, child, what on earth are you crying about?"

Myra did not look up, but sank her head still lower. Then Olga was kneeling beside her with a sudden

movement, as one kneels beside a crying child and tries to peer up into its face.

"What are you crying about?"

Myra saw the beautiful face before her through a blur of welling water. She smiled.

"I don't know," she said.

She looked at the slender white hand that lay on her knee, covering her own folded hands. She bent slowly over this hand, and pressed her lips, her hot, tear-wet cheeks against it.

"Child!" said Olga almost impatiently, trying with her other hand to raise Myra's forehead. "If only I knew what it is you are crying about!"

Myra was frightened by her tone. She raised her head and again stared at the gray wall on the far side of the court-yard.

Olga had risen. Her hand still lay on Myra's head. Its cool smooth palm pressed firmly, almost heavily, upon her hair and brow. Myra felt this pressure as something infinitely beneficent. Felt as if she would fly asunder, were that forceful hand to be removed.

"I don't know myself," she said softly. "But I wish I had been dead a hundred years. Perhaps you would love me, too, then."

With a sudden gesture, Olga Radó clasped Myra's head to her shoulder and pressed her lips hard, almost painfully, against her forehead.

"And what now?" she asked curtly. There was a strange vibrant ring in her deep voice as if she suppressed some resentment only by an effort.

In her temples, in her finger-tips, Myra felt the furious hammering of a pulse. But she did not know whose heart it was throbbing.

She had a feeling as if it were now her duty to do something infinitely great. It seemed to her as if Olga Radó must now rise before her in super-human greatness

and demand some heroic deed of her.

Myra felt a holy determination to jump out a window at the slightest word, or to pierce her breast with a dagger and to proffer her palpitating heart in her own two hands.

But Olga Radó made no such demands. She suddenly released Myra and went to the window. She laid her fingers on the lock and her forehead against the pane. And thus, without looking at Myra, without even turning her head, she said after a pause, in a strangely quiet, even matter-of-fact tone, “Go home, child!”

“Why?” asked Myra frightened. She got up, her legs trembling under her. That oppressive feeling of something mysterious, something gruesome, lay like a heavy weight on her breast. Why was she being sent away? What had she done?

She wanted some kind of explanation. She wanted to place her hands on Olga’s shoulders, to turn her around by force and search her face for an answer. “I have a right to do so,” she thought with mounting anger. “I certainly have a right.”

But as she made her first step toward the window, Olga faced about violently. Crossing her arms on her breast, she clasped her elbows with her spread fingers. In her white face, her eyes flashed deep, dark and threatening.

“You are to go home,” she said with a composure so forced that she seemed to be controlling a simply boundless rage. “Can’t you hear? Am I no longer mistress in my own apartment? Take your hat and go. Go, go, go, go!”

The anger that had been blazing up in Myra was quenched. Nothing was left save fear, and a deep, deep sadness.

Something seemed to be driving her to Olga as if she were scourged. She wanted to fall on the floor before her, she wanted to clasp her knees, she wanted to beseech her.

“Weep, scream, beat me, but don’t use this kind of force against me. Tell me what is the matter. I will die for you, but don’t send me away, because you are suffering.” She stood without moving.

“Go, go, go!” said Olga.

Myra Rudloff picked up her hat and went. She strove to walk erect and in a straight line. She staggered a little as the lock snapped behind her, and she had to support herself against the wall. She leaned her whole weight against the balustrade because the stairs spun around beneath her like a raging whirlpool.

* * *

For a few days Myra lived in a state of dull torment. Through the haze of awakening she would remember that today she must not take the road to Motz Street. Not today, not tomorrow; perhaps nevermore. She was outlawed, outcast, banned from all the joys of life.

Long, drab and barren, the day stretched out before her. A heaviness like lead lay upon her limbs. When the telephone rang, she would start up with her heart furiously throbbing, as if out of a profound lethargy. But it never rang for her.

There was nasty weather during those days, cold and rainy. But one Sunday night the wind swept the sky clean of clouds and dried the streets. In the morning, a blue summer sky shone over the city. The sun’s rays, dancing on one corner of her mirror, awakened Myra.

She felt as liberated on awakening, as filled with the unconquerable force of life, as if at one stroke all her troubles had vanished, all her heavy burden lightened. She felt able to resume the struggle with all its impediments. Indeed, there no longer seemed to be any impediments.

Today she would return the books she had borrowed from Olga Radó.

And then she would call her to account, would ask her quite frankly and cheerfully what was really the matter, whether it was Olga's intention to put her out again. If so, she might do it with an easy mind.

But she would not do so. It had been a mood, a caprice —but no deep-going rift, no conflict between them.

And if she really had committed some offense in Olga's eyes, she would like some explanation, and then would like—ah, yes, for her own sake—would like to beg forgiveness.

Myra whistled and hummed to herself while she dressed and brushed her hair. When she rang, her stupid heart throbbed so that she could not breathe. That came from running upstairs too fast.

The maid was surprised. "Miss Radó is travelling," she said hesitantly. "Didn't you know?"

For the first few moments the shame of not knowing was greater in Myra than fear. She felt that she was exposed to the maid in the most absurd way.

"But, but ..." she said, "I just wanted to leave these books in her room. But I can just as well give them to you. Be so good, as to take them, Erna. Then I won't even have to go up. I am in a hurry. I will see you again."

She bounded down the first stairs so that the girl should hear her haste. Not until the door had closed behind her, did she walk more slowly.

Olga was gone. Without saying a word to her, without once calling her up, or dropping her a line, without as much as leaving a message for her with the maid.

She was gone. Without saying where. Without saying for how long.

Myra bowed her head very low on her breast and descended quite slowly, step by step.

* * *

A few days later, Myra heard the telephone ring, and the

maid trotting at a run through the long hall. Myra opened her door.

“For me, Hedwig?”

“Yes. A gentleman wishes to speak to you. A Mr. Petersen or Peterkin, I didn’t quite catch it.”

On the girl’s round features were emblazoned unconcealed admiration. This was the first time that a man’s voice had asked to speak with her.

“Peterkin!” Myra shouted excitedly into the mouthpiece without paying the slightest heed to the fact that Aunt Emily was sitting in the next room. “Yes, this is Myra. What’s the matter? Nothing has happened, has it?”

“No, no, thank heaven! I am simply commanded to give you ‘her dearest regards’: I received a card today.”

“From where? From whom?” She did not need to ask.

“From Kissingen. I had to look up your address in the directory. I did not know your telephone number, nor even the name of the street. I wasn’t even sure of your name.”

“Good Lord, you poor fellow. Can’t I see you, or have you no time for me?”

“Of course, I have. I’d be glad to....”

“Shall we go walking for an hour? Will you? Please do, please! Today, if you can! Right away? Really? Wonderful! And you’ll bring the card with you!”

They met. After a two word greeting, Myra asked, “Did you bring the card? Please, show it to me. Please!”

Beside the address there was written in a firm, laboriously condensed hand:

“Please, Peterkin, do me a favor and return the books to the Royal Library. One is on my desk, two are on the shelf, to the left of the window in the case farthest to the right. And take my plant to your room, the maids will forget it and I don’t want it to die.”

On the other side was written across the sky that capped the landscape:

“Please ring the little girl and greet her for me. You’ll have to look up her number in the book. Tell her not to be angry with me. All the best to all of you. O. R.”

Hundreds and thousands of such picture post-cards had passed through Myra’s hands in the course of her life, but this was the first time the thought had occurred to her: “What a wonderful and beautiful invention whereby one can send a picture of the place where one is staying. So that is how it looks where Olga is now. She sees these houses every day, goes walking under these trees, these mountains greet her every morning and every evening—truly a wonderful and beautiful invention!”

She would gladly have kept the card, but she did not have the courage to ask Peterkin for it.

“It happened so quickly,” she said, “—this trip.” She was reluctant to say that she had known and suspected nothing. But she was reluctant, too, to ply him with direct questions. Half unconsciously, she spoke in phrases that left everything indefinite, but which, to a certain degree, sounded him out.

“Yes,” said Peterkin, “rather peculiarly sudden. On Tuesday we were all there, why, we were all sitting together. But that night Olga came into my room and said, ‘Give me your railway guide.’ And she kept fingering it through and asking me, ‘Do you know the Black Forest, is it pretty there? What do you think, should I go to the North Sea?’ And so on, which is not her way. So undecided, I mean, so perplexed. And Wednesday night she was off. Didn’t tell a soul where. At first I had a suspicion—a notion, I should say, an idea....” Peterkin hesitated, and a faint red overspread his pale features —“that you had gone away together.”

Myra did not answer. It never occurred to her for a moment that her profound silence might possibly produce a queer impression.

His words had struck her like a bolt of lightning and

she was in flames. Travel! Travel with Olga! There was something joyfully improbable about the idea. For a few seconds, she lived through in imagination all that it might have meant, had they decided to do this that Tuesday!

Abruptly, painfully, she returned to her senses: it was a silly, unfulfilled dream, one never, never to be fulfilled, perhaps. The reality was that she was here—alone—and that Olga was gone. Also alone? Or with whom? Nothing in the world gave Myra the right even to ask.

* * *

During those weeks Myra's sole pleasure was to go walking with Peterkin. They made excursions together, lay half the day beside the water, or took a row-boat, or drank coffee in some out of the way inn with a garden, and talked about books, about strange cities, and distant mountains, about beasts and plants, and of people long dead—and about Olga.

Sometimes, when they were together they wrote to Olga, sent her picture post-cards, or long poems in doggerel, and from time to time they received some hasty reply, and once the news that she was planning to return in three weeks.

Myra was quiet and happy during this time. The companionship of Peterkin did her good. When she was home, she read and studied under his guidance and counted the days until Olga's return. She drew up a long list of books which she intended to have read, of things which she intended to have accomplished by that time. She wanted to surprise Olga with all the knowledge she had acquired in the interval, and labored with a burning zeal.

Everything would have gone nicely, if it had not been for Aunt Emily. Aunt Emily watched and held her tongue and stored up gall and poison. And one day it broke out.

It was after dinner. Myra wanted to leave the table with a curt, “I hope you enjoy your meal,” and fetch her hat from her room. Aunt Emily who had sat on the defensive throughout dinner, brushed together a pile of minute crumbs, on the tablecloth, with her elegant fingers, and at Myra’s words, cleared her throat quickly and sharply and said with emphasis, “Perhaps you will be so good as to remain seated until I leave the table.”

Bored, but patient, Myra sat herself down again. She did not know that this was but the prelude to greater things. She thought it was merely one of those daily bits of chicanery that wasted at least one’s time and energy if they were not taken with the greatest unconcern.

Myra cast a covert glance at the clock. “Now, of course, she’ll sit for another five minutes before she gives the sign to rise,” she thought. “Very well, I’ll come five minutes late. Peterkin will wait.”

Aunt Emily continued to heap up crumbs and to clear her throat. “Will you be so good, Franz,” she began (it would be more precise to say she struck up), “will you be so good as to ask your daughter where she intends going this afternoon, and with whom? When I ask her, she answers, ‘Walking—with an acquaintance,’ or some such bit of wit. So please ask her yourself. Perhaps she still retains enough respect to tell you the truth, at least.”

Franz Rudloff rolled up his napkin and unrolled it again, thrust it into the napkin-ring and pulled it out again while he sat in mortal embarrassment.

“You know, my dear Emily,” he said without looking up, “that I have turned over my daughter’s education to you because I know that she could nowhere be so well brought up as in your excellent hands. Myra owes you exactly the same obedience she does me. You are in full possession of all the necessary authority....”

“Authority!” said Aunt Emily with a mocking laugh. “What am I supposed to do? You can’t spank a twenty-

year-old girl or lock her in her room."

"Not very well," said Myra quietly, "thank God! But perhaps, I, too, may ask one question—would you mind telling me why you need to take such measures?"

"Why? In your own interest!" said Aunt Emily in a tone that was meant to express flaming indignation.

"Oh?" Myra was still rather amused than excited. "And what is going to bring about my total destruction? The fact that I go walking with a young man? Good Lord, poor little Peterkin! Did you ever happen to see him? I can introduce you to him some time, perhaps that will calm your fears!"

"Well, what sort of a man is he then?" asked Franz Rudloff, knitting his brows. This was intended to sound stern and forceful. It sounded rather timid.

Myra felt a tender pity for her father that was not altogether free of contempt.

"Good heavens, papa," she said, "a fine, intelligent man. But a poor, ailing, deformed, little fellow. Hardly the person who could prove very dangerous to a young girl's virtue or reputation."

"Perhaps not to a normal young girl," said Aunt Emily, quivering with malice. "Unfortunately, I do not know how far one can assume that you are normal. Unfortunately, there are plenty of young women who have some sick and perverse attraction to all repellent and unhealthy persons."

Myra pushed back her chair so that it grated sharply on the floor.

"You are absolutely insane," she said. That was all. Then she walked with her firm long stride into the next room, to the telephone, and called a number.

"May I speak to Mr. Peterkin? Forgive me, Peterkin, I'll have to disappoint you today. My Aunt will not allow me to go walking with you. Yes, I am sorry, too. But there is nothing one can do about it. My Aunt thinks it improper.

No, no, better not ring me, probably that is improper, too. God bless you, and don't worry about it!"

Without turning, without casting as much as a glance in their direction, she went up to her room, and locked and bolted herself in.

Thus her friendly companionship with Peterkin was interrupted for the moment.

Franz Rudloff's quiet sensitive nature suffered severely from the tense atmosphere in the house. The meals were eaten in a painful silence, every activity in common, a walk, a visit to the theatre seemed impossible.

He resolved to negotiate a peace and endeavored to bring his daughter to apologize. With this in mind he went, as he seldom did, to her room. Myra was poring, her head propped on her hands, over her books. When her father entered, she sprang up and received him as she would an honored guest. She moved up the most comfortable chair for him and offered him a cigarette.

He did not know how he should introduce the subject and felt dreadfully embarrassed. Myra endeavored to make the situation easier for him, for it pained her to see how he was suffering.

She promised the apology, promised to make conversation at table, promised to put on a pleasant face and manner from morn to night.

"I promise to control myself, Father," she said.

Control! That was not what Franz Rudloff was asking.

"Couldn't you try," he said timidly, "to reach some different kind of feeling for Aunt Emily in your own heart? She really has such very estimable qualities. We could have a much happier family life if you—I know it is difficult to conquer one's feelings—but if at least you *made an attempt* to love her."

"Love!" echoed Myra. Her face was stony in its repose as she gazed past him, out of the window, but her breath came quicker. "I can promise you one thing, all my life

long I have rejoiced at the thought of one thing, have waited for just one thing—the moment when she would die. I have prayed every night to God to make her die, soon, soon."

Franz Rudloff turned quite pale.

"Myra!" he said, his eyes wide.

"I will promise you not to do that any more," said Myra with a gentle, mournful smile. "Besides, it's too late now anyway. Now I will pray God only to let me be twenty-one soon. To make this unhappy year pass quickly, quickly. When I am of age, we can always find some way. If she makes things too lively for me, I shall leave the house, even if it has to be as a nursemaid. If I don't have to be together with her, she can live to a hundred for all I care. But before this, I don't mind telling you, before this there were times when I would gladly have killed her with my own two hands."

A yawning chasm opened before Franz Rudloff. He clutched the arms of his chair tightly, so violently and spasmodically was his poor weak heart pounding.

He rose and left the room, heavily and slowly, like an old man.

For a moment, Myra felt an impulse to jump up and stop him, to guide him back to the easy-chair again. Was there not some possibility of an explanation, some means of arriving at an understanding?

"He's going because he is afraid," she thought. "He's going because he can no longer breathe the same air that I do, the air that is poisoned by the venom of my evil thoughts. He's asking himself now why he has to be so bitterly punished, why he had to give life to a murderess. Who knows; he may go directly to Aunt Emily and ask her advice, what to do with his abandoned daughter. Perhaps they will consult an alienist again. I have expressed an intention to murder my whole family. No, no, there's no point in trying explanations. Father simply

does not understand me."

He had gone. She let him go without moving.

V

Three weeks passed, four weeks, five weeks—nothing was seen nor heard of Olga Radó. In desperation, Myra resumed her long neglected friendship with the Moebius girls. She endured the torture of a few boring afternoons without finding the courage to inquire about Olga. And when finally she did ask, no one knew anything about her.

But one afternoon Emmie burst into the room just as Fannie was telling Myra the highly exciting story of a letter to her which her mother had opened. Myra was not especially clever at such things, but she had achieved some sort of ability to say “Yes? Oh! Really?” at suitable places, without once understanding what the whole business was about. Tossing a couple of little packages onto the table, Emmie cried, “Guess whom I saw, girls! Olga!”

Joy and anguish contended in Myra’s breast. So she was here! There was the possibility of meeting her, of coming face to face with her quite suddenly and unexpectedly—that was her first thought. But her second was—“she is back and hasn’t told me. She doesn’t want to see me. She went away without telling me, she has returned without telling me, I am so irksome to her that she has gone to some trouble to be rid of me. What can I do? Oh, what can I do?”

Between the sisters there developed a long conversation about Olga. “She takes humors,” said Fannie, “for a while she’ll come and see you every three days, and then again you won’t catch a glimpse of her for three months.”

“She doesn’t want to meet me,” thought Myra bitterly, “that is why she won’t come here.”

“But she’s been travelling all this time,” said Emmie in extenuation.

“Yes? And before that?” asked Fannie. “What about the three months before this trip? Did she bother her head about us? I suppose she had no time for us then either!”

“But for me,” thought Myra with proud anguish, “oh, for me she had time—every day, every day....”

“You make me think of Aunt Sophie,” said Emmie and strove to distort her doll’s face to imitate her aunt. “‘This Olga is a very dangerous person. She plays with people as though they were puppets. When she is tired of them, she throws them to one side. At the same time, she’s fascinating, I admit it, positively fascinating!’”

“Yes,” thought Myra, “your Aunt Sophie may be as imbecilic as you like about everything else. But she’s right. In this she’s right. Olga *is* fascinating. Oh, so fascinating. And she has thrown me aside. What can I do? What can I do?”

* * *

Myra brooded for days and nights, trying to think of some way out. She felt that she would not be able to persist in her pride and say, “She does not want me, therefore she no longer exists as far as I am concerned.” To be sure, she told herself so, not once, but a hundred times. But a much stronger feeling said to her, “It is misunderstandings that are separating us, it is impediments that a frank word could remove. I must speak to her, I must ask her. She has courage enough and hardness enough to tell me the truth. I will make it easier for her. I’ll ask in such a way that she can tell me, that she’ll have to tell me. And if she says to me, ‘Go and never come back again,’ then I’ll go and never come back again. I’ll endeavor to order my life without her

somehow. I'll be proud too, but first.... First!"

Myra purchased a bouquet of white roses of a peculiarly stiff and melancholy beauty, and took them to Olga.

The maid who let her in received her, beaming with joy. "It's so long since you've been here, Miss Rudloff! Miss Radó is up in her room. You know your way?"

It seemed impossible to Myra that she should be announced by the maid. If Olga were not at home to her, it might lead to an extremely painful situation. If Olga were not in a mood to see her, it would, at any rate, be much better to say so to her face rather than to learn it from the maid.

She stepped quickly and firmly along the endless corridor. But her heart beat a little faster as she went.

She rapped lightly on the door and pressed down the latch. Olga was sitting at her writing-table, just as she always sat: one hand on her open book, her forehead supported in the palm of the other, the fingers of which held a cigarette.

As the door opened, she turned her head somewhat unwillingly, her brows knitted. Recognition passed like a bright gleam over her features.

"Myra!" she said. "You here again? Where did you come from? What do you want?"

Myra tore the paper from the roses, tossed it in the waste basket and laid the flowers on the writing-table.

"What do I want?" she said, meanwhile without taking her eyes from what she was doing. "To visit you. To see how things are with you. But if you wish, I can go again."

"No!" With a sudden, almost violent gesture, Olga stretched her hand after her. Myra laid one finger in it, which Olga clasped tightly. "But remember—I did not call you!"

She glanced up at Myra with a strangely compulsive and almost threatening expression of the brow and eyes.

“I know it,” said Myra with a bitter smile. “It had not even occurred to you to call me. I feel myself that I am intruding. You hardly need tell me so flatly.”

She wanted to retract her hand, but Olga held it fast and smiled.

“Child,” she said, “little girl! You make me very, very happy! More than you can ever imagine. I think if you knew how happy I am, you would become quite conceited. But remember, I did not call you.”

“Yes,” said Myra almost impatiently, “I don’t know why you attach so much importance to that statement.”

“But I know,” said Olga quietly. “I don’t want you ever to be able to reproach me with being egoistic.”

“Ah,” said Myra, “that’s hilarious! So that I may never reproach you—incidentally, I do not know for what—you let me go and die and never trouble your head about me! No, you are not a bit egoistic!”

Olga laughed. “I give up. It always comes back on me. One way or the other. So let us bear what we can as long as we act sincerely. It’s like a fall day outside.”

“It is good to have you here. Light the samovar and bring us a cup of tea. We’ll call Peterkin, to come and play something for us.”

* * *

Once as Myra entered the room she saw Olga hastily conceal an open letter she had been holding in her hand, under the books on her desk. Myra thought that Olga seemed distracted during their greeting, rather vexed and embarrassed.

“What is the matter?” she asked, without relinquishing Olga’s hand. “Has something provoked you? You look so comical today.”

“I?” Olga flushed. Again that sudden, dark wave of blood overspread her features, making them appear all the paler the next moment. “What are you thinking of?

What could have provoked me? Quite the contrary."

"Quite the contrary?" said Myra with a somewhat forced gaiety. "Is it pleasure that is making you like this? Then it would be indiscreet to question further. Let's talk of something else. I've brought back your Chamberlain. And also your Herz. Father has him in the library."

They talked of this and that. But Myra could not forget the letter. While they were speaking, her thoughts kept straying into other channels.

"What can it be?" she thought. "Jealousy? Have I any right to be jealous? What do I mean by being hurt, suspicious, yes, actually angry, because this woman receives a letter which she does not want to let me see? Good God in Heaven, she is not bound nor obligated to me in any way. She may be secretly engaged, may have a dozen love affairs—why should I expect her to tell me everything or make me her confidante? What business is it of mine what letters she receives?"

Myra was vexed and scolded herself. And all the while she fretted and was sad and struggled against her feelings and could not conquer them.

"It isn't jealousy," she thought, "it isn't an insane desire to possess. It is simply the understanding that life is only bearable when people go hand in hand. It is the consciousness that I can only go on if Olga takes my hand and leads me. Now I have a feeling as if she had let go my hand, that a door has shut between us, that I am left alone, helpless, in the dark, and that she is going laughingly along—I don't know with whom...."

Olga was called to the telephone. It was some time before she returned. Myra was sitting a few feet from the desk. One corner of the letter was peeping out from beneath a pile of books. If she stretched out her hand, she could touch it, could draw it out, without rising from her chair.

It was a painful struggle. She would have liked to slap

herself because she could think of but one thing to do. She meant to commit a crime. Oh, it was worse than that, was indelicate, tactless, contemptible. But she thought of a thousand excuses for herself.

"It isn't just curiosity," a voice cried within her. "Whom will I be hurting by it? Who will it make suffer? Nobody. Neither her nor the person who wrote the letter. And it is of such immense importance to me. Here I cling to her with every fibre of my body, and yet I do not really know what kind of person she is. Why is she so reserved? If I can arrive at some certainty that will alter my whole life at one stroke, I will do it at any cost—even at the cost of a crime."

With one twitch she had drawn out the letter. Her heart was pounding like mad; there was a thick film over her eyes so that the letters danced on the paper. There was the letterhead of some firm, a few words—"pay"....

Myra heard Olga's voice at the door and hastily crammed the letter into her pocket. Olga would probably never miss it. And although she had hardly read it, hardly understood what it contained, Myra already had a plan.

She was extraordinarily anxious to get home that day, and so abstracted and laconic that Olga finally asked, "What is the matter with you today? Has something happened? Are you in a bad humor?"

Myra was amused as she recalled the conversation when she arrived. "Quite the contrary," she said with an exaggerated emphasis that escaped Olga. "I'm in an unusually good humor!"

Myra locked herself into her room and studied the letter as if it were a momentous document. So this was the love letter which had been kept secret from her.

The company "again" requested a payment of several hundred marks, "in default whereof we regret that we shall have to place the matter in the hands of our attorney."

Myra's heart was filled to overflowing with a tender pity.

"Poor dear pet," she thought, "so that's how they plague you!"

She raised the letter and was tempted for a moment to carry it to her lips. Then she began to calculate. The few marks that she could save from her pocket-money—no, that would never be enough. She had squandered too much, namely for the flowers. But hadn't she something else? Her roving glance searched the room. Books? No, she would give them up only in case of extreme necessity. But her jewelry! All that trash for which she cared absolutely nothing! No one would ever ask what had become of bracelets and rings, necklaces and scarf-pins. She never wore such things. At worst, she could pretend she had lost them. Or she could redeem this or that bauble from her pocket-money.

She wrapped the entire contents of her jewel-case in tissue paper and thrust it deep into the pocket of her coat.

The way to the pawn-shop was not hard to find. Myra recalled almost with pleasure that she was not unpractised in enterprises of this nature.

It was much harder to take the money to the fashion-shop. In doing so, Myra had a feeling that she was perpetrating some dreadful deception. After all, she had a perfect right to pawn whatever jewelry had been given to her. But to act for Olga Radó, to do something in Olga Radó's name, that seemed an unheard of piece of daring to her. And it was so difficult to assume the correct tone. To have debts was, according to everything that Myra had ever heard or been told, something very dishonorable, almost unclean.

Therefore, when one came at last to pay a debt after many duns, one must be humble, must sue for pardon. But it was different when one came for Olga Radó. Then

one could come only in the manner of a princely emissary and with majestic superiority discharge the forgotten trifle.

Myra put on her best dress and her top-loftiest expression. It all went much better than she had expected. The people really did treat her like a princely emissary, and she was very proud about it, doubly proud because she felt that their all but obsequious amiability was meant for Olga Radó.

Yes, all that was very easy. But now that she had the receipted bill in her pocket, nothing in the world could have given her the courage to return it to Olga. She consoled herself with the thought that it probably wasn't necessary. The shop would not dun her any further, and Olga would forget the affair.

After a week, Myra was still secretly triumphant and thought that all perils were happily averted. But one day she was received by Olga with a stony face.

"What on earth can be in your mind!" said Olga instead of her usual greeting. "What right have you to do a thing like that in my name?"

"I?" said Myra, struggling to assume an innocent expression, "What have I done?"

"You know very well what you've done!" said Olga harshly, "You've acted irresponsibly. Irresponsibly! I won't tolerate any meddling with my affairs. Least of all from you. Can't you see the unheard of presumption in your conduct? Are you going to appoint yourself my guardian? Or do you intend to support me? What on earth can you be thinking of?" She paced to and fro with long strides. Her tone became more and more heated, more violent. Suddenly, she stopped short, leaning against the desk, stood arms akimbo and asked very quietly, with simply a gentle movement of her hand, "How did you get hold of the bill anyway?"

Myra was terrified. This was the moment she had

dreaded. All the rest might have been foolish, but it was generously and unselfishly done. She could defend it with an appearance of rectitude, at least in her own eyes. But to this question she had no excuse to offer.

Now the game was up. No lie could save her now. So she resolved defiantly, desperately, to tell the truth. She threw back her head and glanced at Olga with an expression that seemed to say: “I deserve death, but I do not fear it.”

“I stole it,” she said. “From your desk.”

Olga remained quite calm. She merely knitted her brows a little as if trying to recollect. “It came while you were there, didn’t it?”

“Yes!”

“But I didn’t leave it lying open. Now I remember very well—I pushed it somewhere under the books.”

“Yes,” said Myra, gritting her teeth, “but I took it out from under the books.”

“When?” asked Olga genuinely astonished.

“While you were telephoning.”

Olga did not answer. She bowed her head and stared in silence at the floor. Myra saw that her mouth was tightly shut, but she was biting her lower lip.

Her silence was more dreadful than the harshest words. Myra felt that she was really incredibly depraved. And the inquisition was by no means at an end. Many more questions followed, much more terrifying.

After a while, Olga raised her head. “But you had no way of knowing what it was. It might just as well have been a personal letter.”

Myra’s forehead began to burn. “Now I will have to lie,” she thought for a moment, “I’ll have to say I saw the figures or the letter-head.” But she could not lie. She had done something so contemptible that she had no right to purchase Olga’s forgiveness with a lie. She must confess, apologize, atone.

“That is what I thought, too!” she said as if with sudden resolution. But she could not look at Olga’s face while she said it. She stared past her at the window. But without looking, she saw Olga make a sudden angry gesture which she instantly controlled.

“So that is what you thought?” she said.

To Myra it seemed as if she made this effort, as if she forced herself to speak so softly in order not to scream.

“But tell me, you must have had some reason. I can’t believe that you would go rummaging in every strange letter, like a maid, out of mere curiosity.”

“No,” said Myra. “I did have a reason, of course I had a reason. But I can’t tell you what it is.”

“If you can’t tell me what it is,” said Olga with a gentle smile, “then I will not ask you either. But reason or no reason, do you think it was a very pretty thing to do?”

“No,” said Myra honestly.

“No, I don’t think so either,” said Olga quickly. But after a pause she added reflectively, almost as if it hurt her, “But understandable. If I wanted to keep anything secret, my dear child, I would do it so artfully that you and your silly little tricks would never even find it out.”

It was said in a tone of such scornful superiority that Myra blenched. She felt the truth of those words, she felt that Olga was as if surrounded by a wall, one through which she, stupid, little, Myra, could never penetrate to the heart of this being, even by tracking her like a criminal and reading her letters.

It seemed as if Olga sensed Myra’s dumb terror. For she said suddenly in her deep, warm voice, “For the rest, I never conceal things from you. Nothing that could be of any interest to you. I write no love letters and receive none. But if there is ever anything that you are itching to find out, ask me—it is the easiest way.”

Her kindly, cordial tone did Myra no end of good, ten-fold good after all the anxiety she had endured. She made

an involuntary movement. A feeling that welled up hotly within her drove her to Olga, to kiss her hands in gratitude. Olga saw or sensed this emotion—and averted it. It was a barely perceptible twitching of her eyebrows that frightened Myra back and held her spellbound where she stood.

It was not until Myra had put on her hat and was going that Olga asked suddenly, “Will you do me a favor, Myra?”

“Anything,” said Myra with conviction.

“But this is no easy task—I....”

“So much the better!”

“No, no, it’s nothing heroic in the romantic style. Something quite unpleasant in a paltry way.” She bit her lip and hesitated. “I should prefer to do it in any other way, but I don’t know how. I want you to do something that you have certainly never done before in all your life—to pawn something for me.”

Myra broke into a laugh. “There you underestimate me considerably. The pawn-shop is one of the commonest of my childhood memories.”

“Why, Myra!”

“It’s a long story. I must tell it to you some time. But first you tell me what it is you want.”

“I want you to take this and pawn it for me.”

With a sudden gesture Olga swept the cigarette case from the desk and gave it to Myra, who took it, shocked, in both hands.

“But you can’t do that, Olga!”

Olga gazed out the window. “Don’t discuss it, please,” she said in a hard voice, without turning her head. “I alone know what I can, and what I must do!”

Myra was silent. There was no contradicting that tone. But she was not convinced.

* * *

Myra kept remembering the tender gesture with which Olga had once pressed the cigarette case to her cheek. And then she recalled the pawn-broker's hairy hand with its flattened, dirt-rimmed nails. No, she could not lay the scorpion in those hands.

She took the case to a jeweler and had it appraised. She did not have enough money in her possession to accomplish the pious deception which she had in mind.

But she knew how to remedy that. Not in vain had she been Frieda Ellert's pupil. She knew very well how to get at the silverware, and which cases contained the most valuable pieces.

As Myra stole secretly to the side-board, she thought of a dozen years before and smiled. It was no longer as exciting as it had seemed then. Although, if Aunt Emily were to discover it, it would lead to precisely the same unpleasantness. Her aunt was prepared to call in a psychiatrist again. What a ridiculous farce the whole business really was. In a year she would be of age, and free to dispose of her grandmother's legacy, and yet for the sake of a hundred marks today, she had to steal in her own father's house!

"Will you let me have the ticket?" asked Olga when they met.

"The ticket?" Myra grew a trifle embarrassed and rummaged in her pocket. "Yes, just a minute! What did I do with it? Don't worry, it's here somewhere. But first I'll count out the money!"

"Not necessary," said Olga emphatically. "The money is just where it belongs. No scenes, please! I have given you no right to insult me."

"I don't understand," said Myra disconcerted. "What does it all mean?"

"It means that I would far rather sit at a street corner and beg than to be obligated to you for money. I sent you to the pawn-shop simply so that the money would be

given into your own hands. Otherwise, I should have had to force it on you, and I hate such scenes. Now that's enough, I don't want to hear another word about it!"

"But...."

"Not another word, I said. As for the ticket, you can keep it, and redeem it for me later. I would rather not see in whose hands it had been. I'll give you the money for it the first chance I get." She laughed quickly. "When, the gods alone know! Come, let's play a game of chess. I'll concede you a castle."

VI

“You know,” said Olga the next time they met, “I have an idea. Don’t you think I could give instruction in languages, Myra? Five lessons every day, at two marks a lesson, makes ten marks, and one can certainly live on that if one manages very carefully.”

“A wonderful idea,” said Myra angrily. “In the first place, I see you living on ten marks a day. And in the second place, I should never see you at all any more.”

“What on earth are you complaining about!” said Olga, laughing. “You spend every day God gives us from morning till noon and from noon till night with me!”

“If it’s too much,” said Myra soberly and somewhat hurt, “all you have to do is say so.”

“Never fear,” Olga consoled her, “I can take care of myself. If I want to be rid of anybody, I am perfectly explicit!”

“Thank heaven. If only I can depend on that. But it is I who have the idea. We’ll combine pleasure with profit. You give me five hours instruction in foreign languages, and I will have my father pay you for it—at his own express request.”

* * *

But it did not go quite as smoothly as Myra had anticipated. Aunt Emily herself went to look for language teachers, and unearthed a pair of very dignified elderly ladies. A sixty-four-year-old professor was, in her opinion, questionable because he was unmarried. She took Myra herself to introduce her niece.

As a result, Myra had the painful task of declining their instruction.

But at least, she succeeded in getting her father to give the money for the classes directly to her instead of sending a money order or having the bank arrange it.

Olga was very exact with the lessons. She insisted on a conscientious punctuality and, as a teacher, was strict and pedantic. Myra was a zealous student in order to live up to her teacher's good opinion.

So far everything went as planned. Except that Olga did not think to economize and live on the money from the lessons.

* * *

Peculiar happenings multiplied.

One day Uncle George bobbed up suddenly in the city. Myra had always had a special predilection for Uncle George. He was really the only one of her relatives whose stately and distinguished appearance, definitely masculine manner and a certain matter-of-fact seriousness pleased her and even compelled her respect.

He greeted Myra in a peculiar way, with a conscious affability that seemed to say: "I'm really quite innocent, there's no reason for you to wonder why I am here or what it has to do with you."

Myra's delicate perceptive apparatus instantly registered suspicion. Her suspicion was intensified when she heard the key grind as all three—Father, Aunt Emily and Uncle George—withdrew into the study.

So they were locking themselves in? What might that mean? Did it concern the servants or her?

She had never taken any particular interest in family conferences. But the cautious turning of that key aroused an uneasy curiosity in her. She sauntered past the door several times. But all she could hear was an indistinct murmuring. No doubt about it, they were whispering.

Myra longed to escape the oppressive and unfriendly atmosphere of the house.

After dinner, during which only Uncle George had spoken, extolling in loud and well-rounded periods the beauties of the little city and the virtues of its children, Myra finally ventured a question.

“You are all going to sleep after dinner, aren’t you? Then may I spend an hour with my friend before tea?”

A general silence followed. All three looked at one another, nobody looked at Myra and nobody answered.

Her father cast an uneasy glance that seemed to beseech succor, from one to the other. Uncle George drummed on the table and looked expectant. Aunt Emily cleared her throat and distorted the corners of her tightly compressed mouth in a sweetish grimace that was intended for a friendly smile.

Nobody spoke. Aunt Emily did not wish to obtrude herself. She withheld her answer, waiting to see if either of the men would reply. But they did not look as if they intended to break the painful silence within the next few moments.

They had left it up to her, hence she must speak. She drew herself up and made a face whose wrinkles were intended to express profound sympathy and serious concern. But to Myra it seemed as if those sharp little eyes were flashing, as if that rigidly erect lean body was trembling with malicious joy.

“I guess you will have to omit that today, for a change, my dear child,” she said in a gentle tone, but her voice was as sharp as a knife. “We are expecting a visit this afternoon which concerns you most particularly.”

“Me?” asked Myra, and glanced at her father.

But Rudloff veiled his eyes and endeavored to control a nervous twitching of his lips. He did not answer.

“Yes, you!” said Aunt Emily as affably as if she were announcing a great pleasure to Myra.

At that moment, Myra felt that danger was threatening her. She felt as if she were caught in the fine meshes of a net, which would be drawn over her head the next moment by a slight twitch of Aunt Emily's bony fingers.

She felt as if all the doors were locked and guarded, as if nothing could save her now, but at this very moment, without hesitation, without a second thought, to jump out the window, and to run, as long as her breath lasted, to rush in mad flight through the streets to Olga.

She turned pale and started to run. It was not even a start, it was only the will to move that thrilled her muscles. But Uncle George must have perceived it.

"Now, no, Myra!" he said in a somewhat forced tone of kindness and assurance. "Just keep cool, my lass! Nobody's going to do anything to you. You must simply have confidence in us and say to yourself that everything that happens is happening, in the last analysis, for your own good. You must try to help us a little in our efforts, which are motivated wholly by a regard for your welfare, and not make our task more difficult by any childish spleen. Thus by a mutual effort we will get over this period, and later on you will be very grateful to us for having used a loving coercion to put you on the right track. You'll look back on this period as on a bad dream of no significance for your later life."

This solemn pronouncement increased Myra's vague uneasiness to all but insane terror. It was all so mysterious and incomprehensible. She knew that Aunt Emily was only waiting for a question in order to gush forth in a torrent of words. Therefore she did not ask any. But what had happened? What was about to happen?

"Out the window! Out the window!" was the only thing she could think of. But the moment she heard the door-bell ring, she shrank within herself, for she knew that it was too late.

The maid came slinking in, as if she were entering a

sick-chamber, and handed Franz Rudloff a card.

His hand trembled as he took it from the little silver tray. He had to support himself against the table in rising. His face was distorted, drawn.

“Have you taken the Professor to my room? I will be there in a moment.”

Hastily he poured himself a swallow of water. His stiff, starched cuff rattled against the carafe.

He went out, making a visible effort not to stagger, and to hold himself upright.

The three who were left sat on in silence. But Myra could not bear to remain at the table. When she rose, Uncle George made a hasty gesture as if to detain her. But she did not go to the door, she would make no further effort to escape. She went to the window and gazed through the drawn lace curtains down at the street.

Monotonous cries ascended of children at play. A delivery truck drew up and stopped at the house opposite. The driver’s helper jumped out, unlocked the back, loaded himself with parcels and closed the doors again with a sharp bang.

Every movement, every sound impressed itself with unusual distinctness on Myra’s brain. She was aware of nothing, nothing, but the sharp perception of commonplace things.

The door opened behind her back. She heard her father’s restrained and rather hoarse voice saying, “Emily, will you be so kind as to come here a moment?” Then the scraping of a chair and the rustle of skirts. Myra did not turn.

The door closed again.

Now she was alone with Uncle George. Now she might have asked him for some kind of explanation. Of these three individuals he was by far the most sensible. Ah, but what use was it? He, too, was a stranger to her, an utter stranger.

"Mother!" she thought as something like a convulsive sob rose in her throat. "Dear, good mother, why did you leave me alone, all alone in this world?"

When the door next opened, and her father appeared and said nervously, "Please, come with me, Myra," she experienced a feeling almost of joy—as a man who has studied well rejoices at an examination, or a brave man at a battle.

She walked with a perfectly firm step through the room, smiling a superior, rather disdainful, smile.

At her entrance, a slight man with sharp features and piercing eyes rose from her father's chair. In his well-trimmed pointed black beard several premature white hairs were showing.

As no one appeared to be going to introduce him, he murmured his own name, with a slight bow, while casting at the others a glance that resembled a command for instant withdrawal.

Rudloff was visibly relieved, but Aunt Emily hesitated and departed grudgingly. Even at the door, she cast back a long and curious glance, but the Professor did not utter a word, did not make a gesture until she had closed the door.

Then he drew up a chair. "Please be seated."

Myra sat down obediently.

The man in front of her leaned forward somewhat. "And now, my child," he said in a soft, almost ingratiating voice, "tell me that you will trust me."

Myra drew herself up stiffly. "I certainly shall not, Professor!" she said quietly.

The man drew back a little.

"What does that mean?" he asked in surprise.

"It means," said Myra while her heart throbbed as if it would burst, "that my Aunt called you in, and that I distrust everything she does. Probably she intends to shut me up in an insane asylum, and your function is to

declare me mentally deranged. She held a similar party for me when I was quite a little girl. But if you are a psychiatrist, you know that the feeling that one is under observation is capable of inducing something resembling insanity, even in the most normal of individuals. And you will make allowance for that in my case."

The physician smiled—a shrewd smile.

"I have not the slightest reason to question your exceptional mental ability. On the contrary, nobody questions it. And neither has anyone the slightest intention of shutting you up in an insane asylum. I came here to talk with you a little, because of certain scientific and human interests. May I ask you a few questions?"

"Certainly!" said Myra, "I probably will answer your questions more exactly if you will permit me to smoke a cigarette."

"Gladly!" said the Professor obligingly.

Myra took the cigarette case from the table and offered him one. He accepted and while he scratched his lighter and held the little flame for her he asked in a casual tone, "You are a confirmed smoker, are you not?"

"I got into the habit studying," she said. "It helps me concentrate. And as I can't rid myself yet of the suspicion that you will construe some stupid answer into feeble-mindedness...."

The Professor laughed. "I would have a hard time doing that. However, you are right, one can chat much more easily over a cigarette. But tell me now, what was this affair you mentioned? What kind of wicked designs did your estimable Aunt have on you when you were a little girl?"

"Oh," said Myra, "she called in a children's psychiatrist because I took the silver from the side-board."

"Aha!" said the Professor with an interested and amused smile. "Why did you do that? Did you like silver?"

"No, I pawned it!"

"Pawned it!" The Professor laughed aloud. "How did such an idea ever get into your child's head?"

"It was not my own," said Myra seriously. From the hazy past the image of Frieda rose clearly and distinctly. "My governess led me to do it. I was completely under her influence, which was not a very good one."

"Ah!" said the Professor with mild astonishment. "Are you easily influenced? You do not look it. Probably there is nothing on earth that could make you do such a thing now!"

"The Devil!" said Myra in sudden terror. "I forgot to redeem that stupid silver!"

The Professor was tremendously amused, but he did not let her see it.

"What," he asked, "the silver you pawned ten years ago? It certainly must be lost by now!"

"No," said Myra, frankly, "that which I just pawned. I clean forgot it!"

"Don't worry about it," said the Professor amiably, "it has already been redeemed."

For a moment Myra did not quite comprehend. "How can that be? Nobody knew about it."

"The ticket was found in your pocket."

"Found!" Myra sprang up. "Found? That is to say, that that shameless person has been going through my things again! Oh, what a pity that I did not catch her at it—I think I would have throttled her with my bare hands!"

"Please sit down," said the Professor, not sharply, but so imperatively that Myra obeyed.

"If by 'that person' you mean your Aunt, I should urge her, as a man and a physician, to supervise you more closely than is customary among adult human beings."

"I am an adult human being," said Myra angrily.

"You are a child," said the physician mildly, "a child that does not even suspect the danger it is getting into,

but who will be very grateful to us all once it has grown up and learned to understand from what we protected it."

"I believe you are mistaken," said Myra, in an icy voice. "I am not in any danger. But if I were, I can protect myself."

"As long as you are not of age, you cannot refuse our helping hand."

It sounded kindly, but quite definite. "I question whether you would find in yourself the necessary strength to break with the friend who is at present influencing you."

The blood rushed suddenly to Myra's heart. She felt that she had turned as white as snow.

"What do you know about my friend?" she asked bluntly. She felt as if she could not breathe.

The physician smiled a superior smile. "In any case, more than you."

"I doubt that," Myra interrupted in a hard, disdainful tone. But his composure was not to be ruffled.

"I know," he said imperturbably, but firmly, "that you are under the influence of a woman who can do you a great deal of harm. I understand you quite well. You *are* a child. I will not deny that the lady possesses intelligence and charm. You are proud of this friendship and would be willing to sacrifice anything for her. You would let this friendship start you on a path of crime...."

"Oh, bosh!" said Myra.

"I understand you to be contradicting me. But just let your cool intelligence come into play for a moment and think logically. You purloin silver from your parents' side-board. You ask your father for money for lessons and spend it on automobile excursions with your friend, on champagne and tickets for the Opera. You pay your friend's dress-maker's bills with money that you have come by in irregular ways. Yes, my child, don't you see yourself what an abyss you are heading for?"

How did they know all that? As if lit up by a flash of lightning, the whole chain of events was suddenly clear to Myra. They had had a detective watch every step she took. Wherever she went, strange eyes had been glued to her, strange eyes and Aunt Emily's notions.

Myra sat quite still and did not stir. She felt as if brutal hands were tearing her clothes from her body piece by piece. Not the hands of this stranger; it was Aunt Emily's hands that were doing it, it was Aunt Emily's face she saw before her, wreathed in a mocking smirk and slavering with foul enjoyment. Slowly, slowly, Myra's fingers clenched to a fist. She bowed her head; the corners of her mouth twitched and she swallowed hard.

Again the Professor's voice came softly and soothingly. "Just think back on your childhood! Didn't you love this young woman who influenced you as a child? And aren't you glad and grateful now that you were separated from her? Well, you will be just as grateful to us later on when you are capable of judging. If you stop to think, you know it now in your heart of hearts. It is you who are the true friend. It is you who love, who sacrifice yourself. It is you who are used, are treated as a plaything, or denied on occasion, and sooner or later tossed aside. Do you imagine that this is the first case I have seen? Meanwhile you will be ruined for the rest of your life, made sick in body and soul, robbed of every possibility of happiness. What is left for you? According to your capacities—death or suicide. I have seen terrible tragedies come about in this way...."

Myra strove in vain against the impression which the words made upon her. Her tensed nerves felt a cold breath that made her shudder to the very core of her being. It seemed to her like a warning cry from the darkly veiled future. Death—the end! A fearful something strode inexorably toward her, casting its cold shadow in advance. She shivered. She had to make an effort to

regain her outward calm. She dug her nails in the arms of her chair and swallowed once or twice.

"All that is quite aside from the point," she said at last with an effort. "Perhaps you will be so good as to tell me why they really called you in and what they have decided concerning me. If not an insane asylum, do they intend to shut me up in a cloister, or a reform school, or send me to America?"

The physician smiled. "None of those things. But you will leave in a short time to stay with your Uncle George and his family. There in the fresh air and amidst quiet surroundings, your nerves will grow strong again and you will be in a position to make sane and healthy judgments unassisted."

"When do I leave?" asked Myra curtly.

"Today!"

"At least I have to pack my suitcase!"

"It has been packed while we were talking!"

That was what she had feared. Myra felt the walls, the hand-cuffs. She glanced about her like a hunted animal driven into a trap. No escape anywhere, no possibility of flight.

They were separating her from Olga. That was bad, but not the worst. They were doing it by force. They should have asked her to take this journey, they should have allowed her time, time to say good-bye, time for an explanation, time to pack her own things, her books. Now Aunt Emily was at her bureau, was packing for her, was rummaging around. In an hour she would be sitting in the train, without having been able to inform Olga. And Uncle George would be sitting across from her—as her keeper. And what would happen here in the meanwhile—to her desk, her books, to Olga....

She had a desire to tear something to pieces, to dash out her brains against the walls. She did nothing. She rose from her chair, quite pale.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"I am delighted," said the Professor, rising at the same time, "that you agree to this journey."

"Agree?" said Myra with a contemptuous twitch of the lips. "I submit to coercion because I know that all resistance is useless. If my Aunt wished, she could have dragged me off in chains, and my father would look on, and all the courts in the world would uphold her."

The Professor went up to her and opened the door.

"Miss Myra and I find ourselves in perfect agreement," he announced cheerfully. "I have prescribed a little change of air, and she is overjoyed to pass a few weeks under your hospitable roof, Herr von Seyblitz!"

Uncle George rubbed his powerful hands, Franz Rudloff attempted a feeble smile, and Aunt Emily made a surprised, and as it seemed to Myra, disappointed face.

She rushed up to the Professor and hissed in a low voice, but loud enough for all to hear, "But you told me, Professor, that you wanted to examine her, to see if there were not some physical abnormalities ... and I think...."

The Professor endeavored in vain to silence her by a slight motion of the hand and eyelids. It was too late.

Myra had already heard. Had suddenly, instantly, understood. It was too late.

She was conscious only of the fierce desire to see this horrible creature die under her hands. She did not know she moved. The floor moved under her feet. She heard a gurgling that was strange and hideous, and yet seemed to come from her own throat. She felt her fingers close on a thin, withered neck, felt at the same moment her own wrists gripped by hands that were like iron, gripped so tightly that all the blood seemed to stop in her veins and she thought she would smother. She felt she could not endure this torture one heart-beat longer.

"Let me go!" she growled. "Let me go!"

The physician immediately released her right arm, and

a moment later Uncle George released her left.

Then her wrists began to ache. She rubbed them quite mechanically. She felt exhausted, quiet, shattered. She was almost happy at the idea that she must leave this house, these people, at once, this very moment.

She turned to the physician. “When does the train leave? Isn’t it time to get ready?”

“We are going the same way, I think,” the Professor remarked casually when the auto had drawn up before the door. “Have you room in the car?”

Myra looked at him in surprise and with a little smiling scorn. “Subterfuge is unnecessary, Professor, if you want to take me to the station. My family will gladly forego the pleasure. It is better for all concerned.”

She gave her father her finger-tips, which he clasped in both hands. “Good-bye, papa, take care of yourself.”

Aunt Emily drew back against the wall as if she feared a new assault on her life, but Myra passed her with a contemptuous glance.

The journey on the train was longer than she expected. Myra gazed intently out the window, striving to impress on her mind the name of every station, every village, every crossing. It was possible that she would have to return on foot.

She had no money—whether she would have the opportunity to pawn or sell valuables was doubtful. She glanced at the mileage-signs—fifty miles from home. She could make four miles an hour with ease. Too bad it wasn’t summer. It wouldn’t be pleasant passing the night in the open at two below zero.

VII

Myra sat on the window-sill in the bright, friendly mansard room, smoking a cigarette and polishing her nails. On the white cover of the sewing-table which Myra had degraded or advanced to a dressing-table, a thick, little, black book lay open—The New Testament.

The door was pushed ajar and her Cousin Herman insinuated himself through the crack. But he stopped midway and stood toying with the latch.

“Coming down for supper, or have you still got a headache?” he asked laconically.

“Shut the door, child,” Myra commanded in a low voice. She did not want the cigarette smoke to float downstairs and assail Aunt Antonia’s sensitive nostrils.

The boy closed the door but continued to toy with the latch.

“Why do you hang on to the door?” asked Myra, amused. “Come in, come in! Take a seat!”

The boy hesitated. “Of course, we’re not supposed to come up here,” he ventured. “But if your headache is better, I guess you can’t be sick any more!”

“Sick?” said Myra in some surprise. “Are you supposed not to come up here because I’m sick?”

“Yes,” said the twelve-year-old, too shrewdly for his age, “because it’s contagious!”

“Ah, Mannie!” Myra uttered a short laugh. “My sickness certainly isn’t contagious.”

“What kind of a sickness have you?” The boy drew nearer curiously.

Myra hesitated. The boy cast a covetous glance at the cigarettes.

"Give me one!" he begged suddenly.

"Certainly," said Myra. "As many as you like. But you've got to mail a letter for me, secretly, so that not a soul sees you. Can you be depended on?" Myra glanced at him sharply and searchingly. The boy's honor was touched.

"Do you think I'd let myself get caught?" he said with conviction. "What do you think I am, a dummy?"

He received the cigarettes and the letter and stowed them so artfully in his blouse that Myra smiled. "This is not the first thing he's hidden from mother's sharp eyes," she thought.

But he was still reluctant to go. He hesitated for a while and then came out with it. "Say, what kind of sickness *have* you got?"

Myra wondered what she should tell him. Then her glance fell on the cigarette case. "Well, Mannie," she said after a pause, "I was bitten by a scorpion, and now the poison is all through my blood. And you know, the only thing that will cure a scorpion's bite is scorpion's poison. But there aren't any scorpions here. It's all superstition that it's contagious. It's only phalanges that are so poisonous you die from washing in a basin that's been used by somebody who has been bitten by one. Your mother has mixed them up."

"Then it's not contagious?" asked the boy, venturing a step nearer.

"No!" Myra shook her head with a doleful smile, "I believe that people can die of it—but it's not contagious."

* * *

Young Herman, who undertook to convey the letter to the post-office with much secrecy and a most important air, was firmly convinced that it must be a love letter which had been confided to him. He would have been greatly astonished could he have learned that the letter

spoke more of him, of little Herman himself, than of love.

"Formerly I used to hate my Uncle's children," Myra wrote after a matter-of-fact recital of the events of the past few days. "I had no reason to hate them except that they had such protruding ears. Tell me, dear, what has changed me so completely? Now I see character in every childish action, I see destinies inextricably bound up with those characters. I see that little Anna is going to have a hard time of it in life—not merely because her ears stand out—and I feel that I would like to help her, to give her something, to multiply the few happy hours of her life....

"I have made a discovery, Olga. You'll laugh at me. My Aunt Antonia has closed the bookcase to me and laid the New Testament on my table. I have a suspicion that she meant to punish me with it. A year ago, at the height of my rebellion, I flung it against the wall and would never have believed that I could actually read it again. And yet we've made friends once more! What a glorious book it is! But you'll laugh at my discovery of the fact. Is there anything beautiful on earth that you do not know and love?"

* * *

Uncle George and Aunt Antonia were most agreeably surprised by Myra's behavior. They had expected an unmanageable child whom it would be necessary to tame, if the occasion required, force. They found a quite perfect and lovable young lady. Hence they disliked to be always restricting and supervising her, and allowed her one liberty after another.

Myra took full advantage of these liberties and began preparations for her flight. Day or night, she had never had any other intention and her constant preoccupation with such plans kept her in a state of almost wantonly happy excitement.

But the first problem was where to find money. Myra

sold everything with which she could possibly dispense. Still it was not enough. She began to dispose of articles from the household. But that was difficult and impractical. In the first place, it might be discovered before she was gone, and then all would be lost. In the second place, the results did not repay the trouble it required, and it hurt her to see valuable things given away for a song.

One day Uncle George received a large sum of money by mail, and locked it away in the desk, in Myra's presence.

Myra stared as if hypnotized at the locked desk. Here was all she needed, but how could she get at it?

She lay all night without sleeping, or even trying to. Her mind was working feverishly. Should she break open the desk that night? There was no train at that hour which would be certain to bring her to the city before daybreak.

Should she take a wax impression of the lock? The locksmith might become suspicious if she asked him to make the key. Should she steal the key-ring? They would miss it immediately and search the whole house. Should she remove the key to the desk from the ring? They would immediately notice that this most important key was missing.

The next day Myra procured a half dozen keys from the locksmith. She told him some story about a key to the bookcase which she had lost, and was delighted at the assured and unembarrassed manner with which she told it.

That night she stole down and tried the keys. Nearly all were easy to insert, but they did not unlock the desk.

Next day she asked for her Uncle's keys in order to get a book from the library. While she was kneeling in front of the bookcase, she removed the key to the desk from the ring. In its place, she attached one resembling it.

She took a book from the case without seeing what it was.

As she handed the keys back to Uncle George, she felt sure he must hear the furious throbbing of her pulses. She thought her face must be as white as chalk and made an effort to set her frozen lips in a smile.

Her Uncle took the keys without glancing up from his newspaper, and with a brief "Thanks," thrust them into his trousers pocket.

Myra packed her suitcase and sent a telegram. Late in the afternoon, she carried the suitcase to the station.

At half past seven they sat down to supper. The train left at half past eight. During supper Myra complained of a headache. At her request her Uncle gave her a headache-tablet and advised her to lie down immediately.

Myra said, "good night," while the others were still at table.

In order to reach the stairs from the dining-room, she had to pass through the darkened living-room. While she listened to their voices in the adjoining room, expecting at every moment to hear a chair scrape as someone rose, she unlocked the desk and crammed a handful of bills into her pocket.

In the hall her coat was hanging, a piece of forethought. She slipped into it and opened the little rear-door that gave on the garden. She did not dare pass the dining-room windows in front.

There was nothing difficult about swinging herself over the low garden fence. She looked back once. That side of the house was completely dark. She listened. Not a door opened or window rattled. Then she turned and ran as if the Devil were after her, across the fields, to the station.

* * *

During the journey on the train, she fought against an agony of fear. She saw herself pursued, hand-cuffed. The

train seemed to crawl along at an intolerable pace, and to stop much longer than required at each station.

At times she felt that it would be better to get out and run, simply to run and run and run until she had no more breath or strength, than to wait, an inactive, restless captive, until the lazy engine brought her to her destination.

With sudden terror she thought of the possibility that her telegram might not arrive in time or that Olga might not be at home to receive it.

And what in God's name was she to do if Olga were not at the station!

To go home was impossible. She could already feel the straight-jacket and hand-cuffs. Should she rush through the night to Olga? Ring a strange door-bell and wake up the people in the pension? What right had she to do that?

There was nothing left but to take a room for a night at a hotel. But where would she be safe? Early next morning they would be searching everywhere for her. She shuddered to think of what lay ahead.

She shuddered, too, at the thought of a lonely night in a strange room.

There were moments, too, when she regarded her own actions with astonishment, terrified by her daring. Suddenly feeling the bills crinkling in her waist, she asked herself with amazement, "Good God, how did I ever manage to do it?"

At eleven twenty the train arrived at the depot. The light and the tumult in the buzzing hall whose vast vault was lost in darkness, was still more alarming than the silent night of the fields.

But Olga Radó was there.

Amidst that sea of hurrying, scurrying, searching people she stood perfectly still, but drawn up a little taller than usual. Surrounded by stupid, stolid, deformed faces, her own pale face shone brightly. From under her

dark brows, which were knitted as if threateningly, her dark eyes sparkled and peered along the line of coaches.

Myra flung open the door before the train stopped. Regardless of all, she forced her way through the crowd, jabbing her suitcase into people's knee-joints. She stretched out her hand, no, she clutched like a falling man at a support, crying between tears and laughter, "Olga!"

Olga's face which had turned abruptly to her, remained grave. Not the ghost of a smile relaxed those tense features.

"Myra!" she said in her deep voice. "My child! What folly are you up to now!"

Myra was a little taken aback. Not much. She would have preferred another reception—but what difference did these words make to her or the tone of these words? Olga was there. She gazed into her face, held her hand, listened to her voice.

Now everything was all right.

"Are you angry?" asked Myra, her eyes laughing, while she clung to Olga's hand. "If you really are angry, you old Philistine, I won't even dare confess all the wicked things I've done!"

"I'm not angry," said Olga earnestly, "I simply refuse to be in any way responsible. If you've run away, that's your affair! I have not influenced you to it by a single word, a single glance. I knew nothing about it. I want to get that straight now and forever!"

"Yes," said Myra, "but as soon as you've got it straight, perhaps you'll tell me whether or not you're glad to see me."

"If I must be candid," said Olga with a vague smile and without looking at Myra, "I'm not unglad that you're here, but I'm a little disturbed. Have you reflected at all as to what is to become of you now?"

Myra had thought about it. But reflected? No, that was

certainly not the right word. She had thought of herself as coming to Olga in order to be with Olga, to remain with Olga. She had pictured herself in Olga's comfortable room, the one room in which she had known happy hours, had meant to hide herself there, never to go into the street, never to go home—now she was aware of the folly of the idea and did not dare to declare it to the shrewd eyes watching her.

"I don't know," she said pitifully. "I only know that I can never go home, never, never, never, never! I'll look for a job as a nursemaid or a chambermaid—anything!"

"Then you might just as well have remained where you were. They certainly wouldn't have beaten you or let you go hungry. Or do you expect that you'll have more freedom as a maid?"

"Yes," said Myra defiantly, "at least I'll have my Sundays free and nobody can forbid me to spend them with you!"

"Do what you like as far as I'm concerned!" Olga stood still and closed her eyes for a moment as if in mortal terror. "You are positively brutal, Myra! Don't you see how you're going to incriminate me! I can't accept responsibility for this, I can't!"

They were still standing on the platform which was by then almost emptied of its swarming crowds. Only a few night-travellers were still hurrying toward the exit.

Myra felt tired and shattered; the light suitcase was like a ton in her hand. The draught in the vast hall made her shiver.

"Can't we sit down in the waiting-room for ten minutes?" she asked dejectedly. "Perhaps if I think about it quietly, something will occur to me that I can do. But if you feel so tired, why don't you go home?"

"Yes," said Olga, "and leave you sitting here alone all night in the depot! Have you gone clean crazy, my dear child?"

They sat in the empty waiting-room, warming their cold fingers on their glasses of hot tea. Myra related the story of her flight. She took the crinkled bills out of her waist and thrust them into her pocket.

Myra had almost expected Olga to laugh. While she was telling the story, the whole business struck her like an incredibly comical adventure. But Olga's face remained intensely serious.

"And now?" she asked.

"I'm going to a hotel!"

"And I?"

"You are going back to your pension!"

"I won't leave you alone."

"Come with me, then," said Myra with a flare of hope.

"Yes," said Olga bitterly, "and the first thing tomorrow morning the police will come and arrest us. No thank you. I'll probably be accused of making you commit grand larceny."

"Then," said Myra after further reflection, "in that case we'll have to behave like real embezzlers. That is, take the next train and keep going. We'll simply get off at some station or other and go to a hotel. From there I'll write my father, and beg him first of all to straighten out the money business. Perhaps he'll be reasonable and I'll be able to come to some agreement with him. In six months, I'll receive my grandmother's legacy. If my father won't give me anything, I'll borrow against my legacy: it can be done somehow." Myra looked at the huge schedule. "The next train leaves at midnight!"

Olga's face had lost its stern expression. Her eyes were laughing with a deep joy. But she still hesitated.

"You're absolutely crazy!" she said. "No night-dress, no toothbrush!"

"I have linen enough," said Myra eagerly, "and we can buy a toothbrush!"

"What ideas you do have!" said Olga slowly.

Myra saw that she was already half convinced.

"Grand ideas!" she said radiantly. "Fascinating, entrancing ideas. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, but *I* never would have thought of it," said Olga emphatically. "*You* talked me into it. It's your idea and no one's else!"

"Absolutely! I'm much too proud of it to let anybody else claim the authorship."

* * *

The midnight train was a passenger train. They sat alone in a compartment for non-smokers, that was dimly illuminated by the blue-shaded light in the ceiling. They made an unsuccessful effort to remove the shade in order to turn on the little gas flame full force.

"Let it be," said Myra in fun. "It's better for us if the compartment is dark, then our pursuers can't recognize us from outside."

Myra was in such high spirits that she elaborated the idea into a merry comedy and even induced Olga to take part.

They played at flight. They stooped whenever anybody passed outside. They breathed freely again as soon as the train had started. Myra did her hair differently so as not to be recognized. They "bribed" the conductor with the "sum" of three marks not to let anybody enter their compartment and afterwards, were worried lest the enormous tip might cause them to be suspected as embezzlers.

"You know," said Myra mysteriously, "we certainly ought not to get off at the place our tickets call for. If we do, they'll be after us immediately. We'll simply get off at some other stop."

"Yes," Olga agreed, "seven stops from here. Seven is a mystic number."

Myra was enthusiastic. "It's beautiful, it's wonderful!

We go on, and we don't know where. We get off, and we don't know where. We'll wake up early tomorrow morning in a strange city, and won't know the name of it."

"How strange that sounds!" said Olga, paraphrasing the words. "Like something really profound! We live—and we don't know how! We love—and we don't know why! We die—and we don't know when!"

"No," said Myra, "I don't know when! Thank God! But I do know why! Also, thank God!"

The ghost of a shadow seemed to pass over Olga's face as if she wished not to hear what Myra said. "I used to long so dreadfully to know when I would die," she said reflectively. "I think it is so unjust for us to know absolutely nothing about how much time we have before us. We ought to have a right to regulate that! I used to envy a friend of mine who died of tuberculosis. She knew exactly—so much of my lung is left, I can live so much longer provided I economize, provided I spare myself. Or I have the choice of squandering the rest, of throwing away what's left. That must be beautiful! As it is, you know, I never can leave my room until it is cleaned up, because I suffer so from the fixed idea—who knows if I shall ever return. The thought is so appalling to me that some time I may have just to step out of life and leave everything in disorder behind me!"

Myra was on the verge of tears. She wanted to conceal, to dispel the sadness that was tormenting her, so she said with affected rudeness, "Don't you think you're really insane? Perhaps you'll be good enough to choose some other topic of conversation for this dismal night-journey! If you don't, I'm going to sit in the next compartment until you've finished your meditations."

"Child!" said Olga, smiling and clasping her hand. "You are quite right! Scold me! It's because of my stupid oracle!"

“Oracle?” said Myra, astounded.

“Haven’t you found that out about me yet? I’m like these old peasant women who, whenever they are in trouble, stick a knitting-needle in the Bible and fish out a quotation.”

“But you haven’t got a knitting-needle,” said Myra, laughing.

“Nor a Bible either! The Bible must be an heirloom. A new one is no good. But you really don’t have to have a Bible for that purpose: you can take any book and open it. It’s remarkable, what answers you sometimes find. I asked yesterday, for example—when your telegram came—whether I should go to the depot....”

“And?” asked Myra in suspense.

“Oh, it’s all silliness,” said Olga with a wry smile. She turned away and stared intently out of the window into the black night that was flitting by them.

“Of course, it’s silliness,” said Myra sincerely. “But it worries you all the same. And you won’t see how really silly it is until you’ve told me. So tell me—then we can laugh at it together.”

Olga turned to her again. She was trying to maintain an uncertain smile.

“When Radomonte Gozaga entered Genoa—in some campaign of vengeance or other, I don’t remember just what—he wore a doublet on which was embroidered a scorpion. Under it was the legend: *Qui vivens laedit, morte medetur*.[1] Is that an answer or not?”

[1] “What life wounds, is healed in death.”

Myra seized Olga’s hand. She must rend some veil that the words, which had been uttered with such effort, had thrown over her.

“You are certainly insane!” she said. But her voice did not ring true. She had to clear her throat of a sudden huskiness.

* * *

The brakes ground under the coaches. “The sixth stop!” said Myra mysteriously, her eyes big. “The next is our fate. I hope to heaven, it isn’t a large city.”

When the train was once more in motion, they began to make ready to get off. The next stop might be ten minutes or an hour distant—they did not know.

They had placed their suitcase on the seat, and were standing side by side at the window, their faces pressed against the pane in an effort to penetrate the darkness rushing past.

“There are lots of woods in this country,” said Olga, “pine woods!”

“Yes,” Myra exulted, “we’ll go walking in them tomorrow.”

The woods ended. A slate-gray, clouded sky hung above long, gently rolling, dark fields. More trees, at first singly, then a thick black woods that extended to the railway embankment, and above which not a scrap of sky was to be seen.

Again, the trees grew more sparsely, disappeared. Again, broad fields. Then at a distance they could not estimate, as though set between the gently rolling furrows, a tiny light twinkled. Another, and another.

“Look! Look!” cried Myra, in raptures. “Maybe that’s our stop.”

“Strange,” said Olga, “maybe one of those lights will be in our window tomorrow morning. And perhaps we’ll have a feeling of home when we pass those lights ten years hence. But now we don’t even know the name of the place.”

A watchman’s shack flitted past. Now and again a section of shiny rails was lit up by a lantern. Once more woods grew right up to the tracks, but more open, criss-crossed by numerous paths. Then a hedge ran along

beside them for a while. After the clipped hedge, a bright wooden fence. Behind it, quite close at hand, the outlines of individual houses already loomed darkly. A rather smoky lantern, and gates that closed a dark tree-bordered highway.

Other bits of woods and gardens. Beyond them, little light after little light. The train was slowing, creaking, puffing. Wooden columns flashed out suddenly, supporting the roof of a narrow shelter. The train stopped.

Olga seized the suitcase, lifted the latch and sprang down the high steps. Myra followed her, in a strange dreamy trance. She was worn out by the two sleepless nights; her senses, sharpened a thousandfold, seemed to notice everything. The thin film of hoar-frost that covered the earth and the trunks of the trees, the coarse faces of two women in peasant's attire, who hurried past, the conductor's long-drawn shout, the leisurely slamming of doors, the red hands in knitted mittens, of the man at the guard-gates, the little dark room, its walls pasted up with bills, and the worn benches, the whistle of the departing train behind her—all was impressed on her mind with ineradicable distinctness.

Olga pushed open a door, descended a flight of stone steps, and they were standing on the uneven flag-stones of a broad square, feebly illuminated by the lights of the station.

Left and right—pitch darkness. As far as they could see —nothing but bare, twisted trees, unpaved, sodden paths, slightly frozen over.

At a little distance there was something that resembled the beginning of a street.

Olga stood still and looked at Myra with a smile. "Well," she said, "are you shivering already? What would you give now to be safe at home under a down-comfortable, with the electric light to turn on whenever

you want it?"

"Nothing at all!" said Myra defiantly. "On the contrary, I think it's extremely pleasant right here. And if we don't find any accommodations, I shall mind it for your sake only. It was I who led you into this excursion!"

"Oh, for all I care," said Olga deprecatingly, "for all I care, we can spend the night on those benches in the station. But if you're afraid, we can go back and ask the man at the guard-gates if there's a hotel."

"No," Myra insisted, "don't ask. Let's go on."

A few hundred paces ahead of them, the houses began. Dark and sleeping or with an occasional lighted window. They stood rather apart, surrounded by their gardens and fields. The road was paved with cobbles. Presently the houses stood closer together, began to form a street which was illuminated by flickering lanterns.

The street broadened to a kind of market-place. It was a dreary polygon, without any artistic embellishments, lime-trees, or a purling spring. On one side, was a long, squat, gray box with a broad roof, sloping low, and several dormer-windows. Over the broad arch of the dark entrance a tin star was swaying, not unlike a shaving-basin, while a big blue lantern, swinging from a beautifully curved arm, illuminated the words: "At the Sign of the Blue Star. Hotel and stable accommodations."

"Look," said Olga, "even a hotel!"

They looked for a night-bell. But they could not find even a door. Beside the entrance-way was a handle for ringing a big bell at the end of a rusty iron rod. But it was difficult to reach. Myra made an attempt.

"Don't bother," said Olga, "that's not for poor pedestrians like us. Moreover, we'll wake up the whole town. Let's try inside instead."

They ventured into the dark cavern of the entrance, but did not get far. Before the passage could open into a court, a huge rack-wagon barred the way. But beside the

wagon they found a flight of steps and a little wooden door in the wall. They felt a metal knob, tugged at it and succeeded in evoking a shrill ring that made them start, so hair-raisingly did it shatter the silence.

Steps, voices, a light.

A sleepy-looking individual appeared in the doorway, slippers on his bare feet, in grayish-yellow underwear, over which he had managed in some remarkable fashion to pull on a jacket that he held closed under his chin with his left hand. In his upraised right he carried a wax candle.

Olga took over the management of negotiations.

She told the sleep-drunk man a long tale of the train by which they had just arrived, and of how the “Blue Star” had had been recommended to her, and how she regretted having had to disturb his slumbers, but the trains arrived at such uncomfortable hours, and they couldn’t remain on the streets, and, of course, the people at the station had directed them here.

The man rallied sufficiently to say, “One moment, please!” vanished and left them standing there.

They looked at one another and laughed, waiting patiently. After some time a gas-lamp without a globe was lighted farther up the stairs, and the man reappeared, this time in black trousers.

The fact that he was collarless and wore neither a jacket nor stockings did not prevent a certain deftness of his movements from revealing at once that he was “mine host.”

He conducted them into a big, dark, cold room, jumped up on the cushion of a chair and lit the gas-jet. It was evidently the “Blue Star’s” “imperial suite.”

The high, broad bed, the ponderous plush sofa almost vanished in the vast room. Between the windows stood a huge, gold-framed mirror before which, on the console, were wax flowers under glass, while the walls were

elegant with numerous gay prints, most of them in heavy gold frames.

"Mine host" stooped and lit a gas-heater. A long row of little pointed blue flames puffed up, were mirrored in a reflector of grooved copper that cast a warm and ruddy glow on the shabby carpet.

"Splendid!" said Olga, tossing her gloves on the big, round, plush-covered table. "Now it will be warm here, too. That's simply ideal! No, sir, we don't need another thing. We should like to have breakfast here in the morning. Is this the bell—splendid! Thank you! Good night!"

The door closed behind him.

"Wonderful!" said Olga, including it all in a wide embrace.

"Are you serious?" asked Myra timidly. "I was afraid your sense of beauty would be in constant agony! Those pictures! And those artificial flowers, and the plush-upholstery!"

"Simply splendid!" said Olga. "It just couldn't be any different. I'd have been terribly disappointed if those fighting stags were not here, or that wonderful Empire maiden with the apple-tree in bloom. Do you think I want to see Chippendale furniture or a Kokoschka in the 'Blue Star'? God forbid! As it is, I think it's simply heavenly!"

Myra unpacked her suitcase, spread night-gowns on the bed, set bottles and boxes on the wash-table. Olga walked about noiselessly, whistling with soft, sweet flute-tones. She stopped before each picture, studying it with childish enthusiasm, while she made up long stories about it.

"Here!" said Myra, laying her silk kimono on the chair, "you can put that on."

"And you?"

"I have my wrapper, that's all right for me."

"Wonderful," she said, "simply wonderful! Now all I need is warm feet. Then I'll be absolutely happy."

She rolled a chair up to the gas-heater and began to untie her shoes.

"Shall I help you?" asked Myra, eager to serve.

"I never heard of such a thing!" said Olga provoked. "Why, I wouldn't let my maid do such a thing for me!"

"That's another matter," said Myra, smiling. "It's a distinction that one does not confer on maids."

"You're certainly insane!" Again that sudden deep crimson pulsed into Olga's cheeks.

She had drawn off her thin silk stockings and was holding her bare feet toward the flame. She raised her arms and slowly ran Myra's brush over the hair that fell in heavy black curls about her neck.

Myra jumped on the chair and turned out the gas-light.

"Now," she said with a laugh, "you can have a painting made of yourself, or a chromo and frame it in gold and hang it on the walls here. Title: *Au coin du feu*, or The Witch, or Firelight, or something just as good. How can anybody be so shamelessly lovely?"

"Indeed!" said Olga dryly. "Now you've done it! We haven't any matches!"

"In the first place, there's light enough for me," said Myra, seating herself on the floor in the ruddy firelight. "And in the second place, we can always light a spill from this. If we can't find anything better, we'll use a hundred mark note. We have plenty of them. Child, what a marvellous foot you have! But so cold, they're always like ice!"

She clasped both hands about Olga's foot. It was as nobly shaped, as beautiful in line and color as if a masterhand had chiselled it out of marble. But it was as heavy and as cold as stone.

Myra endeavored to warm it in her hands, but then she could not resist temptation—she set her lips upon its cool, smooth, white skin.

Olga broke away, sprang up and ran through the dark

room to the window.

"Olga!" cried Myra, terrified, and rose, hesitantly. "What is the matter? What's wrong with you?"

No answer. Myra went over to her. But when she reached the window and stretched out her hand toward her, Olga dodged as if hunted, along the wall.

She stood, cowering, in a corner, Myra barring her way.

Her lovely pale face gleamed weirdly in the dark. Her tense features were at once frightened and threatening, like a wounded animal's, that sees itself surrounded and prepares to defend itself desperately.

Myra shrank from the expression of those compressed lips, those darkly glowing eyes. Timidly she laid her hand on Olga's arms, which were folded across her breast.

Olga started and cowered deeper in her corner.

"Go away!" she said through clenched teeth. "Let me be!"

"You must not stand in your bare feet on the bare floor," said Myra on the verge of tears. "You'll catch your death of cold. I don't want you to do anything but sit by the heater. I can sleep in the hall, in front of the door, or I can take another room, or I can jump out the window. But come out of that corner, I can't bear to look at you a minute longer!"

She seized her by both shoulders, but Olga shook her off.

"Let me be!" she said angrily. "Can't you see that you're torturing me to death? How can anybody be so stupidly cruel?"

Her voice broke and suddenly her face was covered with tears.

Myra could control herself no longer. Her eyes, too, brimmed over.

"I don't understand!" she said with quivering lips. "If I'm so hateful to you that you can't stand me, what are

you here for? Why do you have anything to do with me? No one can like a person whose presence is a torture to him. But I know why you can't stand me!"

"Why?" asked Olga astonished.

Myra shook her head in silence, still struggling with her tears.

"Why can't I stand you?" Olga demanded more urgently. "Answer me! I want to know!"

Myra still avoided looking at her. "Because I love you too much!" she said bitterly and sadly. "It must be dreadful to be loved by someone whom you do not love! Almost disgusting!"

"Idiot!" said Olga and stroked Myra's hair very tenderly.

"Oh, don't," said Myra and disengaged herself from the hand. "There's no use forcing one's self."

Olga let her arms drop heavily.

"One must force one's self," she said, breathing softly but with an effort. "If I did not force myself, I would so smother you with caresses that you'd be frightened to death and run away."

Myra felt the pulse throbbing in her neck so that she could scarcely breathe.

"Don't do it," she said. "Though I would certainly never run away, I might go mad with happiness!"

Then Olga slowly raised both her slender white arms and laid them on Myra's shoulders. Myra felt their powerful, delicious pressure grow tenser and tenser.

Since Olga was barefoot, their faces were almost on a level. Their eyes bored into one another, gravely, unflinchingly, while they felt in every vein the terrible throbbing of their hearts.

Then they bent toward one another, like two thirsting souls, and laid mouth upon mouth.

They did not release one another again. They kissed one another more and more covetously. They walked

through the room, nestling close together, they sat on the edge of the bed in one another's arms. Their clothes slipped off and lay on the floor.

The coarse, damp sheets exhaled a chill miasma. They hardly felt it, so hot was the blood in their youthful bodies.

They pressed upon one another as if they wanted to pass one into the other, to be merged, be one.

Their slender, supple limbs wove one into the other, as the trees of a virgin forest inextricably interpenetrate.

They did not speak. But like a murmuring music, they heard the droning pulse of one another's hearts, and the breath that came quicker and quicker.

Their bodies seized each other as wild beasts seize and shake the bars of their cages. They buried their nails in one another's flesh, their teeth in their tensed muscles.

Then they lay nestling one against the other like children tired with play, while their lips brushed eyelids and cheeks as gently, as softly, as a butterfly a swaying flower.

"Little one!" said Olga, and all the bells pealed in her voice. "My beautiful, my good one!"

"My dear," said Myra. "Oh you miracle of heaven! What are you really? Are you a wild creature? Or a god? Or the spirit of a white orchid?"

"I don't know," said Olga. "I believe I am a god. But an hour ago I was a poor tortured creature. Are you not proud, little girl, to be able to work such miracles?"

"I wish I could work miracles," said Myra longingly.

Olga laughed a hard laugh. "Then you'd change me into a man!" she said.

"God forbid!" cried Myra, clasping her in both arms. "Never! Never! Never! But if I could work miracles, I'd never let this night end. I would make it last forever!"

The red glow of the copper behind the gas flame filled the room with a warm light. The little pointed flames

trembled gently, and the bright spot on the worn gay carpet trembled, too.

Olga leaned on her elbows, supporting her head in her hands. Between her white fingers her black curls peeped. In her pale face, her clear dark eyes glowed in infinite majesty and clarity, like twin stars.

"Forever!" she said softly. "Everything that is God, is eternal! Do you not feel that this night belongs to God? Time is an invention of the Devil. Satan invented the passage of time in order to make man apostate to God. But God remains eternal. Satan invented much else, besides, sickness, pain, vermin and money. Above all—money! But time came and the passage of time, and could never be dispelled again. Now they are a part of every invention of the Devil. But what is God's is eternal. New happiness always effaces old pain as if it had never been. And happiness endures. No pain can efface it. I would die of shame if I thought that only the nerve-endings in our skin vibrate. Don't you feel that something has happened to your soul that must remain with it beyond all death? Don't you feel that this hour has changed you beyond any power of death to change?"

"Yes," said Myra. "And more than any birth. I was born today—not twenty years ago. Now I can say to myself for the first time consciously: 'I live!'"

"*We* live!" said Olga, clasping her to her, with an exultation in her voice that was like the jubilant cry of a wild bird rising in flight.

"We live, sweetheart! Forever, and ever, and ever, we live!"

VIII

When Myra awoke the next morning, she found a bright, cheerful, winter sunshine in the room. Her first thought was of Olga. She was not there. Her coat, too, was gone from its hook. Myra felt a sudden pang of terror. Olga was gone, forever, would not return, was lost, irretrievably lost.

Myra sprang out of bed, suddenly wide awake.

Then she saw Olga's hat and gloves. She picked up the gloves and stroked them, pressing them against her cheek. A sense of joy and tranquillity seemed to emanate from the soft gray leather. So it was no dream, no witchery: Olga had really been there, Olga would return. The gloves retained the shape of her beautiful slender hands, were still filled with their life....

From below came a familiar grinding and scraping sound.

Myra ran in her bare feet to the window and drew the heavy white twill curtain a little to one side. On the window-ledge lay a thick cushion of white snow. The houses below all had roofs of dazzling white, while above, flashed a sky of the purest blue.

In front of the hotel, the servant of the house was scraping a dark path with his shovel through the white carpet. Beside him stood Olga, her coat open, both hands plunged in its pockets, her head thrust somewhat forward in the intentness of her conversation with the old man.

Myra gazed down for a while, delighting in every line of Olga's figure. She watched her speak, seeming to hear the intonations of her voice. She wondered what she could find to talk about with the servant. She admired

her talent for embarking on conversations with all kinds of people, and giving each just the proper tone.

Myra knew that talent of hers. If Olga were in the mood, she could make the grouchiest waiter or conductor beam at her.

After a few moments Olga suddenly glanced up: she must have felt Myra's gaze. She saw her standing at the window, or perhaps only the trembling curtain. She waved and ran into the house.

Olga brought a breath of cool snowy air into the room. Her eyes were as clear and as transparent as ice, while a very faint rosy flush mantled her cheeks.

"Where have you been, you gad-about?" asked Myra.

"Have a nice long sleep, my wench?" Olga inquired by way of reply. "I've been walking. I was in town. I wanted to get some flowers for your breakfast table. But flowers in winter—such sinful things are unheard of here! But there's a bake-shop below, one of those with steps and a railing in front of the door. You know the kind? And a gold pretzel up above! And it smells of fresh bread. Hurry up, I've got a ravening appetite."

They breakfasted in their room. Then Myra urged that they go walking. Snow and sunshine beckoned them out.

"First you must write to your father," said Olga seriously.

"Yes," said Myra, making a face. "You don't want to accept any responsibility—I know without your saying it."

She sat down and wrote a long, well-considered letter. She described the incidents at Uncle George's with much humor. She told where she was stopping, earnestly begged her father to let her remain where she felt happy and was in no one's way. She begged him, too, to believe that she was a mature and intelligent person and knew exactly what was best for her. And she begged him to pay back the money which she had unwillingly borrowed

from Uncle George—and to support her for the short period until she came of age, or else to give her an advance against her grandmother's legacy.

But of the fact that she was not alone, she did not write him a word.

They took the letter together to be mailed. Olga already knew the way. When the letter had dropped into the blue box, she breathed more freely, and took Myra's arm.

"Come," she said, "what had to be done, is done. In three days you may get an answer. But let us enjoy those three days."

"Do you suppose," said Myra, glowering, "that any power on earth could compel me to return home? If they won't send me money, I'll hire out to do washing or sewing, or I'll run up debts."

"I don't know," said Olga, "I only know that as long as that letter is on its way we are safe. No living soul knows where we are—that's a glorious feeling—as if one were safe behind walls and moats. But once that letter arrives, the drawbridge will be lowered. What will happen then, I do not know. I know nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing! But it's always possible that we'll be torn into little pieces!"

"Then why did we lower the draw-bridge?" asked Myra, stopping short. "Why did you force me to write?"

Olga smiled rather gloomily. "Because I will *not* accept responsibility!" she said, making an effort to jest.

* * *

They walked along the broad streets with the little low houses. The show-windows were strangely fascinating.

As they entered the woods, it was suddenly still and warm about them—so warm that their faces, lashed by the wind, began to burn.

In the branches, high above them, the wind murmured,

now and again shaking down a silvery star to the dark ground. But they did not feel the cold rush of its fall.

They wandered plunged in silence. Only when gay titmice flitted past, or a squirrel dashed up a tree trunk, did they indicate it to one another by a gesture, a whisper. And when their glances met, they remained fixed on one another till they smiled and closed their eyes.

“Aha, there it is!” said Olga at last.

“What? Where?” asked Myra in surprise.

Olga pointed ahead. A red brick wall was suddenly visible between the tree trunks.

“Did you know all the time where we were going?” Myra was filled with wonder.

“Of course, child! I would not lead you through here at random. By all human computations, this should be the wild-cat’s lair. In summer there’s coffee, music and dancing here. In winter we may get a bite to eat—if we’re lucky. The servant at the hotel told me all about it this morning. Such a lovely story about a haunted mill where there are only a donkey, a cat and a dove. And one other animal. Look, there goes the dove, and there’s the cat. But not a soul to be seen. Are you frightened, Myra? Wait and see, the cat will say something to us.”

They crossed a kind of inn courtyard and shook a couple of locked doors.

“They can’t have died,” said Olga, pointing to the wisp of smoke that arose from the chimney. “Or perhaps the cat made the fire. But if she can do that, she can also cook us something to eat.”

They found one door open. Through a cold and empty hall, from the ceiling of which hung strips of torn and dusty paper, they reached another door that gave when they lifted the latch. The room they next entered was filled with a comfortable warmth and a penetrating smell of cabbage. An iron stove was giving off a glowing heat

while on top a blue enamel pot was bubbling and steaming. At one of the tables a big-boned maid was sitting sprawled, eating her mess of cabbage with her knife.

"Good day, Anna," said Olga, beaming affably. "Well, how goes it? Does it taste good?"

The girl rose slowly, grinning. "I'm not Anna," she said. "The girl before me was Anna. I'm Bertha."

"It's lovely and warm in here, Bertha." Olga drew off her gloves and spread her fingers before the fire. "And it smells wonderfully of cabbage! Will you give us a little of your lunch?"

"If the ladies would like something to eat, I'll ask the mistress."

The black and white spotted cat stole into the room.

"There's the wild-cat!" said Olga. "Come here, Mies! Come to me!"

The cat let her pick him up and hold him. Olga stroked him and pressed him to her while she talked to him in a whisper, asking sympathetic questions.

"Strange, that you like cats so much and can't bear dogs," said Myra a little disapprovingly. "It's certainly typical of you!"

Olga raised her head quickly and her brows were lifted. "In what way is it typical?"

"Because you set more value on grace than on faithfulness," said Myra with a melancholy smile. "Because you love what scratches you unexpectedly more than what lets itself be whipped and then licks your hand. I guess I'll have to take care that you don't grow to despise me."

Olga pushed the cat off her lap. "No, Myra," she said, her big eyes grave, "there you misunderstand me completely. I have an antipathy to dogs, not because they are faithful, but because they are shameless. Because they carry on their love affairs on the street." Again that

crimson flush overspread her features. “Cats are more cultured about such things—if I may use that much misused word. There are insects that mate only in the darkest nights, in the most forsaken corners, so that no forester has ever succeeded in observing them. I’ve always held that there will come a time when we will speak of the barbarous practices of this century, or the last ten centuries, as if they were a fairy-tale. Just think how tremendously funny it must strike any sensitive person when two people, having conceived a certain desire to go to bed with one another, set a special date for the event. They inform certain public institutions, the State, the Church. They tell their friends and relations, their own parents, their own brothers and sisters. On the day which is to end in that night, they gather everybody they know about them, let themselves be observed by persons who stuff themselves and drink until they are sick, listen to suggestive songs and suggestive speeches—and yet do not get sick themselves. I’ve always had a feeling that marriage as it is practiced today would be fit punishment for a hardened criminal. It is such a cruel, such an exquisite torture. Myra, my child, oblige me and if you ever decide to marry, do it when you desire and not on some appointed day. Do it in utter secrecy so that no living soul can suspect the possibility of such a thing....”

“I?” cried Myra, her eyes filled with the horror of a shattered dream. “I?”

“Yes, you!” said Olga, smiling. “Ah, my child, do you fancy that you even begin to suspect all the things that can still happen in your life?”

* * *

The next day they went to see if there was a letter. Olga was relieved to find none.

“This blessed postal service,” she said. “The mail comes

here only once a day."

Myra shook her head. "I don't understand you. I shan't really be able to rest until the answer comes. Until then we're always on the *qui vive*, sitting on a volcano or some such thing. Once we know where we're at, then we can arrange matters. Eventually, I'll have to write to the attorney who is my grandmother's executor. He will surely advance me some money on which we can live for the six months until I'm of age. But I wish I were finished with all these things."

Olga played with the fringe of the table-cloth and smiled.

"Why do you keep smiling?" asked Myra.

"Because you make such elaborate plans. Your father will write, Come, and you will go."

"You know very well that that is impossible," said Myra almost angrily.

Olga rose with a shrug of her shoulders and walked to the window.

"Perhaps I will send you!" she said in a hard voice.

That afternoon they took another long walk across the fields. The early nightfall surprised them, and they did not reach the hotel until dark.

They trudged along the highway, struggling hard against the wind, and saw the lights of the town beginning to twinkle in the blue dusk.

"Strange," said Olga, "we're going home. There is a town ahead of us whose name I had never heard of three days ago. And yet it is home to me. There is a hotel room in which some salesman may have slept three days ago, a room in which there is not a picture, not a book to attract me—and yet I call it home. When I think of our gas-heater and its reflection of the worn carpet, I feel so warm that I scarcely notice the wind. How happy a person must be who really has her own home, and loves each chair and the color of the carpet and the light of the

lamp and each picture and each cup."

"You could have that," said Myra.

"I? Never! Never! Never!"

"But you can!" Myra objected somewhat timidly, "if you have the patience—in six months."

Olga laughed abruptly. "Child!" she cried and hugged Myra's arm tighter. "My dear, sweet, wonderful little creature! In six months! Where will you be then, and where will I? You will be married perhaps, and I—dead."

* * *

As they entered the room, something white was lying upon the dark table-cover. Myra seized it and ran to the window. The lantern outside shed a faint light.

It was an urgent telegram. "Turn on the light, please," she asked in a rather shaky voice. She tore the message out of the envelope, and read it in the dusk by the window. She read it again by the bright gas light. It was no different:

"Your father has suffered a stroke. End expected hourly."

Without a word, Myra handed the open telegram to Olga, and walked past her to the heater. She held her hands in front of the flame, and was filled with the strangely painful sensation of not knowing how she ought to behave.

For no feeling welled up irresistibly from the depths of her being, darkening every thought—neither grief nor fear, nor yet love. Only ugly, painful thoughts: "Now I'll have to go away and arrive too late anyhow. So that it's quite useless for me to go at all. If he really is going to die, why couldn't I have just received word that he's dead, instead? Then no power on earth could drag me away from here."

She cast a stealthy glance at Olga whose back was still toward her. "She'll wait for me to do something," she

thought. “I’ll have to say something or other. I suppose the most natural thing for me to do would be to cry. But I simply can’t. Of course, I think it’s dreadful. But it’s nothing to weep about. What would Olga do in my place? Strange, how little we actually know of one another! I don’t know what she would do. And I don’t know what she expects me to do.”

At last Olga turned, laying the paper on the table with a beautiful and extraordinarily discreet gesture. Her face was calm, but very pale.

“I’ll go ask about the trains,” she said and went out quietly.

Myra was glad to be left alone for a moment. She could now consider in quiet what was to be done. If Olga were going to inquire about the trains, she must accept it as a foregone conclusion that Myra would leave at once for home. And it probably was a foregone conclusion: of course, it was.

She rose with a sigh from her easy-chair by the fire, opened her suitcase and began to pack. Meanwhile her thoughts kept flying hither and thither.

Perhaps it was not true!

Perhaps Aunt Emily had thought it up to lure her back home! To shut her up in prison!

If only a telegram would come from her father, denying the first.

Or supposing it were true, if only a telegram would come from Aunt Emily saying that all was over! Then she would not have to go. Or would Olga demand that she go?

If only Olga would come back now and say, “There is no train, not today, not tomorrow, not ever. The trains, are snow bound. Or there’s been a wash-out.”

Or if Olga would return and say, “Don’t go! Don’t leave me! Let us go somewhere else, anywhere they can’t find us. Prove to me how much you love me: give up

everything for me! What is that strange dead man to you? Nothing! You belong to me, are mine! I demand of you that you remain with me. I don't want to be parted from you, not for a single hour."

Yes, that would be the most beautiful way, but of all impossible things, the most impossible.

Olga opened the door. Her movements, though quick, were as gentle as if she were entering a sick-room.

"At nine forty-five," she said and glanced at her wrist-watch. "So we have plenty of time to pack and eat a bite."

Myra felt a twinge of something like resentment. She *had to* go. She was simply being sent. Would Olga have gone in her place? Olga acted freely and flew in the face of everything that was considered convention. But Myra must be bound by what was normal, commonplace, proper. The train left at nine forty-five—she was not even asked if she wanted to take it. It was the next train, therefore she was to go on it.

She continued to pack her suitcase, with a sullen expression.

"Can I help you?" asked Olga gravely and gently.

"Thanks, no!" said Myra curtly.

Olga's compassionate tone tormented her. She would have liked so much to speak the brutal truth: "You don't need to treat me as if I were an invalid. The worst of this business for me is that we have to part, that I have to go away from here, that our fairy-tale life here must end." But she did not possess the courage to say so. Yet she felt that Olga was withdrawing herself almost timidly, as if she had no right to disturb Myra in her sacred, childish grief.

In packing, Myra's hand accidentally touched something carefully wrapped in tissue paper on the bottom of the suitcase. She tore off the wrapping, so that the shreds fluttered to the floor and held the gold

cigarette-case in her hand.

"Oh, Myra!" cried Olga with a soft exclamation of surprise. "There it is again! How long has it been there?"

"It has never been anywhere else," said Myra with a rather strained smile. "I could never bring myself to give it into a stranger's dirty hands. I really did not want to say anything about it to you. I intended to send it to you at Christmas. But that's all silliness, I'd rather give it to you now."

Myra walked over and placed it in Olga's hands.

Olga held the case very quietly on her fingers without closing them over it while she regarded it with a profoundly thoughtful smile.

"Strange," she said without raising her eyes. "Why now? Why today? One must not be superstitious, but sometimes it is hard...."

* * *

At home there was the odor of sickness and death. The maids sat about drunk with sleep, with swollen eyes and stupid faces.

Everywhere there were lights burning. Not bright, cheerful, radiant lights, but individual lamps casting a faint glow in one or two rooms. The doors stood open or ajar so that one could see that it was not night in this house, that no one was sleeping, that people were constantly hurrying to and fro. And through the open doors, too, came the monotonous rattling in the throat of the dying man. It filled all the rooms.

Her owlish eyes wide open in her puckered face, Aunt Emily flitted about like a spook.

"You come too late!" she said with icy triumph as she confronted Myra. "There is no more hope."

Myra felt as if something dreadful ought to happen to her, and the sudden consciousness of being so depraved, so unfeeling that nothing could happen to her, that even

this woman's immeasurable hate implied too high an opinion of her, brought the tears to her eyes, for she was tired and over-excited.

Aunt Emily, of course, could not divine these thoughts.

"Your tears are too late, too!" she said meanly.

Each of the twenty hours that followed had a thousand minutes. Myra paced to and fro, or sat now in one chair, now in another. Everywhere she felt out of place, in the way, and observed by evil eyes.

She was worn out in every limb and felt the need, if only for an hour, to lock herself into her room and throw herself on her bed. But she lacked the courage.

She knew they expected her to stand flooding repentant tears or to sit by her father's death bed, or better yet, to kneel. She endeavored to control the horror that from time to time shook her, and went in. The heavy air smelt of decomposition and medicines. Among the many white pillows lay a small, strangely bony skull with closed eyes, an alien, distorted mask, whose yellowish lips moved gently as it gasped.

Myra sat for a while beside the bed, terrified lest that dreadful rattle in the throat should cease suddenly; terrified still more lest that strange something should suddenly open its eyes and begin speaking.

Doctors entered, conferred in whispers, bestowed sympathetic glances on her, and went out again.

The maid spread the table at the usual time and urged her to eat something. Aunt Emily left all the connecting-doors open, listening intently while she spooned her soup, for any change in that monotonously rattling throat.

It was all Myra could do to choke down a bite.

The twilight set in early and again the lamps were lit.

Myra picked up a book, but encountered so furious a glance from Aunt Emily that she laid it down again, and folded her hands spiritlessly in her lap.

Toward evening the rattlings grew feebler. The bridge of the nose stood out sharply against the tiny shrunken face. The doctor who came at night did not go away again. Now there was one more to sit in silence or pace noiselessly to and fro across the thick carpets—waiting.

The rattlings grew more and more feeble. Then a louder, grating expiration of the breath, twice, with short pauses. Then suddenly—silence.

And suddenly, too, as if it had just begun, they heard the ticking of every clock in the house.

The doctor bent over the bed, then drew himself up and walked over to Myra to give her his hand. Aunt Emily dabbed her dry eyes and the maids outside sobbed.

Myra saw and heard it all as if through a dense veil; she was afraid of fainting.

The doctor probably observed her greenish, livid appearance, and laid his hand on her hair. “Go lie down, my child,” he said gently. “You can be of no further use here. You have sad days behind you and before you. Youth needs sleep.”

Myra was glad to be in her room. But she did not think of lying down. When, after an interval, she heard the doctor go a nameless dread seized on her. She was so tired and yet so afraid to sleep lest horrible dreams torment her once she relaxed control of her thoughts.

If her heavy eyelids shut for a moment, she saw the dying man’s distorted features, or Aunt Emily trying to seize her with her claws to strangle her, or Uncle George raising his arm to strike her with an enormous bunch of keys that would crush her aching head.

Myra reached out longingly for another hand that would clasp hers warmly and firmly. But her cold fingers remained empty. Finally, she could not endure her terrors any longer. Slipping into her coat, she stole down the rear stairs and out of the house.

The cold night air awoke her from her trance. She ran,

rather than walked, through the streets to Olga's house. The house was locked. Myra stood for a while undecided. Perhaps someone who lived there would be coming home late, or the watchman would unlock the door for her for a tip.

She waited a long time. She was shivering with cold. At last she woke up the doorman. But at the top of the first stairs, she hesitated again before she dared ring.

She sat down on the steps and laid her forehead against the wooden door-jamb. She endeavored to awaken Olga, to summon her by thinking intensely of her, by ardent entreaty, by fierce willing. From time to time she thought she heard her light step approaching the door and she listened breathlessly, only to perceive that she was mistaken.

At last she had to make up her mind to ring. It was a long time before a very sleepy, half-dressed girl opened the door. She told some tale of having just come from the train and of being unable to go home because she had left her key with Miss Radó. She laughed as she was saying it and had a feeling that the girl thought her positively demented.

She groped her way along the familiar hall, fearing, for some incomprehensible reason, to strike a light. Perhaps she was afraid that the noise or the illumination would wake someone, or perhaps she had some unconscious dread of being seen, and felt herself safer in the dark.

As she stood in front of Olga's door she felt suddenly, and with a painful intensity so strong that she thought it must be premonition, that Olga was not alone—that this horrible day was to have a still more horrible close.

She leaned against the wall, not daring to knock or to lift the latch. A voice, which she seemed to hear speaking distinctly outside her, said, "What are you seeking here? What right have you to force your way in here? Where did you acquire the boundless audacity to feel at home

here?”

The door opened noiselessly and a feeble ray of light appeared. In its glow stood Olga Radó, tall and slender in a varicolored dark kimono, one hand on the latch, peering sharply from under her knitted brows. She saw and recognized Myra at once.

“Myra!” she exclaimed softly, and closed her eyes a moment as if frightened. “I knew it! What has happened, child? How did you get up here?”

Myra did not walk, she staggered. She went into the room, looking at the soft light of the shaded lamp on the papers, on the desk, on the backs of the books, on the silk cushions. Colors and shapes were a marvellous exhilaration. She let herself slide to the floor, laying her head against the easy-chair, and saying between tears and a laugh, between waking and sleeping, “Let me stay here, it is so good!”

Olga raised her, undressed her like a little child and laid her in the bed. As the cold sheets touched her body, horror set her trembling again. Once more she was wide awake, and sat bolt upright in the bed, striving to control the chattering of her teeth.

“Lie beside me,” she pleaded, “I must feel that I’m not alone. I’m so dreadfully frightened.”

Olga did not answer. She bolted the door, she set the lamp behind the bed, spread another silken veil over the light and let the kimono fall from her shoulders—all with a sad smile and slow, languid movements as if she were preparing for a sacrifice. Then she put her arm under Myra’s neck, tucked the coverlet more tightly around her and stroked the tangled hair from her forehead.

And as Myra felt the warmth of that beloved life, the strong pulse of that heart, she began to weep, quietly, released from pain. She cried herself to sleep.

After an interval, she did not know if it were hours or minutes, she awoke again. The light was still burning.

Olga lay motionless beside her, her eyes wide open. Myra sat up and released her arm.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she said reproachfully. "Poor thing, I must have broken your arm, that's why you can't sleep."

Olga turned her head a little. "I should not have slept anyway. I'm so wide awake."

"What were you thinking of?" asked Myra, trying to fathom her eyes.

Olga smiled a little wearily.

"I was thinking that your people are probably searching the whole house by now. I should like to know, or better, I'd rather not know, what is going on in Aunt Emily's head at this moment. She certainly must think you've been bitten by a tarantula!"

Myra laughed softly and put her arm around Olga.

"By a scorpion!" she said tenderly. "There is no antidote but its own poison. You know that very well."

Olga sat up and clasped her hands about her knees. Her glossy black curls fell luxuriantly about her shoulders. Her eyes gazed straight ahead and her wide pupils darkened the irises.

"What a strange fate!" she said in a vibrant tone as soft and deep as a cello's. "That I must be stung by the scorpion and yet look for healing to the same creature."

Her pale beautiful features assumed an expression of fierce, of sorrowful, of almost weird energy.

Myra was so terrified that her heart seemed to miss a beat. She did not have the courage to touch Olga, to embrace her.

"Olga!" she cried, in fear and pain, and stretched out her hands to her.

Again that troubled smile played about those pale lips. Olga threw both her arms around Myra and clasped her to her as if her embrace must smother, must annihilate, must destroy.

“Ah, little Myra!” she said with a little explosive laugh, “it’s all no good! You’ll have to let me take the easy road first, then perhaps, everything will be all right.”

IX

In her sleep Myra heard a violent ringing. Then she woke up: doors were slamming, steps approaching, there were many excited voices.

She opened her eyes and saw Olga standing beside the bed, already fully dressed. She was very pale, her eyes dark and blazing. “Get up, Myra,” she commanded in a voice that was breathless with excitement, “get up for God’s sake and dress!”

Myra threw on her things in mad haste. Meanwhile they were pounding on the door. Olga immediately went over to it, unbolted and opened it a crack.

“Who is there?”

Loud excited voices in the hall: excited faces trying to force themselves through the crack.

“I’m sorry, I can’t permit you in my room at this moment,” Olga said with icy courtesy.

Some voices began to shout louder than the others, Aunt Emily and Uncle George. Also the girl who had admitted Myra that night.

Myra’s hands were trembling as in a nightmare. She could not button her dress. She was aware only of a dreadful desire to be invisible or to jump out of the window or to sink into some vast unconsciousness.

Olga’s voice rose above the clamor, deep and calm, but as cold and sharp as polished steel.

“Does this conversation have to take place in the hall?”

Then suddenly, a soft, gentle voice: “May I offer the use of my room. I’ll be glad to step out.”

The voices withdrew next door and a few moments later—Myra had thrown on her dress—Peterkin stole into

the room.

"Can I help you, Myra?" he whispered. His eyes were troubled.

At the same moment, there came a sound from next door as if a stick had been smashed across a table.

"I'll have you thrown into jail!" thundered Uncle George.

Myra wanted to rush in, but Peterkin restrained her, imploring her not to go. "Don't, don't!" he begged. "Fix your hair quickly! Put on your shoes!" While she smoothed her hair, he knelt before her and buttoned her shoes. She let him. She could not dash next door in her stocking-feet, with her hair unkempt, to the immense pleasure of all the people peeping through the cracks in their doors.

When Myra did go down the hall to the next room, she was quite calm, quite erect, and sustained by a strong, brave, hot and almost joyous determination.

At the bottom of the hall stood a strange man with his hat and overcoat on. He looked her over with a piercing glance.

"Straight from her father's dead body!" whimpered Aunt Emily with high pathos.

"The criminal police in a decent house!" screamed Frau Flesch. "Never in all my life have I had anything to do with the police!"

Myra pressed down hard on the latch. Her pulse was throbbing in her neck. For an instant the thought flashed through her mind: Perhaps it was best that this happened. Perhaps it was a good thing that she must now have the courage to take her place beside Olga and say, "I belong to her and will never leave her, even if you tear her and me into little pieces! If you have the courage and the right, use force on me, for I'll never go one step with you of my own free will."

Olga was standing, leaning against the table, her arms

crossed on her breast, the fingers clasping her elbows.

As Myra opened the door, Aunt Emily rushed to her with a choking cry, “Here is the unfortunate child!”

Myra stood for an instant as though numbed. For a moment she felt as if she were among lunatics or had gone mad herself. With a hasty glance, she thought how very becoming to Uncle George were his stern manner, his steel-blue eyes and his iron-gray mustache against a face crimson with rage.

He came up to her and said in a deep, rough voice that trembled with something like emotion, “Myra, my child, what are you doing here? We’re burying your poor father tomorrow and you’re here!”

He laid his heavy hand on her shoulder.

Myra did not look at him. She was looking at Olga.

“This is my home,” she said. She meant her voice to sound vibrant and firm, but she could not manage it, and it sounded soft and tremulous.

“If you think you have the right, go ahead and use force on me, for I’ll never go one step with you of my own free will.”

It was hard, very hard, to say that. Very hard to say it under Uncle George’s honest gaze while his face was distorted with rage and sorrow, under Aunt Emily’s little blinking bird-eyes, or Frau Flesch’s spongy face that seemed fixed in a repulsively avid grin. Hard to say it in front of the strange man and the maid, who were listening in the hall.

But now it was said. And now everything would be all right. Now Olga would come and take her in her arms, would press Myra’s head against her breast so that she need not hear or see anything more, would, with one of her haughty and imperious gestures, show all these strange and horrible faces the door, would point her revolver at these intruders and drive them out with a single word....

Olga turned her head without changing her position, and looked at Myra. Everybody thought she was looking at Myra and gave an involuntary start.

But actually her eyes were merely resting on Myra's forehead, eyebrows and hair.

Myra strove to intercept her gaze, but could not. It was fixed on her forehead, her eyebrows, her hair—on a line above her eyes.

"My dear child," said Olga with a gentleness that was icy-cold, "your sense of dependence on me is touching, but I have done nothing to merit it. If you feel about me as you say, you ought to go with your relatives, behave like a rational creature and spare me your visits in the future. You must see that they occasion me nothing but unpleasantness!"

Myra hesitated for a moment. "Something must happen," she thought, "she must look at me, she must give me some sign, a glance, a gesture, that this is all comedy, that I must trust her, believe in her, wait for an explanation...."

But nothing did happen.

Myra racked her brain for something terrible with which to shatter that stony mask. Could she not say, "You made me come, lured me, forced me and now you deny me"? No, she had no right to do that. But could she not think of some abusive word, something that would pierce, would wound, something cruel?

She turned over various silly childish epithets in her mind: they were as heavy as blocks of stone.

"Canaille!" she thought. "Harlot!" That was not what she was seeking. It seemed to her as if she must shove the blocks of stone this way and that in feverish search for the one sharp word she must fling.

Suddenly, she felt as if she had stood there an endless time, with arms hanging, and vacant eyes and open mouth.

She drew herself up and attempted a smile that would be at once proud and affable. But she felt as she was doing it, as if madness were twitching the distorted muscles of her face.

“Will you telephone for a taxi, Uncle George?” she said. “I am too tired to walk.”

She went to the door. “I just want to gather up my things. I won’t be a moment.”

She went into the next room, put on her hat before the mirror very carefully, threw on her coat and looked for her bag. She did not hurry at all. She still had some mad feeling that Olga must steal in and whisper something to her—where they could meet, where she should write, when she could explain it all to her. But no Olga came.

As Myra opened her bag, she noticed a little wad of tightly pressed bills.—What was left from their trip. She took them out, laughing bitterly. Probably she would no longer be in any way tempted to steal.

Probably she would never again need money as long as she lived.

She raised her hand and opened it, letting the bills flutter down on the disordered bed.

Then she went out, past the strange man, past the maid, downstairs and out of the house, without once looking back.

* * *

In the street she got into the taxi with her relatives.

Uncle George remained for a while in the city. His behavior was really curious. He was quiet and kind, and always fixed upon Myra a pair of honest, anxious blue eyes, and always spoke to her in a slightly emotional tone. But there was never a word about the money or her flight.

When Myra pondered this behavior—she did not do so very often—she found only one explanation for it. She

did not think it might be remorse because his vehement letter had occasioned her unhappy father's death. Nor did it ever occur to her that he was striving to win her affection through love and kindness. No, probably she was a source of irritation to him. But he had seen Olga Radó. Had heard her voice. Had experienced something of her power. When Myra thought of that, she almost loved him.

He had heard how Olga denied, betrayed and humiliated her. And he sympathized with her. When Myra thought of that, she hated him.

Even Aunt Emily was singularly gentle. Myra thought later that it would have been better if they had tormented and wounded her at that time, and thereby made her strong through steely hate.

Aunt Emily and the entire family were all for expressing the depth of one's grief by the length of one's veil. Nobody was going to say that Myra, the depraved daughter, the unruly offspring, did not mourn her father's death.

The first time Myra saw herself in a mirror, black crêpe from head to toe, slender and pale, with lifeless eyes and a mouth distorted with grief, she thought, "Like a widow!" Her heart contracted painfully.

When they drove to the interment, they sat side by side. Aunt Emily's black-gloved right hand held a white handkerchief to her quivering lips; her left held Myra's hand. And Uncle George stared out the window while from time to time a tear rolled from his blue eye and into his mustache.

Myra felt as if she had been a mountain: her stony invulnerability had turned aside every shot. But now an explosion had torn a crater in her. She was hollow inside, a deep, dark, precipitous chasm. The savage wound lay exposed to view, and everything fell into it without let or hindrance, lay in her like heavy stones, tortured her—

everything, glances, words, tears, gestures.

"Woe to those who have torn me asunder!" she thought bitterly.

Then her fingers clasped Aunt Emily's a little tighter for a moment. "We belong together," she thought. "Forsaken, loveless, unhappy people who have grown hard and bitter—we belong together. There are two great families in this world—the rich and the poor, the sound and the sick, the laughers and the weepers.... Olga Radó belongs among the happy: she has triumphed, she has justified herself, she has rid herself of me—now she can go, laughing, to the next adventure."

Myra did not always think such thoughts. She was a prey to the most conflicting feelings. There were sleepless nights when she thought that everything would be all right if only she could hold Olga's hand and ask, "How did you come to do it, child? How could such a thing happen? What were you thinking of at the time?"

The next day she would pace up and down Motz Street and stare at the house across the way—but always in vain.

Then there were days when Aunt Emily displayed a loathsomely friendly sympathy and let fall insinuations concerning the ingratitude of the world in general and in particular, and how lonely Myra now was because she had given all her affection to such a person.

Then Myra hated them both—Aunt Emily and Olga—with a terrible hatred. But she hated Olga the more—Olga who had thrown her down where Aunt Emily could trample her, Olga who had torn that wound which Aunt Emily's foul fingers could probe.

Sometimes she resolved to die, but more often to flee, to pack up a bundle and run down the highroad, to pass the night in meadows and hollows with nothing over her but the eternal starry skies.

At other times, it seemed to her as if that sort of life,

particularly that sort of life, would be merely a constant torment without Olga—but a treasure without end, an inconceivable happiness if only Olga were there.

She strove to reconcile herself to the thought that Olga no longer loved her. But it was impossible that she actually hated her. She had simply sacrificed her, surrendered her without second thought in order to shield her reputation, in order to protect herself from unpleasantnesses. It is true, she did not love her. That was why her words had been lies. She had simply been glad when Myra came. Always. And she would be glad again if she returned.

It was becoming clearer and clearer to Myra every day how rich she was. Franz Rudloff had been no miser, but there was nothing for which he really cared to spend money. And Aunt Emily was much too much of a model not to economize, even in the pettiest ways.

Myra had no very clear understanding of money or the value of money. But she knew that the sums mentioned to her, guaranteed her freedom, promised her that in a few months she could live her life where she wished and as she wished.

A life without Olga?

Myra finally resolved to write to Olga. Not how she felt, nothing about her longing, her love—God forbid! But a line or two, quite businesslike, if one might use the expression—lines whose purpose would simply be to bring about an explanation.

With much effort she composed a letter which she amended and improved and copied; she felt quite satisfied with her handiwork. No one could find in it a trace of affection or humility of any kind.

Rather it was sharp, ironic and somewhat challenging in tone. She mailed the letter and awaited the answer. None came.

* * *

Meanwhile Aunt Emily decided to inform Myra of the "facts of life." To be sure, she chose a rather remarkable method.

Aunt Emily was too much of a model to discuss morally offensive matters with a young girl. Besides, she was probably afraid of Myra's outbursts of temper, though otherwise she was not cowardly.

Myra had fallen into the habit of sitting in her father's study. She would sit and read the whole day through, the most difficult and abstruse things, simply in order not to think. Here she had all the books within reach. It was more convenient to sit down at the writing-table with them, than to lug the sometimes heavy folios into another room.

On his desk she now found from time to time pamphlets, brochures, apparently of a quite varied character, novels, medical works, daily papers with passages underlined—but all treating of one theme.

There were strange and weird stories of countesses who dressed in men's attire and frequented various dives until they were lured into a trap and brutally murdered.

Or accounts of sickening orgies in well-known clubs where hundreds of women dressed and disported themselves like men, and men were dolled up with false curls with open-work silk stockings, and with their bare arms and shoulders powdered.

There were statistics showing all the unfortunates who fell victim to softening of the brain, lunacy, tuberculosis of the spine and other diseases as a result of unnatural practices.

Or descriptions of the soul life of sexual inverts which led one to suppose that these thousands of human beings constituted a vast community, a community bound together by no ties of common interest, no similarity of

education, origin, taste or attitude toward life, and never by love, but by a common lust for a common form of excess.

There was the biography of a famous man who was miserably murdered by a blackmailing waiter with whom he had had intimate relations—whom he had *loved*.

Myra shuddered when she thought of the word love in this connection. Sometimes it seemed to her as if she would be stifled by so much filth. She became physically ill simply from touching the books. Then she would not read them—for quite a while. She would read historical, philosophic and scientific works. But there were long periods when she was not conscious what she was reading. Her eyes ran along the lines and reflected the words. But her thoughts struggled with the dreadful things that had been flung at her, like blocks of stone, to kill her. Then she would pick up the other books again, the bad ones, and look for enlightenment and draw conclusions and make comparisons.

Whenever masculine women were discussed, mention was made of their superior intelligence, their thirst for knowledge and their desire for culture, coupled with an abnormal tendency to spendthriftness, a passionate desire for luxury, and an unnatural predilection for beautiful foot-gear. Mention was made, too, of weird Don Juan natures who passed with insatiable lust from one adventure to another.

As a result of such readings, Myra was left in the most dreadful bewilderment. These books should have taught her to understand the person who, of all others, had been closest to her. She had said to herself a hundred times in the past months, “This woman is a riddle that cannot be guessed, a mystery that cannot be solved, forever strange and remote, not to be grasped or comprehended. And each time she had felt with every fibre of her being, ‘such and such is the solution; now everything is clear,

everything is all right, nothing can ever arise to divide us again.'"

But now, now?

Now Myra felt an anguished need to pack up these books and take them to Olga Radó! "Tell me, are there such people? Are you one of them? Am I? What do you know about it?"

Olga had had to express an opinion about everything that Myra had heard or read in the last year. And Olga's opinion had nearly always been Myra's, or had aroused, strengthened, clarified another opinion in her.

Now, for the first time, she had to settle such monstrous matters single-handed and she groped about blindly in the dark. Where she thought to find a light, a way out, she merely strayed deeper into the maze. She could neither make headway nor go back.

So Myra wrote a second letter. This time, too, there was not a word about love or longing—simply an urgent appeal for help, a good deal of complaining about what was happening inside her and a certain reproachfulness: you have brought me so far, you must take my hand and lead me out of this swamp.

No answer came.

Spring came, however. Warm, caressing winds came, and broad flashing rays of sunlight and a veil of buds shrouding every branch, and snow-bells and crocuses, forcing their way with difficulty through dark purple, rotting leaves.

Myra could not bear the heavy, soft air. She could not sleep and suffered from headaches day and night. Reading no longer sufficed to distract her mind. She sat bowed over her books and stared out the window. The same page would lie in front of her for hours without her ever turning it.

She began to read novels. She could not forget she was reading them as easily as she could dry scientific works

because they stirred her imagination and evoked certain pictures.

But those pictures were a torture to her.

There were always people in love with one another. They struggled with one another, discovered one another, came together or parted, destroyed one another, died or abandoned one another. It hurt her to read of love.

She read of riches, of luxury, of automobiles dashing along highways, of white hotels beside blue waters, of balls and banquets and yachts and journeys by sledge. Then she would begin to calculate her fortune and think, "Olga Radó could have led just such a life if she had remained with me."

The cherries blossomed. Olga Radó was no doubt going by steamer with some lovely woman, over the blue waters of the Havel. And all about her was a world of beauty and sunshine and light.

Myra was seized with a mad desire to be where Olga was, to lead Olga's life. Pride dropped away from her like a burned rag. She stood naked to herself and cried out with the pain.

She wrote her third letter to Olga Radó. She wrote that she could no longer live and breathe without her. That she wanted nothing from her, not love, or affection or friendship. That she wanted nothing but to serve her with all her strength, and in payment she would let herself be beaten and kicked. That she would feel no jealousy, no craving, no lust of possession. That she would serve anyone, man or woman, whom Olga loved, and that she would chain and immure her love so deep within her that never, never, never would anyone suspect its existence, not even Olga.

Again she waited for an answer. Again none came.

Suddenly it occurred to her that Olga might not have received her letters, certainly had not received them.

She went to Motz Street and every step made her feel

as if she were walking on red hot coals. The same maid answered her ring who had admitted her that night. Myra could not bring herself to utter Olga's name, so she asked for Peterkin.

He had moved—address unknown.

She lived through ten more days of torture. Then she went again. A new maid opened the door. "I'm in luck," thought Myra and she was dizzied for a moment as the idea flashed through her mind that the next instant she might be standing face to face with Olga in her room. What might happen afterwards was of no moment.

Miss Radó had moved—address unknown.

Myra went to the bureau of registry. She filled out the prescribed blank and gave it to the gray-haired official while her heart throbbed wildly.

The friendly old gentleman rose, went searching, returned and asked if the lady lived in her own house. No? Unfortunately, they did not register people who lived in lodging-houses.

Then Myra made her last and most difficult attempt. She went to the Moebiuses. The girls grinned in her face, impudently, when she asked about Olga Radó.

No, they didn't know anything about her. Naturally, she had not put in her appearance here again, and father would probably have very politely given her the air if she had. But they would be *delighted* to find things out. Ablaze with curiosity and pruriency, they began to ply her with questions, whether it was true that....

Myra blushed and paled, turned hot and cold. She might have murdered one of them if she had not been so tired. "I don't know," she said. She answered all their questions with "I don't know."

Perhaps she should have become indignant and defended Olga Radó. Perhaps she should have let them slander her and have made all kinds of mysterious insinuations. Perhaps she should have laughed and led

the girls a merry chase. She supported herself against her chair with both hands, and said, “I don’t know!”

As she left the house she realized that she would never enter it again. A senseless expression kept running through her mind as in a delirium—“To be on everybody’s tongue....”

It had never before had any meaning for her. Now she felt, actually in a physical way, as if she had been chewed over and spat out on the sidewalk. She shuddered with nausea.

* * *

From time to time, but at ever shorter intervals, a dull racking hatred began to tarnish the surface of her feeling for Olga Radó. That woman was to blame for all that she was now suffering—heedlessly, cold-heartedly and quite unscrupulously to blame.

During this period, Myra was very unjust to Olga Radó. For it seemed to her as if she had been torn by her from a happy shielded youth, as if a profound and placid peace had been destroyed in her, some marvellous equilibrium shattered.

The be-all and end-all of her desire seemed to her to be a return to what she had once been. Her one wish was to strike the last year out of her life, to expunge, to forget it.

Then she would take up those evil books again and deliberately read the things which had most nauseated her. She thus artificially intensified her hate and anger and fear.

There were days when she said to herself, “At last I am free! It’s as if I had recovered from a severe illness; I feel that my blood is pure again. From now on I shall live as other people do, without pain and without joy, without desire and without fulfillment.”

And there were nights when she felt as if a burning poison were eating at her veins, when fear of an unutterly

horrible future made her shudder. Nights when she felt she must succumb to her unbridled appetites, must give herself unresistingly to every loose woman who for criminal reasons chose to arouse her passion. She saw herself victimized by blackmailers, tracked by the police, sick, insane, in prison or murdered.

In one such period of abysmal despair she permitted herself to become engaged. Some decent, solid man or other came courting her.

She knew nothing about him. She did not know when or where she had seen him for the first time, knew hardly anything of his character or his inclinations. She simply became aware one day that for some time there had been some person around her who had made an effort to be kind to her. Someone who helped her on most carefully with her coat, stooped when she dropped something, brought her flowers, and tried to tell her cheerful stories in order to brighten her face a little.

The man knew as agreeably little about her. In his presence Aunt Emily bubbled over with gentle, motherly solicitude. She could just as well have made biting observations or cutting innuendoes about him, but he fitted into her program.

He pitied Myra tremendously because she was an orphan. He ascribed all the suffering in her pale face to grief for her father. Sometimes he ventured to take her cold fingers in both his hands and gently stroke them. At such moments Myra would close her eyes and scrutinize her feelings in terror. Warmth and peace flowed from his big strong hands. His gentle tenderness was pleasant rather than abhorrent. Then Myra would say to herself with a burst of hope, “Perhaps everything will be all right, after all. Perhaps I shall have somebody near who is good to me, I’ll have children and a home, I’ll always have something to do—perhaps it is still possible for a life like that to be bearable.”

She felt, too, an irrepressible desire for revenge. It might wound Olga Radó's vanity somewhat, if she learned how quickly she had been forgotten.

The man was rich. That suited Aunt Emily and incidentally suited Myra. She pictured herself in the loge at the opera, flashing with jewels, beside this man, a very attractive and stately man—it would never occur to anyone that she had not married him for love—and suddenly Olga Radó would appear from somewhere. Or she saw herself driving past Olga Radó in a de luxe car. Or best of all, she saw them meeting when she was walking with her fair-haired children dressed neatly in white. Then she would draw the children away from Olga as if from a venomous snake. That was the way, yes, indeed, that was the way to wound Olga most cruelly.

As the man was persistent, Myra said yes. She had had sufficient time to accustom herself and took good care that it appeared in various newspapers.

On her twenty-first birthday, there was a little garden party at the villa of her parents-in-law. It was a very hot day in summer, the nineteenth of June, and on Aunt Emily's advice, Myra again put on a white dress trimmed with black.

As she strolled past a mirror in that strange house with all the strange people about her, she did not recognize herself. She was shocked and could not rid herself of the idea that she was not the pretty girl dressed in white, who smiled at her from the mirror, on the arm of that strange man.

She tried to find herself and could not imagine where she could be. But it seemed to her as if she saw herself, thin and dark, like a specter, wandering through great, dark, empty rooms. Again, it seemed to her as if she really was the reflection in the glass, and that that other Myra, who was so identically like her, was the stranger. Dream and reality began to merge inextricably; all her

nerves seemed to thrill like snapped chords. In mortal fear she longed for complete unconsciousness or for sudden complete clarity, feeling as if she were blinded by fog or a prey to vertigo. A moment later, she could not understand exactly what had happened to her, or give any answer to her fiancé who anxiously inquired the cause of her paleness.

But the singular feeling persisted all evening that all this was simply a dream, a game. The whole business of the engagement was simply a joke, a comedy. Each moment might step forward like a stage-manager and cry, “Enough! Let reality resume!”

* * *

On the twentieth of June, in the morning, Myra was called to the telephone. A light masculine voice spoke from the receiver, curiously restrained and hesitant.

“Is this Miss Rudloff herself? Myra, is that you? Forgive me for disturbing you—I wanted to speak to you!”

Myra felt her heart tear itself loose and plunge into an unfathomable dark abyss.

“Peterkin?” she said and tried to suppress her smile without stopping to think that no one could see her face. Nor could anyone have heard that smile in the trembling of her voice.

“May I speak with you, Myra? I mean....” Again that timid hesitation in his voice. “If you care to, you understand. Of course, I don’t know how interested you are in your old friends now.”

“It goes without saying,” said Myra firmly, “that you can see me any time, where and when you wish.”

She did not ask what had happened. She did not want to ask.

“It can’t come very well.” Again that timid tone. “And I’d rather not go on the street ... or to a coffee-house.... It really wouldn’t do....”

"I'll come to you," said Myra quickly. "Tell me where you live!"

"Yes—but—is that all right either? Particularly—if anything unpleasant should happen.... You're engaged...."

"Nonsense!" said Myra roughly.

* * *

As she hurried down the street she did not try to picture what might actually have happened. She did not want to. "Perhaps Olga is sick and wants to see me," she thought. "Perhaps she doesn't know anything about it, and Peterkin simply called me of his own accord."

She simply thought that she would see Olga, that she would take her hand. At the same time she thought, "I tell myself these things as we tell a feverish child stories, I paint them in the brightest colors, and believe them no more than we believe in fairies and sorcerers."

But it was better to tell herself stories, better to sing herself cradle-songs, than to listen to the voice that cried the truth deep within her.

It was strange how, without a moment's hesitation, she found the house and the street as if she had been there a hundred times.

When she rang, Peterkin was already at the door. That spared her any interrogation. And she felt, looking at the maid, the first human face she noticed, that she was in no condition to answer questions.

Peterkin took Myra by the hand and, without a word, led her past the astonished maid and into his room. He shut the door, and without looking at her, said, "Sit down, Myra."

The first thing that Myra noticed in the room was the gold cigarette case on the black surface of the table. A ray of sunlight was flashing on it.

She made an effort to restrain herself. It was as if she tugged at the reins with both hands in order to check

herself. But when Peterkin turned to her, and she saw how his hands, how his small white face quivered, with what an effort he was struggling for control—she lost control herself. She began to cry.

"Cry, cry," he said at last, his chin quivering, while the tears started from his eyes. "Cry, for she was worthy of tears, you can believe me...."

"Believe you?" said Myra with heart-rending bitterness. She laid the handkerchief over her eyes and supported her head in her hand. Her other hand stroked his nervously.

"Now tell me everything, Peterkin. You see that I'm quite calm again, quite, quite calm. When did it happen? How? And why? Tell me everything, everything you know!"

"I could not tell you, Myra—not before your twenty-first birthday. That was yesterday, wasn't it? I've marked it here on the calendar—for another reason—I'll have to tell you all about that, too. I had a message to deliver to you. But of course, I had no suspicion—sometimes it is as if we were struck blind...."

Myra glanced up for a moment. "Did she do it herself?" There was nothing interrogatory in her tone.

"Yes."

"Did she shoot herself?"

She covered her eyes again with her handkerchief.

"Go on."

"She was sick during the spring, a light case of influenza. She had some fever and I used to sit beside the bed while she talked of death and burial, quite cheerfully and unconcernedly, as she always did. You know very well that nobody ever knew whether she was jesting or in earnest. She said to me at that time, 'If I die now, Peterkin, take good care to keep it quiet. Don't let it get into any of the papers, and don't let anybody know about it, not even Myra. I'd like to strew my ashes on the sea or

at least on the Wannsee. But the State won't permit that, I believe. So simply make haste and have my remains cremated. I will have no traffic with my corpse. I won't be inside it, you can be sure of that. Not for one moment longer than necessary will I remain inside my corpse.'"

To Myra it seemed as if she were hearing Olga speak. So clearly did she hear her voice, that her heart was filled with an inner joy and she smiled.

"I smiled, too, at the time," said Peterkin sorrowfully. "But she became quite serious and sat up and looked at me. You know how she could look at one out of her intense eyes. 'It is my sacred wish,' she said. 'Promise me you'll do it, give me your word of honor!' I promised her, but I said, 'You're crazy, in three days you'll be well again.' And she was well again in three days." He stopped. Somewhere a clock was ticking and flies were buzzing against the window-pane.

Something filled Myra with a few moments of joy and tranquillity. An obscure feeling—how good that Olga was well again in three days. There was so much vigorous life in that beautiful body.

Then the present struck at her heart like a clenched fist. And now? And now? She had to wait a few moments before she could bring herself to utter the terrible word.

"Did you bury her at once?" she asked in a very low voice.

"She was cremated. The urn was sent to Vienna. Her sister lives there...."

"Did she live here toward the end?"

"Two doors away, around the corner."

"And it happened there?"

"Yes."

"Can one ..." Myra swallowed hard, "can one see the room?"

Peterkin shrugged his shoulders slowly. "What is the use? Everything is changed. Nothing of hers is left. It has

been rented again."

She had a peculiar feeling; it seemed to her as a curiously happy fact that every pattern which this spirit had created was now destroyed. There was not even a room left in the world which those hands, that mind, had arranged, and in which a trace of her being might have survived. Half unconsciously, Myra felt as if the shifting of a few pieces of furniture had broken the stones from a prison wall.

Now Olga Radó was wholly free.

A gentle breeze stirred the curtains at the open window. A sweet, cool breeze blew over Myra's burning eyes. She smiled.

"It is best that way!" she said again.

Suddenly she understood that Olga had not received her letters. There was no need to inquire about it. But Peterkin was the only person of whose opinion she was a little afraid. She felt that she must justify herself.

"I wrote Olga three times!" she said.

"I had an idea that you did," said Peterkin with a gloomy smile.

"She never received a line."

"But you knew it anyway?"

"Of course. We talked often enough about you."

While Peterkin was speaking, Myra had a curious feeling that she was living over in a few minutes and with the most powerful intensity, the last six months of her life. It seemed to her as if on that unhappy morning the woof-thread had been broken and day by day had labored at a make-shift pattern that was false. Now that false woof had suddenly been unravelled as the shuttle plied backwards like lightning. The thread was knotted where it had been broken and the true pattern was resumed, a little curtailed, perhaps, a little fainter in color, but there it was, woven for the present and for all days to come.

"What did you say about me?"

"Oh, a great many things. I urged her so often to write to you, to establish some sort of contact with you. But she was convinced that she must not do it. Sometimes I thought I would telephone you, or I'd waylay you somewhere against her will. Once I suggested it to her. She glared at me out of her big eyes. 'If you ever do any such thing,' she said, 'our friendship is over with for all time! Do you want to destroy the poor child?' She was always of the opinion that you were happy and that things were going well with you. But I was sure you must divine what was going on. I tried so hard, you'll never know how hard. Once I promenaded under your windows for a whole hour. I always thought that if I could only speak to you, we would find some way out. I always thought that everything would be all right in the end. Then you became engaged. Yes, then I had to admit at last that she was right."

"Oh, you idiot!" said Myra, laughing through her tears.

"I remember the day so well. Olga came up to my room early in the morning. She sat huddled over in the easy-chair, smoking one cigarette after another. For half an hour she did not utter a word. I sat here at the desk, pretending I was working. I had tossed aside my paper when I heard her coming. But from the way she sat there, I thought, 'She knows already!' She knew I knew it, but neither of us wanted to begin the conversation. When she finally did, she kept saying 'I'm so happy, I'm so glad!' And she demanded that I celebrate with her, too. In the evening we went to have a bottle of wine together. She made me do it. I can still see her as she sat at the table, turning the wine-glass in her hand. She had such a curious smile all that day. Again she said to me, 'So little Myra is going to be married. That's fine, fine. Our little Myra will have children, real lads who will never know a trouble in life.' Then she kept demanding that I say how happy it made me. And I had to say so—as matters then

stood it was the best thing to do—but from that day on she lived in morbid dread of meeting you somewhere on the street. Sometimes when she needed something, she would ask me to get it. She would sit here, pale, with her hands folded, and say, 'Please, please, Peterkin, I can't go to the store.' For the last eight or ten days she hardly left her room. She used to telephone me to come over, she did not want to go on the street. But of course, there was another reason for that as well...."

"What was that?" asked Myra after staring silently out of the window for a long time.

He cast a quick and searching glance at her. "So you don't know?" he asked as if relieved. "You really know nothing about it? I was sure you didn't. But they had her shadowed—your people, you know. No matter where she went there was always a detective after her. Oh, she suffered so cruelly because of that!"

"But why?" asked Myra. "Why should they do that? They had me where they wanted me. They knew just where I spent every hour of the day."

"Probably they were afraid. They may have thought, before your engagement at any rate, that you might waver in your resolves, or that she might try to influence you again; they may have wanted to catch her at something so that they could have her deported as an undesirable alien. Your Uncle bought up all her debts. You did not know that either, I believe. So they had her cornered. Every day there were letters from attorneys, from the courts.... Later on she simply refused to open them. She used to let them pile up on her desk. I said to her sometimes, 'You can't do that, you must answer them, you must go, you must make promises.' Then she would smile an infinitely melancholy smile. 'I've lost my sense of humor, Peterkin,' she would say, 'I'm old and tired. It isn't a hunt as far as I'm concerned'—and she indicated the pile of papers with a wave of her hand.

"Then there were threatening letters—I can't tell you how vulgar. Filled with expressions that one simply can't repeat. From your Aunt Emily, I think. But they were sent as if they came from you. They said you knew now the sort she was and wanted her to drop every attempt to get in touch with you and to stop blackmailing you. It was sufficient that she had seduced you into stealing and breaking open people's desks, that she had undermined your health, that she had caused your father's death—ah, I don't know all that was in them. And then, things you were supposed to have said—they must have been horrible, for she would never tell me what they were or let me read them.

"She used to sit here in front of me, her face perfectly white and her eyes blazing, while she gripped my wrist so that I thought she would snap the bone. 'Myra doesn't know anything of this, does she, Peterkin?' she kept repeating, 'Myra doesn't know about this?'

"There were times when I did not like that tone of voice. But now, when it is ringing in my ears again, I don't see how I could have failed to understand it. From that time forth, she began frequently to speak of the journey. 'I'm going home on the twenty-second of June.' She was always saying it. Once I asked her why she had chosen that particular day. She laughed and said, 'Because it is three days after the nineteenth.' I pondered over it considerably. But at that time the connection was not clear to me....

"But after your engagement everything was different. Suddenly she began to say 'When I go away—next week—or the day after tomorrow,' I teased her about it, 'So you've turned traitor to your plans? I thought you weren't going away until three days after the nineteenth?' Then she looked at me mysteriously and shook her head. 'Ah, no, Peterkin, I have no reason for waiting now!'"

* * *

“On the evening of the ... on Monday evening, she appeared here suddenly in what I thought was a very cheerful state of mind. She laid the cigarette case on my desk just where it’s lying now, and asked me to do her the favor of placing it in your hands. She intended to go away and was already packing. If she sent the case to you, it would probably be taken as an attempt at blackmail!

“I was to give it to you after she had gone—on your birthday. And she insisted that I mark the date on my calendar. I said I could remember it without that. But she opened my calendar to the date and marked it herself.”

With an almost devout gesture, he turned back the last leaf and pushed the calendar toward Myra. In the white space, under the nineteenth of June, which had been carefully circled, was written in Olga’s bold, beautiful hand, “Myra’s birthday. Don’t forget, Peterkin!” Underneath were three crosses, playful little crosses marked in black ink.

Myra said nothing. She laid the palm of her hand on the paper and did not remove it.

Peterkin cleared his throat a few times and continued. “Before she left, we arranged everything for the next day. We would inquire about the trains in the morning; in the evening, I would take her to the station. But when she had gone, I grew terribly nervous. Something struck me as wrong, but I didn’t know what it was. I tried to telephone her, but there was no answer. I sat here at my desk in a quite indescribable state of nerves. This thing was lying before me,” he picked up the cigarette case. “I picked it up quite without thinking. Suddenly it occurred to me—pardon, Myra, if it was not discreet, but I felt such dreadful anxiety—suddenly it occurred to me to open it. I did so half in fun, half with the notion that I

might find something in it which would tell me something. When I opened it, I found this note."

He handed it to Myra. Under the clasps that were to hold the cigarettes against the case, was a slip of paper. On it was written in Olga's unmistakable hand:

"*Qui vivens laedit, morte medetur!*"

"*Qui vivens laedit, morte medetur!*" repeated Peterkin. "I read it several times like a drunken man without understanding. Then I rushed down. Without my hat, without my keys. The lower house was locked. I rang for the doorman. He did not come at once. I rushed upstairs again to get my keys. It took me ages to unlock the house, to run around the corner and ring for their doorman—ages. On the stairs I met the maid, screaming and sobbing. It had already happened."

Myra laid her forehead against the edge of the desk. Not a sound was to be heard. Peterkin stroked Myra's hair once or twice, with trembling fingers.

"There is something else that I must tell you," he said in a low voice. "She was completely covered with your flowers. Perhaps that will make you happy. You know, when you parted that time—you ran downstairs with your people after you—I half heard what was said between you. After quite a long while I went back to my room—there was Olga still standing in the middle of the room, supporting herself against the table. When I entered, she looked at me as if I were awaking her from sleep. I took her by both arms and shook her. 'What's happened, Olga? What have you done to Myra?' She looked distractedly at me and kept repeating 'Something terrible, Oh, God, Peterkin, something terrible!' She showed you the door quite formally, did she not? She said that you shouldn't bother her again, or something like that, didn't she?

"Then she seized my hand and said very quietly, 'I'm

lying, Peterkin, I'm simply lying. It was nothing but my miserable cowardice. But Myra must know that, she understands me. I would have jumped in front of a train for her, I'd have jumped out a window, but I can't let the clothes be torn off my body in front of such people, I can't, I can't. I know, I'm a miserable, contemptible creature, but I can't, I can't.' I asked her what you had answered. She turned quite pale and said, 'Nothing. Not a word. That's the terrible part. She was so defenseless against my commonness.'

"Then she had another discussion with Miss Flesch. You have no idea how that woman acted. Olga would not remain in the house another hour. For which I could hardly blame her. Then she went to pack her things. In a few moments she came back, and seizing me by the wrist, drew me into her room.

"'That is her answer,' she said and showed me the money on the bed. 'She is articulate,' she said. 'We underestimated her powers.' Oh, Myra, why did you do that? To be quite frank, I was dreadfully angry with you myself at the time. She kept saying 'What shall I do? What shall I do?' I said 'Put the money in an envelope and send it back without any message.' But she shook her head. 'I deserved the blow,' she said at last, 'I will have to take it and smile.' She gathered the bills almost lovingly, saying several times in a low voice, 'What a child! What a child! She did not know what she was doing! She did not know what she was doing!' Then she gave me the roll of bills. 'Keep it for me, Peterkin, the time may come when I shall need it, and when it will be a joy to me to know that it comes from Myra.'

"I mentioned it to her often before the end, when she literally did not know which way to turn for troubles. But she always shook her head and said, 'Not yet, not yet!'

"After she—was dead," his voice broke, "I bought white orchids for her, I spent the whole sum: she looked

beautiful."

He could get no further. His lips quivered, the tears rolled down his cheeks. After a long, long pause, Myra sat up: her eyes were dry.

Beside the cigarette case, on the desk, lay a revolver.

"Is that the revolver?" asked Myra and reached for it.

"Yes."

"Give it to me." She clasped the butt in her fingers.

Peterkin made a gesture of terror. But Myra slowly shook her head. Peterkin looked into her eyes, then he reluctantly drew back his hand.

"I do not want to keep it," he said, "it is too much of a constant temptation. And not everyone has as steady a hand as Olga Radó. You have a right to it. Of course. But I should not like you to keep it either. Promise me something, Myra—promise me you will give it to the man you love. Then it will be in the best hands."

She had risen. "I promise you," she said almost solemnly, "I will give it to the man I love."

"Promise that you won't do anything silly with it, that you won't carry it carelessly or foolishly."

"I promise you," said Myra, "with this proviso. I have no right yet to swear on my life that I won't shoot myself. But I will swear by my eternal salvation. I will swear by Olga Radó's ten thousand times sacred memory."

Something struck him in her tone. He rose slowly from his chair as if trying to search her eyes with his own. "Tell me, Myra," he said, "I hope you are not angry with me. I should not like anything that I have said to influence your decisions in any way."

Myra held his fingers in a short firm clasp. From the swift gesture with which she drew herself up and ran her hand over his hips, it was apparent that she was at the utmost limit of her powers.

"I swear," she said, "that from this hour forth nothing and nobody can ever again influence my decisions."

* * *

Myra did not return home at once. In a few seconds she had made plans which instantly became decisions. There was no wavering as they took form; it all advanced with one stride from darkness into light and remained there irrevocably.

She visited a shipping-agency and the landlord of the house in which she had spent so many years. There was a time when she would have dreaded such tasks. Now she felt that never as long as she lived should anyone relieve her of such unpleasantnesses.

It made her feel good, to be determined, to manage her affairs prudently and deliberately. When she entered her room and laid her hat in the closet, her hand touched the black dress that she had worn to her father's burial. For a moment, she felt a desire to put it on, to see herself in gloomy crêpe. But she drew herself up. "Nonsense!" she muttered, gritted her teeth and shut the closet.

She went to her father's study, seated herself at the desk and wrote various letters, to the attorney, to the bank.

After a while the maid entered. "Your Aunt, my mistress, requests you to come to dinner."

Myra did not raise her head. "Tell your mistress, my Aunt, that I have already eaten. And request my Aunt, your mistress, to come here after dinner."

The maid stood in the door for a moment, her mouth wide open. But as Myra did not stir, adding nothing and retracting nothing, simply scratching her pen hurriedly over the paper, she trotted off.

Presently, Aunt Emily appeared, visibly undecided as to whether to be indignant or affable.

"Sit down, please," said Myra in a tone, so businesslike, so short, so firm and unimpeachably polite that it threw Aunt Emily into confusion and deprived her of all power

of speech. “Pardon me, if I shorten your afternoon nap a little, but I have something to say to you and time is pressing.”

Myra picked up the paper-knife, turned it over and over, bent it, rapped her outstretched fingers with it, and stared intently at it while she spoke.

“You will have to decide quickly where you are going —I am about to travel....”

“You?”

“I am about to travel. We are going to break up the household. The house will be rented. Newes has agreed to let me break the lease. The furniture will be put in storage. Within the next few days. I’m beginning today. The moving-men will be here tomorrow. You will certainly want to get out of the way of the commotion. I suggest that you go to a hotel or a pension until you have definitely made up your mind. If you need the maid this afternoon to help you pack, she will be at your service. And then—I should not like you to suffer in a pecuniary way on my account. I should prefer if you were to state your wishes in writing and hand them to Rosenbaum. I have already written him in this connection.”

Myra laid down the paper-knife.

“That’s about all!” She rose and supported herself with her hands behind her, against the desk. “But if we should not see one another again, God’s will be done, and well done by you.”

Aunt Emily also rose, her knees trembling, while her face turned all shades of color from citron yellow to ash gray.

“And—and Alfred?” she asked with a vain effort to inject a touching gentleness into her sharp voice.

“What? Who?” Myra knitted her brow. “Oh, yes—no thank you. You don’t have to notify him. I will take care of everything necessary myself.”

“Myra!” said Aunt Emily solemnly, “what would your

dear father say! I have cared for and shielded you from the day you were born, and for thanks I am shown the door....”

Myra seized the paper-knife again.

“I have already written Rosenbaum that he is to transfer fifty thousand marks of my fortune to you. With what you have and what is coming to you from father, you can live very comfortably indeed. I will go tomorrow morning and give him the necessary authorizations.”

“Myra,” said Aunt Emily with mounting pathos. “I shielded you from an awful fate. You ought to go down on your knees and thank me!”

“All right, all right,” said Myra and made a rather wry mouth. “I’ll tell Rosenbaum a hundred thousand.”

Then Aunt Emily turned and rushed out.

Myra packed her things in feverish haste as if for flight. She worked all day and night, permitting no one to help her, not even the maid, not even Peterkin.

But on the evening, when she was departing, Peterkin came to fetch her from the house and accompany her to the depot.

The house was dark and empty. All the furniture had been removed. The chandeliers were down and the windows curtainless. Here and there a picture hook projected disconsolately from the bare wall, or a square on the paper showed that a picture had hung there for years. A big suitcase and a small bag stood in the middle of the empty room. Myra had stuck a lit taper on the window-sill. It gave a strange, flickering half-light. Their shadows glided, huge and bent along the walls and ceiling.

Peterkin kept glancing at his watch. “Isn’t it time for me to call the taxi?” he asked uneasily.

Myra raised her hand. “Stop it! We have oceans of time. What would we do at the station? And what difference does it make if I miss the train? I’ll simply

leave in the early morning."

"Ah," said Peterkin relieved, "I'd much prefer that. I don't understand how anybody can travel at night."

"I'll travel in the morning," said Myra. "In a few hours the dawn will come. But I love the night. Whoever loves the stars must love the night. Tell me, Peterkin, have you really never thought that they're up there in the daytime, too—just as remote and just as near as at night? Sometimes I try to see them when the sun is shining—and I feel quite certain—that such and such a one is here, and another there, and I can hardly wait for twilight to make them visible."

"You get that from her, too," said Peterkin sadly, "that insane love of the stars."

"Yes," said Myra and her deep voice was like a bell, "what have I that I didn't get from her? Everything! Certainly all love. The earth and sky are full of things she loved. And her love streams back to me again from all those things. Good God, how many things she loved. Mountains and seas and flowers and spiders and little children and leather and silk and crystal and Günderode and the blessed St. Francis of Assisi—and—me.

"Truly, she taught me love. Good heavens, if Aunt Emily were to hear that she would certainly read a wrong meaning into it.

"Once she said something to me, Olga, I mean, it was when we were on our trip and were talking about our future, and I said that I did not want to be separated from her until I came of age. Then she grew quite impatient and said, 'Good heavens, what a dreadful attitude, never to be able to love what you aren't holding in your own two hands!'

"Wasn't she right, too? Why shouldn't one love the dead and those who are arriving and those who are far away, whose existence we can only surmise or whose creation wafts us a breath of their souls? And why only

one, why not thousands—those for whom we yearn and those who yearn for us—those who have died with longing for us unfulfilled, and those who will live with longing unfulfilled after us, when we have long been dead. Sometimes I feel as if I should stretch both my arms into space and call, 'I love you, I love you, I love you!'"

"It is strange," said Peterkin timidly, shaking his head as he gazed up at Myra who stood, weirdly tall and slender in the spectral light, "it is strange how like her you sometimes are."

"It is much stranger how *unlike* her I was," said Myra, with a smile. "Remote, strange, unrelated. So horribly unlike her that I really did not understand her at all. I think I tormented her to death with jealousy and distrust."

"And now?" asked Peterkin. "Would you be jealous and distrustful now? Who knows, if you had remained together, perhaps in a few months you would have had cause to be."

Myra shook her head slowly. "You're just trying to comfort me, Peterkin. But you don't succeed. My delight in her was so uncontrollable. Even though her form were destroyed a thousand times, my delight in her will always remain. I see now that I should not have been so greedy as to rob heaven and earth of her love. But Olga never deceived me. Never, never, never!"

"The train, Myra," warned Peterkin.

Myra glanced at her wrist-watch. "Yes, we must go."

Peterkin went to call a taxi. The chauffeur carried down the luggage.

"And look there," she rose with a strange rapture on her face and pointed to the starry sky, "there's Antares! The heart of the Scorpion! I'll follow it, farther and farther south. We may remain together, or I may wait until it appears again, for it is the most trustworthy of friends."

“Nevertheless,” said Peterkin, “I have a feeling that it will be very little protection or friendship for you. When I think that in a few nights you will be sleeping in a strange city, in a strange bed....”

“Splendid!” said Myra. “That is the one thing that can give me peace. A room that I’ve never set eyes on before. And what if that room is already there and another person occupies it and fills it with his sorrows and joys and worries and thoughts? Must one always lie down in a strange bed with a feeling of aversion? There are no strange microbes and bacteria in a freshly made hotel bed.

“In the morning the strange bed will tell me everything it has ever experienced. That’s also a fairy gift, you know. I’m no longer afraid because things begin to talk to me. It is always the lucky children in the fairy tales or the wise men in the stories—King Solomon conversing with the birds—to whom things and animals and trees tell their secrets. You don’t know what that means. The whole world was so dreadfully mute. And now everywhere I hear beloved, familiar, inaudible voices. You can’t imagine with what joy and pride that fills one. See, Peterkin, that is something else that I learned from her, from Olga.”

“I am grateful to her for what hours of pleasure I may again find in this masked ball of life, but if the effort seems worthless to me, then I shall be grateful to her for showing me the exit.”

“Yes,” said Peterkin somewhat bitterly, “a loaded revolver.”

“Oh, more than that,” said Myra, “it isn’t done with that alone. Don’t you remember what the little mermaid yearned for, why she let them cut off her tongue, why she suffered a thousand agonies at every step she took—what only a great, a truly great love could give her? Well, Olga gave me that. Olga has given me everything one needs to

confront the future with imperturbable calm—a loaded revolver and an immortal soul!”

X

Myra locked and bolted the door. She heard the footsteps of the maid grow fainter, a click as the electric lights were turned on and off, a latch lifted somewhere in the distance, the creaking of a hinge—more steps, probably on the next floor—and a slowly repeated, irregular sound as if an open window were banging. Then silence. Vast, overarching, empty, cool, dark, unmoving silence.

Myra had to make up her mind at last to take her hand from the lock and go to the electric button, although she was afraid of the sound of her footsteps and the rustling of her own skirt. She turned on all the lights, even the little lamps beside the bed and on the desk. In the overilluminated room, she stole along the walls, opening and closing the closets, raising the curtains and drawing them again.

She was not afraid that there might be a murderer hidden in the room, but she wished to familiarize herself with every detail of her strange surroundings. She was merely afraid that something might surprise, and thereby terrify, her. The unfamiliar furniture might assume the form of a phantom figure in the dark room, a draft might twist the curtains into human shape. She also examined the pictures very carefully. She recollected from feverish nights in her childhood that even well-known pictures, when seen in the dusk or in the penumbra of the night-lamp by the bed, can transform themselves into terrifying faces.

When she had examined the room in this fashion, she again turned out all the bulbs except one that shed only a very diffuse light. But there was no longer anything to

terrify her in this twilight: Myra knew that that crouching shadow was the curved commode, and that unaccountable ray of light came from the edge of the mirror above the wash-basin, reflecting the reflection of the electric light in the mirror on the bureau.

She opened her suitcase and took out various articles she needed—a night-dress, which she spread on the bed, a couple of bottles and brushes, which she carried to the wash-basin. Then she brought the box from the night-table and laid a piece of soft white silk on the bottom—as carefully as if she were smoothing her lover's couch, or preparing for a priestly service. With cautious movements, as if she were handling living objects, she laid the revolver and the cigarette-case with the scorpion inside. She shut the box with a determined gesture, for, as always, the sight of the revolver aroused in her an almost passionate desire to set its cool, smooth, metallic mouth to her temple. She was afraid to give way to this desire, for she was not sure that some sudden impulse might not make her pull the trigger, and thus, lead her, rather by accident than from necessity, to destroy herself, and thereby extinguish thought, feeling, memory, anticipation.

She did not wish to die. Or rather, she would gladly have died, if it had not involved being dead. She would gladly have died the same death as Olga, if only to be able to know with her last thought that she was suffering all that Olga had suffered, and that it was not so unbearable, so terrible, as inexperience imagined it.

On the other hand, she felt a fierce desire for life of which she knew so little. Not that she promised herself any great joys, any fine raptures therefrom. But she felt so well armed against the beautiful and terrifying monster that it would have been a pity to give up the struggle. It seemed to her as if Olga's blood had bathed her soul in that invulnerability that Siegfried found in the

dragon's blood. She was convinced that she had surmounted the most beautiful, the most difficult, the most significant part of her life. In the tragedy or comedy in which birth compelled her to participate, she had had to play her part only in the first act. She had expended all her strength and feeling—and now she mingled with the supers, still eager, but exhausted by the shocks which she had undergone: half curiously, half wearily, she watched the others act.

In reality, her curiosity was stronger than she knew, and although she thought, or wished to think, that she was no longer capable of any powerful emotion, either joy or pain, although she felt that her peace of mind was steeled against impacts of every sort, she felt moved to try the invulnerability of her armor, to seek out new impressions, and expose herself to them. She would plunge into the thickest of the fray, pressing the bristling spear-heads to her breast.

The first to which she so eagerly offered herself and whose wounds she had certainly not suffered before, were strangeness of surroundings and solitude.

As a result of the feeling that in her new freedom she had herself elected strangeness and solitude, and as a result, too, of the thought that nothing more could hurt her, nothing more must hurt her since her separation from Olga Radó, she felt the cold and almost hostile silence as a kind of beneficent release.

One thing she knew—she could endure solitude. But tomorrow she would be compelled to take her meals in a room containing ten or twenty strange people. The idea almost took away her breath. She felt curious eyes pricking her skin like pin-points. But she would endure that, too.

Somewhere below a door slammed, with a dull, heavy sound that shook all the walls. The elevator rose with a humming noise as if the huge body of the house were

drawing a labored breath. In the stillness of the night she could hear quite clearly the click as it passed the first, then the second, floor.

She heard, too, the opening of doors, the clinking of keys and grinding of locks, the snapping of electric buttons, footsteps moving carefully over muffling carpets or pounding on the bare floor. A suppressed laugh, a whispered good night.

Myra tried to decide whether these voices which she could barely hear were pleasant or unpleasant. She arrived at no very definite decision.

The door opened in the adjoining room. Again she heard the softest rustling, the click of the electric light, the drawing of curtains.

Myra knew nothing of the man in the next room, nothing. Not even his name, not even his age, not even as much as can be read in any face that hastily passes one by in a dark street. And yet she knew that her neighbor did not care to be waked up early, for she heard the window shut with considerable care. That he was a considerate person, for he took pains to make no noise, pulled off his shoes quietly and stole about in soft slippers so that she could no longer hear him walking, and sensed his presence only by a slight vibration. He was a cleanly person, too, for despite the lateness of the hour, he brushed his teeth at some length.

It made Myra laugh. Perhaps it would be best to make the acquaintance of all one's fellow humans in this fashion. What good did it do to learn a stranger's name, or his occupation, or his father's position? What use was it to talk with someone and know no more about him in the end than where he spent last summer or what he thought of the latest operetta? But what use was it, either, to live with only a wall dividing you from someone so that you could hear every breath he drew—and still know nothing about him?

Ah, of what use was it to be of one blood with someone, and spend your life with him from the day you were born? Of what use was it to love someone, to love him with every fibre of your body and soul—if in the last analysis you really knew nothing about one another?

Myra went to the window and leaned out. She scanned the heavens for Antares, her star. But the brick walls of the houses hid it. She leaned out a little farther, peering down into the air-shaft. She felt a strange dizziness. If she were to fall down there, no one would notice it. If they found her body there in the morning, nobody would know what to do, whom to notify, whom to send for.

Myra was indeed free. So free that it sent a little shiver down her spine. Not the trace of a chain left, but no bond of any kind, either; no walls to circumscribe her, but also no sheltering roof.

The persons to whom love or obligation had bound her were dead. Her father was dead, Olga was dead. From the others she had severed herself with one sharp slash.

“Dear stars,” thought Myra, “how good it is that you are up there! Always the same, after tens of thousands of years, the same as when Olga and I lay by the Wannsee. There is no such thing as chance, there can be no such thing as chance. Why do not the stars collide and plunge with a trail of sparks through the night? Eternal, immutable laws keep their huge bodies floating in space and guide them with as vast composure along their courses as if it were the easiest thing in the world to rule the stars. At some point I, too, am subject to those laws and cannot resist—nor do I want to. I am afraid when I must decide to go right or left, and yet all roads are closed to me except that single one which I shall and must take because it is mine, the one immutably predestined road which will lead me to my goal. To what goal? That I do not know. But since I am alive there is probably something in store for me somewhere, and the

best course is to await it in patience."

* * *

In the large dining-room of the pension, Myra had her table in the darkest corner. The friendly hostess had felt obliged to apologize because all the places near the window were occupied by prior guests. It quite suited Myra. She sat with her back to the wall and the little table before her like a bastion. Usually she appeared when the first gong struck so that she could watch the others pass by and would not have to weave her way between the crowded tables. Once she was late, and the short walk across the room had been a torture to her. She felt herself racked and impeded by all the shamelessly inquisitive, and even the indifferent, glances. Although she always looked into the mirror before she left her room, she thought that her hair must be disordered if a glance rested on it, or that she had a hole in her stocking if someone stared at her legs. Then she would have to struggle sternly against the impulse to put her hand to her head, or to glance at her feet. She would press her elbows against her body, and endeavor to assume an impenetrable expression, and to move cautiously—she was plagued by the idea that she would overturn a chair or upset a plate. She tried to walk so quickly that no one could observe how precisely she navigated. Once seated, she felt as if she had reached a haven.

Generally, she took a newspaper with her, in order to screen herself behind it while she was waiting. She was not afraid that someone might accost her—talking was much less terrifying to her than walking—she was afraid of looking as if she were expecting to be accosted, so unoccupied, so solitary, so hungry for a charitable word.

Actually, she was nothing of the kind. The less she had occasion to speak, the less she missed speaking. But while it caused her no unhappiness, it did require a certain

resolution before she could bring herself to say something to the maid. When, in the evening, she went to her room, and bolted the door after the last, “That will be all, thank you, Bertha,” the feeling that now she could be silent, now she was permitted to be silent, was like a deliverance to her. At times it seemed to her as if her tongue had become atrophied like any other disused muscle. And she wasted no further pity on the Trappists because she perceived quite clearly that it requires but a few weeks so to accustom one’s self to silence that the utterance of a word presents tremendous difficulties.

Myra’s yearning for Olga almost drove her mad—but that was by no means the worst of it. The worst was that her yearning was the cry of a human soul, not for love, not for companionship or understanding, but for the warmth of a body, for the pressure of encircling arms and tender lips.

At such times, Myra would tear the pillow with her nails and teeth, and shake as if in fever. At such moments, too, she felt certain that she really must be a wicked creature, the most damning evidence being that she could never succeed in feeling repentant or in making good resolutions. On the contrary, if she were very unhappy, she resolved at once to be wicked. Her desire to study and improve herself was only for the sake of acquiring more power over people, to beguile, to seduce them. Then she would enjoy whatever stirred her desire or her curiosity, were it only for an hour; she would merely skim the chalice, squeeze the juices from the fruit, and pass quickly from one sensation to another, never boring herself, never tying herself to anything, never creating from the depths.

Some such resolution impelled her to mingle with people. She meant to plunge head first into the stream, because she felt within herself the power to master the current. She determined to start an acquaintance the next

day, to place herself on speaking terms with someone. Like a stone cast in the waters, a word can spread wider and wider ripples. In a few weeks she might find herself the center of a circle.

But next day when she reviewed all the faces, they seemed to her suddenly vacuous and boresome, or false and sinister, and she drew into herself like a frightened hedgehog, timid and hostile. She made a new resolution —not to speak, never, never to say a word, never to utter more than was absolutely essential, to erect barricades and walls of silence between herself and the world.

Things might have gone along in this fashion for weeks and months, had not Gisela Werkenthin arrived at the pension one day, to visit the painted young lady. She attracted Myra the instant that she entered the dining hall. Not that she was especially beautiful. She was built on the slim, slight, boyish scheme. Her narrow face seemed even narrower because of her dark hair, which was cut in page fashion and concealed half of her cheeks. Her mouth was all but lipless, simply a delicate, pale red, proud, severe curved line. Her dark eyes with their strikingly wide lids lay in great, deep ashen-gray hollows.

That night Myra did not rise from table immediately after supper as usual. She ordered a cup of tea and in order to have a pretext, pretended to be stirring the tea impatiently, to cool it while she watched the table at which sat the pale girl with the bobbed hair.

She laughed with the others, drank and smoked innumerable cigarettes. But she had a trick of withdrawing completely into herself in the midst of the noisy conversation. Her slender hand with its lit cigarette would remain as if petrified in the air, while her eyes bored through the fog of tobacco smoke and steam as if they were beholding something indescribably horrible.

The next day Myra visited Mrs. Meidinger, the hostess. There was a small matter she had to discuss with her

which ordinarily she would have conveyed by the maid. But during the night, she determined irrevocably to make her leap into "life." It was for this reason that she constrained herself for the first time to pay a personal call. The hostess, blond, rotund, coiffured and as amiable as ever, received her in her comfortable living-room, enthroned behind a well-covered tea-table.

She seemed quite enchanted to see Myra. She teased so long that at last Myra accepted a cup of tea, while she began to ply the girl with questions in which curiosity and friendliness were equally commingled, and which Myra answered because she saw no reason not to answer them. But she smiled slightly and thought, "If I really wanted to hide something from you, my dear, I would do it so well that you would never even suspect it."

She readily admitted that she was an orphan. Yes, she believed that the mourning she was now wearing for her father did explain her pale and sorrowful expression. Thus the good-natured and inquisitive woman would never think of any secret grief or probe its causes.

Myra's story was soon told. She was an orphan, had neither brothers nor sisters nor grandparents, and had visited this strange city in order to dispel her sad memories in a new environment. The hostess was satisfied with that explanation, or appeared to be. She confessed to Myra—what surprised her very much—that all the guests had inquired concerning her, and that each had assumed some romantic history behind the silent young lady in mourning. Miss Luigi—no doubt Myra knew who Miss Luigi was—worked at a cabaret and had enjoyed a great success, a really extraordinary success. Yes, the little lady with the beautiful red hair—dyed, quite obviously, as perhaps Myra had already remarked? Anyway Miss Luigi was always teasing her to introduce her to Myra. But when Mrs. Meidinger had told Miss Peters, the latter had said—Miss Peters was always very

outspoken—and sometimes even a little broad—she had said, “What, you mean to introduce that delicate, tender, unborn babe to those....” Well, she would rather not repeat what Miss Peters had said. Miss Peters was sometimes a little broad. But little Miss Luigi was by no means as bad as that. Of course, she was no angel from heaven—but whose business was that? She, Mrs. Meidinger, was not her sister’s keeper—and the most important thing was that her house remained honest; that was her business and nobody could say anything against it. If a young woman has to earn her bread these days like a man, she wants to take her fun like a man, too. Of course, she liked respectable people, that went without saying. But, ah, who was respectable in these days? Some did one thing, some another. Had Myra noticed Gisela yesterday?

Myra assumed a forgetful expression, but felt as if she had blushed.

“One of the girls who visited Miss Luigi?”

“Yes, the dark one. Oh, you must have noticed her, Miss Rudloff! She looks so unhappy, so dreadfully unhappy! Didn’t it strike you? Of course, you wouldn’t notice such a thing, but it’s easy for anybody who knows, to see that she’s a dope-fiend. It certainly is no indiscretion on my part to tell you what the whole town is talking about. And such a talented person! It’s a terrible pity, but she’s going to pieces, literally going to pieces, over another woman!”

An artistic pause. Mrs. Meidinger looked at Myra expectantly. Myra felt that the glance demanded some comment from her.

“How dreadful!” she said in the tone of a child to whom someone has just told something incredibly horrible.

“Yes, my dear little girl,” said the hostess with an almost commiserating condescension, “in your big

innocent eyes it is easy to read the question: ‘Are such things possible?’ My child, have you any idea of all that goes on! We live in an appalling age, really! But what can one do about it? We can no more escape our times than we can jump out of our own skins. If I had had my way, I’d have lived among respectable people where things are decent. Or have sat at the feet of Goethe. But where is one to find a Goethe today?”

Myra frankly regretted her inability to assist Mrs. Meidinger to this longed-for situation. She pictured it very amusingly to herself, and took her leave as soon as possible.

Even while she was traversing the long, feebly lighted corridor that led to her room, her thoughts returned to poor Gisela, and did not leave her again.

Poor Gisela, going to pieces over a woman! Ah, how well Myra understood that! Just as Gisela would understand Myra. Would understand all that Myra had been through, her struggles, her sorrow, her love.

Myra felt as if she must seek out this strange girl with the burning, tormented eyes, must follow her, must seize her hand and say, “We understand each other, we belong to each other, because we are the most unfortunate souls in the world! We must become friends because no one except ourselves can ever understand what we have suffered.”

* * *

The next evening the conversation between the tables concerned some story in the newspapers. Some had read it, others not, and since Myra had a paper in her hand she offered it to her neighbor. Little Miss Luigi also asked if she might glance over it, a request which Myra granted with great cordiality, and in five minutes a general conversation was in swing.

Next day it seemed perfectly natural to Miss Luigi to

say a few friendly words to Myra. In the evening when she was inviting her usual crowd to “sample” a glass of brandy in her room, she walked over to Myra’s table and asked her to come up, too, for a quarter of an hour—nothing “formal,” just “sociable.”

Myra gave herself a mental push, and rose to go. She had to pass the table at which were sitting Luisa Peters and her companions. Myra held her head high as she walked by, but she thought she could feel their surprised and scornful looks along her spine. Defiance welled up within her, and she linked her arm in little Mara Luigi’s. “I belong with these,” it was meant to say to the others, “with these whom you despise but who sympathize with me. I don’t belong with you hardened saints. You never gave a thought to me before, now it serves you right if I am lost!”

As she became conscious of this feeling, it struck her as the height of absurdity. What had these utter strangers to do with her? In what way were they responsible for her? Then she felt darkly—“That crowd who are staring after me, scornfully and pityingly—are my kind. We have ties in common, I belong to them. But I am cutting those ties and going with these others, with these strangers with whom I also have something in common. But it is a common destiny, not merely a common existence. For they understand not merely suffering but passionate grief and passionate love. They are not merely ardent, but jealous, not merely active, but impetuous. No, I do not belong to you! I hate you, I despise you! You and your kind! Olga Radó has killed you for me. I no longer belong to you. But since I must belong somewhere, I shall try to belong with these others.”

She entered Mara Luigi’s room as tensely and determinedly as if she were entering a new life.

* * *

Mara Luigi had to snatch something from nearly all the chairs before she could offer her visitors a seat. She tossed an armful of all kinds of articles on the bed and said, “There you are, my children, be seated!”

Miss Lorenz, a slender, well-dressed, blondined girl with a pretty, expressionless doll’s face threw herself among the cushions on the divan and took a big teddy bear affectionately in her arms. A chap named Kramer, a slight, fair-haired young fellow, with the face of a child who has known too much too soon, struggled for a place on the divan. But pretty Miss Lorenz opposed him so vigorously that her slim kicking legs in their thin silk stockings were visible above her knees.

A grave and sickly looking man, who was not, strictly speaking, a member of this circle, since Myra had often observed him in friendly conversation with the other party, silently moved up a chair for Myra. She was standing irresolutely in the middle of the room.

Myra smiled her thanks to him, somewhat confused, and sat down.

Meanwhile young Kramer had encountered so powerful a blow that he scrambled down from the divan with a howl of pain and sat on the carpet where he remained, refusing to be elevated by force or entreaty.

Mrs. Breslauer, a buxom lady, with strikingly painted eyebrows, had discovered a corset of white tricot under a heap of other things on the bed, and she must absolutely know whether it was made in mass production or whether the famous Fischer had “created” it and how much it had cost.

Giesbert, a young painter, a slender, good-looking fellow, wrenched the corset from the lady’s hands and danced through the room with it. Mara Luigi rushed after him. She had caught up her short little skirt in her left hand, her right was clutching after the artist. When Giesbert held the corset on high, she jumped on a chair to

reach it. When he hopped back and forth on the far side of the table, prepared to change his direction any moment, she did the same on the other side. Her comb clattered to the floor; curls and strands of hair danced around her face.

Myra grasped the arms of her chair tightly and shut her eyes for a moment because she felt herself becoming dizzy.

"So this is 'life,'" she thought. "I must accustom myself to it."

The ugly, sickly looking man, who had been standing behind her chair, said in an uncommonly gentle and pleasant voice, "You are a stranger here, are you not?"

"Yes," said Myra with a helpless sort of smile, "rather."

She scolded herself for being petty and narrow-minded, but she could not help feeling that it was easier to get along in one of those stiff and conventional gatherings where the hostess felt obliged to look after a strange guest. She did not wish to be noticed, did not wish to play a part. She would gladly have attended this promiscuous gathering of the clans as a nonparticipating spectator—but a quite invisible one. For—quite mistakenly—she felt that everybody was staring at her and thinking rather uncomfortably that this serious, embarrassed and silent young lady did not belong. She was very grateful, therefore, when the strange and not very congenial looking man spoke to her, grateful that she could turn to him occasionally, if only so that the others might not think that she was waiting stiffly for somebody to befriend her.

The ugly man bent forward slightly. "My name is Eccarius," he said. "We've been invited here very kindly, but unfortunately they've neglected to introduce us to one another."

He smiled, and his smile was so kind, so indulgent that it captivated Myra at once.

“You shouldn’t say that,” she said, prepared to be indulgent on her side, too. “We can get along somehow this way.”

She mentioned her own name.

“May I?” He drew up a chair beside her. “Of course, we can get along, my dear Miss Rudloff! We are hidebound by too many outworn conventions. I envy these children their ease. They skip and frisk about, speak familiarly to one another, sharing all their secrets, and never dreaming how difficult it is for one of us to bridge the gap from individual to individual.”

By the word “us” Myra felt she had been recognized. No matter what pains she took, they realized that she was a stranger to this circle. She was not quite sure whether it was for better or for worse.

The pretty Giesbert was dancing before the large mirror. He had put on the corset over his gray jacket and was trying to pull it shut.

“My best corset!” screamed Mara Luigi in a rage. “You’re going to ruin it! You’re a beast! Take it off, I say, take it off!”

“You don’t need it,” said Giesbert laughing, “don’t try to act as if you’d ever worn one!”

He pinched her sides which caused her to squeak loudly.

Myra would not have admitted even to herself that she felt offended by his tone.

“How splendidly young these people are,” she said smiling at Eccarius. “I feel quite old and sour beside such children.”

“Children ...” repeated Eccarius with a strangely reserved expression as if his eyes were turned inward, “yes, perhaps—children....” Then he glanced at Myra again with his frank expression and his kindly smile.

“You must have had a very happy childhood.”

“Yes,” said Myra with complete conviction.

Myra recalled that she had learned to know struggle, unhappiness and suffering very young, that she had felt real hatred for Aunt Emily who had managed her upbringing with so much righteousness and so little understanding, that she was aware at an early age what it means to be jealous. And it seemed to her as if that period, a period when she was not yet quite ten years of age, no longer belonged to her childhood. Childhood had been those few years when a stream of happy love had bubbled up from her heart and had flowed forth without distinction toward whatever trees, animals, persons or dolls happened within range of her feelings.

At the moment when this stream of love had had to force its way over obstacles, when it was dried up in places which it had formerly enriched, leaving nothing but arid indifference or a swamp of hate—at that moment the idea of childhood seemed ended for Myra.

“Yes,” she said, again fastening her gaze on Eccarius, “a very happy childhood, but not a very long one. I have a feeling that I was awakened before most children—not that I was mature, I don’t want you to misunderstand me —I am not mature even today....”

“Who is?” asked Eccarius with his gentle smile.

“But I believe that I was awakened earlier than other children from the bliss of unconsciousness.”

“That is too bad.” Over his grave and clear gray eyes a veil, as of profound grief, seemed to be drawn. “It is a great pity, a great, great pity.”

Involuntarily Myra looked surprised, but he made an effort to explain his sympathy.

“You know whenever I see happy children, I always want to build walls and ramparts around them, so that they will remain as they are, will remain so for a long, long time. It is dreadful to think that one poisonous breath can change all the happiness of these little creatures into horrible pain.”

"Let him keep them," cried little Kramer from his place on the floor, "let him keep them, if he can't bear to part with the corsets! Every man has his passion, and there must be people who find corsets quite diverting."

"You swine!" said Miss Lorenz and kicked his shoulder.

Giesbert had picked up a tulle hat with egret feathers and clapped it on his head. With one hand he held the corsets together across his stomach, with the other he clutched anxiously at the hat with every step, to keep it balanced.

"I'm going to wear this to the artists' ball," he announced in a tone of triumph, "I'll be a sensation!" Suddenly he passed into falsetto. "Oh, no! I'll be the fairest maid of all! Sugar-daddy will give me an education. If only I knew what for! I have so frightfully many talents!"

"Yes, yes," cried little Miss Luigi meanwhile and skipped into the air, "the artists' ball at Sophus'! Stand still a minute, you loathsome little darling! Tell me seriously, what are you going to wear? A costume or what? Come, put those things down, Giesbert, else you certainly won't get a single glass of brandy!" She stamped on the floor for emphasis.

Giesbert pretended a terrified trembling and quaking while his knees shook as he put the articles on the bed.

Mara laughed and brought the bottle of brandy from the closet.

"I have only two glasses! Ring, will you, Erich?" she commanded.

"Oh, what's the use," said Miss Lorenz indifferently, without rising, "we'll drink one after the other. If Emma brings glasses in here, she'll report that we're holding an orgy."

"All right." Mara Luigi rinsed the glasses in the wash-basin. She reached for a hand-towel, and Myra was somewhat shocked, thinking she was about to dry the

glasses with it, but she merely wiped her finger-tips. She filled the glasses to the brim, and offered the first to Myra.

"Do you know what, Miss Rudloff?" she asked as she stood before her, "you must come with us tomorrow night, you really must."

"I?" asked Myra frightened. "Where?"

"To the artists' ball, of course! Probably you've never been to a really truly artists' ball in all your life. But you must see one." Myra did not feel the slightest inclination to accept. She even regretted having accepted the first invitation, instead of remaining in her room where she could shut out every disturbing sound, and take refuge from her own thoughts in quiet and clever books.

"But I don't know the persons who are giving it at all," she said helplessly. "Isn't it strange?" she thought. "At home I should certainly have said, 'The people,' and have been sharply reprimanded by Aunt Emily. And here where 'persons' will be sure to strike everybody as affected, Aunt Emily's good teachings burst forth for the first time in full flower."

"Don't know whom? Sophus and Nora?" asked Giesbert, checking his crazy behavior for a moment and speaking like a rational human being while, still out of breath, he smoothed his hair. "You don't know them? Then you certainly will have to go there tomorrow for it's high time that you did know them! A pair of splendid women, two of the most remarkable people I know! Would anybody like to take exception to that? If so, I challenge him to put on the gloves immediately."

He rolled up his sleeves, drew his head between his shoulders, and bared his teeth.

"You need have no qualms about going," said buxom Mrs. Breslauer in her somewhat unctuous voice. "I was lugged up there the first time positively *sans façon*, and was received charmingly, isn't it true, Marakin, they were

really perfectly charming."

"Yes," laughed little Kramer, "I really believe they never meet anybody except as their guest!"

"Is Gisela coming for us, or shall we see her there?" asked Miss Lorenz.

"Gisela," thought Myra, "so she's going to be there, too. I'll really have to do it. The only alternatives I have are to bury myself like a hermit, or to take advantage of every opportunity to meet people and learn to know the world and human beings. Gisela! Here I sit trying in some way to meet her, and when I'm asked to make her acquaintance in the easiest way in the world, I haven't the slightest desire, but only fear and shyness and aversion and a feeling that I'd like to creep away somewhere and be quiet."

Eccarius must have read the inner struggle on her face. He bent forward slightly. "I think you can venture it," he said in his very soothing way. "You will find a rare bouquet of people there. They will certainly distract and may even interest you. There are some really worthwhile characters among them. And if it becomes too lively for you, I shall undertake to bring you home at any time you wish."

"So you will be there, too?" asked Myra, relieved.

He nodded.

"Yes, then I believe I can 'venture it.'"

XI

While Myra was dressing to go to the artists' ball, she was not conscious of any effort to beautify herself in order to attract attention, to please, to cause sensation. Indeed, she desired to attract as little attention as possible, and would have given a good deal to be invisible, or to watch the hubbub from a gallery or a darkened adjoining room.

She selected a very simple black taffeta dress quite void of color or boldness of line. Nevertheless, she could not prevent something striking in her appearance. Perhaps it was caused by the anticipation which flamed up in the depths of her lifeless eyes and which was in such sharp contrast to the gentle, almost colorless composure of her pale face.

* * *

As Myra took off her coat in the vestibule of the little villa and was at once surrounded by a throng of persons in fantastic costumes, and a throng of noises, her immediate thought was of escaping. She looked for little Mara Luigi who was raising waves of people about her. Perhaps no one would notice if she asked for her coat again and slipped quietly out the door. She glanced about, weighing the chances of flight, and encountered the eyes of Eccarius who stood directly behind her.

"Look around a bit first," he said soothingly as if he had divined her thoughts, "and if it's too much for you, give me a sign and I'll take you home. I have no intention of staying here till daybreak myself."

The rooms were large and bright, and so full of noisy

people that Myra grew dizzy. A thin, bluish pall of smoke hung over the groups and spun in rings around the lamps. Faces stood out, impressed themselves on Myra's mind, sharp and yet unreal, like visions in a fever—then disappeared again.

Eccarius remained at her side, pointing occasionally to someone whom she could not discover in the throng, or mentioning some name that she did not understand or could not catch because it had no meaning for her.

A tall, slender, beautiful girl passed them in a sort of page's costume. Eccarius called to her and she stopped and greeted him. Myra had an opportunity to observe her. She wore black silk knee-breeches, white stockings, a jacket with lace cuffs, and had secured her dark, curling hair in a great black knot at her neck. Her features were clear and regular, a high and beautifully modelled forehead, and an almost challenging, free and bold expression which captivated Myra at first glance. She seemed to perceive that Myra did not feel quite at home in that tumult. She took her by the hand like a child.

"Come," she said, half to Myra, half to Eccarius, "I'll take this little girl to Nora. She is always 'the pole of repose in the flux of appearances.' You'll feel much better with her. Good Lord!" She took Myra's chin in her hand and turned her face to Eccarius. "Doesn't she look like a little child on its first day at school? Come, baby; you shall have a place of honor."

She forced her way through chattering, noisy groups. Everywhere the beautiful woman was called to, stopped, embraced, greeted, questioned. With a patience and affability that never altered she always managed to release herself again, but it took a quarter of an hour for Myra and her to cross two rooms.

At the end of the second room was a raised alcove on which, towering above the other chairs and a table with a charming cover, stood a Renaissance easy-chair, with

high and very beautifully carved arms. In this arm-chair, standing out against its strawberry-red brocade as against a painted background, sat a very fair woman, dressed in white, softly flowing white veils over her shoulders, a soft white covering over her knees.

Myra was astounded at first sight by the beauty of this vision. On closer inspection she perceived that the woman in the chair had passed her fortieth birthday, that she was too buxom to be beautiful, that age and sickness had ravaged and obscured the once pure lines of her face. But the next moment, as Myra held her warm, matronly hand, and felt a smile of indescribably warming cordiality and kindness envelop her, she forgot all about beauty or ugliness, and surrendered without reserve to the mild fascination of this personality.

“Here, Norina.” The slender page laid her arm lightly across Myra’s shoulder. “Take this little girl under your protecting wings. Else she’ll be lost in the hubbub.”

Something in the words, the solicitude concealed by a gentle irony, recalled Olga so vividly that Myra wanted to howl like a whipped dog. She no longer seemed to see the bright room with its throngs of people and strange faces as through panes of glass. They seemed to crowd in upon her, somehow to break through those glass casements which she had set about her life. It was all too much after the silence and solitude of the last few weeks. She felt herself in a condition not unlike a violent attack of fever.

Myra had to smile when she saw a shade of concern pass over the fair face of the woman while the room seemed whirling about her. She felt a chair moved against her legs while she was forced to her seat by gentle but firm hands.

She was sitting on a low chair close beside the high arm-chair.

“There,” said the dark-toned voice behind her. “Now if it’s too bright, or too loud, or too gay for you, just lay

your little head against the arm of my chair and creep under my veil. That's what I always do."

Obediently, Myra nestled her cheek against the arm of the high chair and felt the veil being drawn over her head. A gentle scent of mignonette emanated from the soft, filmy silk.

Nora turned to Myra. "You mustn't imagine that it's always as gay here as it is tonight. You must come sometime when we are more intimate, more quiet. We have a nice little garden which is our real joy. Just as long as it is possible, we take tea out there and love to have someone keep us company."

"Yes, when the flag is up!" laughed the young person on the step, turning with a jerk. "You ought to know that we do here as at court. When their majesties are at home, the flag is hoisted!"

"You ought to explain, Will," Nora amended, "just how it is done. On the roof of the arbor there is something like a little flag-staff *en miniature*, with a gay little pennant on it. You can see it from all sides, even in front, if you are passing the house.

"But if Sophie has to work very hard, or I am not feeling particularly well, we haul in the little flag. Then no one, at least none of the initiates, needs trouble to come to the door simply to be turned away. For, of course, that's always painful to both sides. For those who have to interrupt their work or control their illness, and are disagreeable hostesses anyway; or for those who feel like disturbers of the peace. If they are really turned away, they usually think, 'Well, they might have made an exception in my case,' or, 'They did not have to have the maid tell me.' Most of them are habituated to the lie they tell themselves: There is no one at home. That someone should be working never seems a sufficient excuse for them.

"But all our friends know that I never leave the house

and Sophie very rarely. So the little flag is there to avoid any unpleasantness. When it is unfurled that means, 'Please come in, we're expecting you.' Then there's no need even to come through the house, for everyone who wishes can enter by the garden-gate, or if it should be locked can jump the hedge, eh, Will?"

But Will had sprung up and motioned with his hand without even glancing back, for he was staring intently into the room where a circle was gathering around a dancing couple.

"Fiametta is dancing," he called back, with a hasty turn of his head, "the woman is marvellous! You must see her!"

Quite youthful in his impetuousness, he seized Myra by the elbow and dragged her from her chair to the step.

"I ask you, have you ever seen anything like that in all your life? Isn't she dazzling? Isn't she perfect?"

In the rather narrow circle which the crowding spectators had left free, a slender, well-built young man was dancing with a woman of refined beauty and great charm. She was so perfectly at one with the music that its tones seemed to emanate from her supple body.

She had a manner of dancing such as Myra had never before seen. Her movements were gentle, cool, subdued, noble and almost solemn. At the same time it seemed as if the beautiful girl consumed a vast reserve of strength in compelling her symmetrical body to maintain its dignified repose, as if it would have required only a moment's forgetfulness for that bridled temperament to leap up like a flame, for those soft, relaxed muscles to turn to steel and impel her sinewy body through the air, like a wild beast springing on its prey.

Myra felt a kind of painful, burning sensation at the sight of her, and when she sought, with her habitual honesty, to account for it, she decided that it was envy. A thousand appraising glances could never embarrass this

woman: it would have been no task for her to cross a crowded dining-room to her table.

"Isn't she marvellous?" said the young man beside Myra, aglow with enthusiasm, "isn't she fascinating? Isn't it just as if she stepped out of another century? Out of a century when there were still beautiful women, beautiful women who left the stamp of their personality on their environment, the courts, the city, the arts!"

Myra nodded silently. She would have been glad had he kept silent, too, for she wanted to know what was being said behind her. She could hear Nora's quiet, gentle voice.

"Certainly, she is very beautiful, Ulrich. She has breeding, temperament and culture, everything one could wish, but she is a little strange to me, and a little strange she will always remain. Perhaps it will sound very silly and sentimental to you if I say that she has no heart. But I really believe that she has not even the most elementary sort of kindliness...."

Myra could not catch what Ulrich might have objected. But she heard Nora's reply.

"No, Ulrich, I cannot agree with you. A woman without kindliness is something without charm, without fragrance for me, no matter if she is as beautiful as your Fiametta. Oh, yes, I know you have a foible for her, and forgive in her everything that you would never forgive in another. Of course, no one is obliged to love simply because she is loved by another. But then one should not arouse feelings in others if one has no use for them...."

"Oh, that! Yes, she does do that! And not in one case only—in hundreds of cases. And she keeps right on doing it! She completely ruined poor little Miss Bernhardt, she drove Erwin half mad, and she's destroying Gisela now—for the mere diversion!"

At the name of Gisela Myra started. So this was the woman for whose sake Gisela's life was being destroyed—

poor Gisela! Oh, Myra knew only too well that it is possible to be destroyed for a woman's sake! Her heart burned with anger and pity, with painful recollection and a desire to help, to alleviate, to save.

She had not another glance to spare for the beautiful woman. Her eyes sought Gisela, and found her on the opposite side of the room, her shoulders hunched over, the inevitable cigarette between her lips, staring into space with an expression of complete abstraction. Myra chose a moment when Mara Luigi was approaching Gisela, to turn to Nora and excuse herself.

"If you will pardon me, I should like to say a word to Miss Luigi."

Nora's tone seemed to veil a mild astonishment. "Ah, you know her? Are you friends?"

Myra felt a sudden redness invade her cheeks and forehead.

"Yes.... No ... that is, we stay at the same pension," she said somewhat embarrassed.

She forced a path for herself along the walls, fearing all the while that little Mara would have stopped talking to Gisela by the time she reached her. She felt that she was committing a deed of great daring. She had a feeling, almost of homesickness, for the low seat beside the soft, concealing veil; she thought of herself as a half-fledged bird that has abandoned its nest to make a flight into the world.

But a fierce impulse drove her forward.

"I must not be a coward," she thought, "I will have my destiny and I will go forward to meet it. I will open my arms and bear with joy everything that is meted out to me. I will love life no matter what it brings."

The sweet, hot dance melodies quivered through the air. They seemed to force Myra's steps to fall into their light and fiery rhythms, while her thoughts kept iterating like the refrain of a song, "I will love life, I will love life."

When Myra stood before Gisela and Mara had mentioned names and made a gesture of presentation, there was that strange feeling again—"What is the purpose of it all? What will happen now? We have been introduced, that is, we know one another's names, the series of letters whereby we are listed in official registers, and that gives us the right to talk to one another. But nothing gives me the right to utter what I am thinking. If I were to say, 'I wanted to know you because you make me feel so dreadfully sorry, because Mrs. Meidinger has told me that you take morphine in order to deaden your grief, your sorrow over a woman, and because I understand you so well and would like to try to help you, or at least be unhappy with you'—if I said that to her, they would shut me up in a lunatic asylum. And quite rightly, for if I were in a normal state of mind I could never bring myself to say such things."

"I believe that I have seen you before," said Myra with a reserved smile, half to Gisela, half to Mara Luigi. "Weren't you at the pension recently?"

"Yes, of course," Gisela's dark eyes were fastened on Myra. "That's where I saw you, too. That's why your face looked so familiar to me. Come on and sit down beside me, there's still room."

"Thanks," said Myra and smoothed her taffeta dress before she sat down.

Again she felt a slight anxiety because she thought that it was her duty to say something, something, too, that would lift her above the average—but she couldn't think of anything.

Gisela was not so easily embarrassed in beginning a conversation. "You know little Luigi from the pension, don't you?"

Myra nodded.

"She brought you here, didn't she? You haven't got anything to do with art and such awful things, have

you?"

"Unfortunately, no," said Myra.

"Unfortunately? Thank God and your most honorable parents that you have a decent occupation."

"But I haven't any."

"Haven't any? That's the most decent of all."

"Are you serious? I think it's dreadful not to have any occupation."

"Why dreadful? Having an occupation means being paid for work. Taking money from somebody, that means being subservient to somebody, whether it's an individual, or a company, or the public. Being at the public's beck and call is the worst of all! If you have no occupation and don't need to have one, then you're your own master! That is to say, you're not anybody else's servant. Why is that dreadful?"

"I don't know." Myra wrung her hands with a gesture of helplessness. "Perhaps because then we don't belong anywhere. Home has no meaning for us any more. I was born and brought up in the city. But does that give me any feeling of home? Yes, perhaps, if I were in Tokio and heard someone from the city talking I might discover some such feeling in myself, and might even become sentimental with him, when we thought of Potsdam or Linden. But just think how ridiculous it would be if we addressed somebody in Lucerne or Baden-Baden with 'I believe you come from my native city!'

"We have no families any more either! Or we have no use for them. Sometimes I envy the old noble houses with their hundreds of branches, each linked by name. But above all I envy people who have an occupation, for every cobbler has connections with every other cobbler, cabmen have something in common with all other cabmen, physicians have their colleagues to help them in almost every village on the earth. The artists are like one big family, especially theatrical people. And sometimes—

I don't know if you will understand the feeling—it seems to me that it must be good to be chained quite firmly to something—so that one will not plunge into the abyss."

"Oh, I understand it all right.... Have a cigarette?" She offered a narrow birchen case. "Only, I don't altogether believe in this fellow-feeling of fellow-workers. No more than I believe in blood relationships. The greatest stranger in the world to me is my own sister. No, no, the same kind of education, the same kind of interests—they have about as much to do with people's feeling for one another as the same kind of incomes."

"But one must feel one belongs somewhere," Myra objected, bewildered.

Gisela shrugged her shoulders wearily. "Yes, if you want to feel happy, to feel secure. But our best emotion is probably a fellow-feeling for our fellow man. Only, it is in very rare cases that we ever discover who he is. And what else is there? Sometime I think that people who have suffered the same misfortune, the same sickness should band together. The blind, the lame, the hunchbacked."

This was approximately what Myra herself had previously thought. But when she heard it uttered by someone else, it roused her opposition.

"I don't think," she said reflectively, "that I would like to see myself surrounded by my own infirmities, especially if they were exaggerated or distorted, any more than I'd like to see myself in a mirror if I were a leper. At bottom it always pleases people more to hide their infirmities and keep them as inconspicuous as possible. And I don't believe either that the ailing are especially sympathetic to one another! Everyone says to himself, 'He's a much worse case than I am!'"

A young man came up to Gisela and embraced her with a girlishly gentle and fawning gesture.

"You must sing something for us, Gisela," he pleaded,

“please, please, be nice!”

She shook her head without answering, knitting her brows a little.

But he did not release her and begged like a child. “Oh, please! Do be nice! Only for a few of us, one tiny little song!”

“My lute isn’t here, John.”

“Oh, you can use Sophus’, but come!”

With gentle coercion John tugged her from her place. His narrow face, sensitive features and delicate bloom of color were almost angelic in their beauty. His fair, gently waving hair was a little too long, his big dark blue eyes too soft, almost ardent in their expression.

Despite his surprising beauty, Myra thought his exterior almost repellent. But after a few moments she decided that it was really his costume which disturbed her, because it suited him so little. In a white tunic, in a silk doublet with puff sleeves, even in a gold embroidered rococo jacket he would have been a perfect picture.

Gisela, still tightly embraced by his arm, held out her hand to Myra. “Come with us, little girl,” she said. “I can’t promise you any great enjoyment, but I’ll be flattered if you’ll listen to my croakings.”

Myra seized the outstretched hand, letting it draw her along. It was a slender, feverishly hot, ruinously thin hand that clasped her fingers in a loose, but tenacious grip.

Somewhere in the distance she saw Eccarius’ face emerge. He did not even glance at her, and yet his grave and worried face seemed a reproach to her.

“I suppose I ought to pay some attention to him.” A slight feeling of fear, then her defiance blazed high. “But why should I? Why must I always be talking obligations into myself which really aren’t mine? From now on I’ll have regard for no one, I’ll go where I feel attracted—and only where I feel attracted!”

In the small adjoining room a dozen people were sitting, lying and crouching in the most varied postures. Sophie was there in her becoming page's costume. Beside her was the young man called Will who had sat on the top of the alcove step, little Mara Luigi and the painter Giesbert, who was wearing a kind of cowboy costume, and Ulrich, the man with the grave, haggard face, and deep minor voice.

Someone lifted Gisela's slight, light figure and set it on a table. John took the lute from Sophie and laid it in Gisela's arms.

A young person in a silk Pierrot's costume who was dashing about with a tray of glasses, offered one to Myra. Myra drank down the sweet and fiery wine at a draught, in order to be rid of the glass, and found herself searching for a seat.

Sophie extended her hand to her. "Come here to me, little lost bird," she said. "No one will hurt you here."

"I'm not afraid," said Myra smiling.

And she really was not. She felt quite content and well concealed in the deep, soft silk cushions between two faces that did not seem strange or unpleasant to her.

Little John with his page-like grace seated himself at her feet. And although she felt no particular liking for him, she enjoyed his slightly cuddling touch.

Gisela tuned the strings, her head bent low. Her loose black hair fell about her cheeks. With a sudden toss she raised her head, shook back her hair, and after a few opening chords began to sing.

Somewhere
A voice is calling through the dark night,
A voice that makes me tremble.

Somewhere,
On their hot couch, hot hands incite
My longing hands to tremble.

Somewhere
A heart weeps quietly for the right
Against my own to tremble.

Her voice was small as if muffled by a veil, but the deeper tones especially had a passionate, enthralling ring. Myra felt as if she were caught in the web of a sweet, dreamy happiness that was, nevertheless, a painful longing.

Sophie had put her arm around her, and now and again her hand kept time to the music by stroking Myra's shoulder gently and soothingly.

Sometimes Gisela's eyes sought out Myra while she was singing. Their glances met, were fixed one upon another, and it seemed to Myra as if Gisela were singing every word to her. "Sweet life," she thought, "beautiful, beloved life!"

She felt a feverish longing that filled her heart to overflowing. It was a longing without name or object. It was a longing for distant lands, a longing for affection. It was a longing for glittering fame, for heroic deeds, and a longing, too, for grandmother's quiet garden, for the meadow over which the bees hummed.

Your sad and silvern soul
Draws its last gasp in blood.
Alas, that it stands sole,
Alone, by me unfound.
For your soul will be drowned,
Will plunge beyond control,
Sink, drown in burning blood—
Since my cool hand has never found
Your brow to still the fevered flood.

A shade of almost sorrowful gravity passed over Sophie's beautiful, cheerful features. She smiled, but it seemed as if her smile were steeped in melancholy.

“Wait a moment.” She motioned to Gisela with her hand. “I want to get Nora. You know how much she loves to listen to you.”

She rose abruptly. John sprang up at the same moment. “Can I help you?” he asked, it was a plea.

Myra thought his words sounded mysterious.

Sophie and John did not enter the large hall-like room from which they had come. Sophie opened a glass-door behind a curtain which gave upon the night-darkened garden.

“Leave it open a moment,” she begged. “It is so warm outside. We’ll be back this way.”

Gisela hesitated. Some interior struggle was reflected in her mobile features.

“Sophie,” she called, springing down from the high table, “would you rather that I came with you? I can sing in the next room just as well.”

“No, no,” said Sophie. She was standing on the step and had lifted the two parts of the curtain so that they framed her slender figure for a moment. “It is so crowded and smoky in there, and dusty from the dancing, and one can’t make the whole crowd listen quietly. Besides, I’m glad to have a good reason for enticing Nora out for a while. She’d never decide to come herself, and if she doesn’t, the evening will be too much for her.”

She nodded gratefully to Gisela and vanished in the darkness. Through the half-open door, streamed the manifold fragrances of the night and its flowers.

Over the little circle lay an expectant silence. Those who were sitting side by side made observations in hushed voices. Gisela strummed her lute without raising her eyes.

The murmured conversation presently grew louder and somewhat more lively, only to subside entirely when heavy steps were heard crunching the gravel in the garden. Then the most intimate friends of the household

began to talk rapidly again in a fashion that seemed to say: “We were not waiting for you, we shall pay no particular notice to you when you come.”

Involuntarily Myra glanced at the garden-door, and though she instantly controlled herself, she started and felt that she had turned pale.

They were leading, they were dragging Nora in.

Sophie was supporting her on one side, John on the other. But they could not raise her heavy upper body; it sagged forward as if it were bent, broken. With an effort Nora raised her head, and her soft brown eyes, filled with silent suffering, like those of an injured animal, met Myra’s for a second.

Ulrich moved up a chair, Will set down cushions for her feet; an instant later she was sitting in her easy-chair, her hands laid upon its arms, her knees, which were drawn up a little higher than most people’s, covered by the lightly flowing folds of her silken veils, her fair head laid back upon a violet-colored cushion. Again a picture of almost queenly beauty.

Not unless one observed closely, was a slight twitching discernible around her mouth and cheeks—from pain or the unusually violent exertion.

Myra’s heart was quite filled with contradictory feelings. She felt a terror that verged on horror and even aversion; an anguish of sympathy, but at the same time, a fear as of dark veils falling, of a slowly settling, unbearable burden.

Had not life been simply bright and gay and alluring? Had she not loved it with a hot, longing, ardent, sacrificing love? And was it not now as if a fiery and flexible dancer, the swaying of whose arms had intoxicated her, suddenly had torn the mask from his face, and with a mocking grin pointed to a fleshless death’s head?

What was there in the world after all? What could one

expect from life? Misery and affliction, sickness and death, and bitter, freezing solitude....

Gisela plucked several chords and began to sing.

Somewhere
The alarm rings dull and heavily.

Somewhere,
It says, home-going tolls for me.

Somewhere
The long white roads lead well away;

Somewhere
Will lead me home to earth, some day.

She bowed her head lower over her instrument. It was strange how the tones found their way out of her restricted breast.

Everyone was silent when she had finished.

Will was the first to speak. “More, more,” he cried. “Another, another!”

Others shouted after him. Gisela slipped down from the table and laid the lute in a corner. Her weary movements were those of a child, but her face, which was always narrow, had become old and small.

“I believe I cannot sing any more,” she said, as if asking forgiveness. Her voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

Through the door of the adjoining room came an elderly fat man with an ugly, bloated face. Inside, someone was thumping the piano, but it could hardly be heard for the noise and laughter and the shuffling of dragging feet.

The fat man seized little John around the body with a firm grip. “Come, Johnnie boy, we’ll dance,” he cried and pulled him about in a circle. John swayed from his hips

like a coquettish girl. Myra observed for the first time that above his small and narrow foot in its low-cut patent-leather pumps, he was wearing open-work silk stockings.

Suddenly she loathed him. She loathed the fat man. She loathed Gisela because her face looked old and sick and worn out. She loathed Will because he spattered wine down Mara Luigi's low-neck dress, and then ran his hand down her back on the pretext that he was drying her. She loathed Mara Luigi because she was pleased by the performance although she shrieked and kicked and struggled.

Myra felt a terrible longing for the peaceful solitude of her own room.

Giesbert was standing before her, asking her to dance with him. She pressed with both hands against his arms which were seeking to clasp her and carry her away.

"Please, don't," she said, impatient but pleading. "Don't, don't, please, I don't like it!"

Suddenly, after she had released herself and was swaying a little dizzily, her glance came to rest on Eccarius' face. He approached her with a gentle smile, and involuntarily she extended her hand to him. "I'm so glad you're here," she would have liked to say. "I want to go home!"

Then it occurred to her that she had no right to command him as she would a servant, when she had not given him a thought the whole evening.

But before she had found anything to say, he spoke himself. "You look tired, Miss Rudloff. I don't want to hurry you, if you still wish to stay here. But if you would like to go, simply say so."

Myra was heartily grateful to him, although she had again been almost shocked by his ugliness as he suddenly appeared before her.

She was not entirely satisfied with herself. It must be

her own fault that she was always seeing ugly and pathetic things everywhere. Probably she was not strong enough for life, not healthy enough, not stupid, or perhaps not wise, enough.

Everywhere life had angles and edges, points and sharp corners. Wherever one groped among the rosy, shimmering clouds that so beautifully enveloped them, one was struck and hurt. One had to be a cobble-stone or a diamond not to be shattered by their hardness.

She walked after Eccarius in an almost stony silence. Let him think what he would of her! She was tired and upset, angry and dispirited. She had no desire to torment herself further with a laboredly indifferent conversation.

Eccarius allowed her time to cool her feverishly hot forehead in the night air. She gazed up at the bright flames of the stars and again, as always, felt the need to spread her folded wings, to launch herself at last, at last into the infinite; so impatient was she that her heart was depressed, her breathing labored, and there was an aching against her ribs.

Finally, after a long time, she heard a quiet voice beside her utter what seemed to be the last link in a long chain of thought.

“You will do me a great favor, Miss Rudloff, if you do not pass judgment upon your hostesses and their house because of this evening’s rather”—he hesitated—“rather turbulent festivities. You must sit out there in their garden with them some quiet afternoon and talk with both ladies. I am quite certain that you might gain much by it, and it would be a pity if tonight’s performance had spoiled your taste for it.”

Myra felt as if she had been looked through and through and was a little ashamed.

“Oh, of course not,” she said with some embarrassment. “I was really very charmed by both ladies. I am simply not accustomed to such noisy society.

Ah, I am really not accustomed to sociability at all, and there were simply too many and too varied impressions for me. I am suffering a little from a *carrousel feeling*, if you can imagine what that is."

"Oh, yes," Eccarius laughed softly. "I imagine that it is mostly dizziness and nausea."

"Not only," said Myra, "but music too, music that keeps droning on, and a lot of gaiety and a lot of light, a mysterious and fascinating gaiety—pearl-bespangled, dazzling decorations behind which mysterious, alluring, weird things are concealed—the driving power, the machinery, the engine. And out of the darkness appear single brightly illuminated faces that keep vanishing and reappearing. But above all, above all is the impression of a longed-for pleasure that has been tasted till one is sick and tired of it."

"That's all right then." Eccarius smiled as if his thoughts were already somewhere else. "You did not know that Nora is an invalid?" he inquired after a pause.

"No," said Myra. Then, half involuntarily, as if driven by a sense of guilt for which she somehow hoped to atone, she said, "Oh, she made me feel so terribly bad!"

"She has had a very sad life," said Eccarius, rather reluctantly, "but in spite of that, I would not say that she makes me feel bad. Somehow I wouldn't dare say that. It would seem almost presumptuous of me. There is so much about the woman that compels one's admiration, so much that is superior to us, so much that one can almost envy, that pity, in my opinion, hardly enters into the case."

Myra felt that his remark was worded very discreetly in order that she might understand, though not too harshly or emphatically, that she had said something stupid. She was grateful to him for his considerateness, for it hurt her dreadfully to be corrected by anyone.

"At any rate, I will make every effort to know her

better," she said with a hearty determination. "I believe that there is much to be learned from her, and there is nothing I need more in this world than to learn."

"It is already a great deal simply to know that," said Eccarius with a smile. "Most young people of twenty think they know enough. If you always pick your instructresses with as sure an instinct, you can't go far wrong."

"I hope so." Myra knitted her brows. Fear again cast its shadow on her like a cloud, fear of making a misstep, of becoming bewildered, of straying into treacherous morasses, of walking into an abyss—courting disaster in some form or other.

"In any case, I won't have to suffer any long-drawn death," she thought, "when my shattered limbs are lying at the bottom of the abyss. Then there will be nothing left for me but Olga's bequest—my friend, the revolver!"

XII

For the third time during one of her walks, Myra suddenly found herself, on that corner in the suburbs, on which stood Sophie's little house. But this time she did not turn quickly in the opposite direction. Instead, she walked down a street flooded with late autumn sunlight, quite bathed in whiteness except for the thin tremulous shadows cast by the delicate plumage of the young mountain-ashes.

Myra no longer remembered the number, but it would not be difficult to discover the house. It must be the third to the right. Yes, the garden-gate bore a rather striking name-plate, and above the arbor the little pennant was hanging limply in the motionless air.

Myra's heart beat somewhat faster as she opened the little grille-gate. She was as embarrassed as she had been as a child when she had to go to strange houses and knock on strange doors. If she walked right into the garden they would stare at her in some surprise. No one would remember her name, no one would recall her face, they would ask her what right she had to force her way in here. Oh, she would create a very painful situation for herself and others.

It would certainly be better to climb the short flight of steps to the front entrance and give one's card to the maid. Then they could bundle her off with a polite remark if they no longer remembered her. Hesitantly, she retraced a few steps.

But they must already have seen her, or heard the crunching of the gravel—a blonde head appeared behind the house.

“Ah, Miss Rudloff!” Little John literally sprang forward to meet her. And for the first few moments she forgot all that she had heard about him, all that she had thought about him, and was captivated by his boyish charm, by the lightness of his movements which were like a dancer’s.

“How nice of you to come! No, no, right this way, there’s no need to go through the house. We’ve spoken of you frequently, wondering where you were. Nora will be frightfully glad to see you. Sophus still has something to do, but she’ll be down any moment.”

He led her past a green wall where the first plump beans were hanging between countless red and white flowers. In the narrow beds phlox and asters were a riot of dazzling colors. They were surrounded by a golden-green border of fragrant mignonette. In the big hexagonal arbor a cozy tea-table was spread.

Myra also experienced a slight unconfessed fear of meeting Nora again. Now she was almost gratefully surprised by her beauty and by the commanding nobility of her movements. Nora was so accustomed to her ailment that it never even occurred to her to make an attempt to rise only to have to sink back helpless and pitiable in her chair. She sat a little stiffly and very regally, extending her hand to Myra with a winning smile.

Beside her sat Ulrich Zeeden, who in his haste to spring up and come out from behind the table imperilled the tea service, which caused both John and Myra to clutch frantically at it. The result was a merry confusion which got them over the first few moments of what might have been painful formality, and the conversation became general and lively.

In a few moments Sophie, too, emerged from the house with a long, quick stride. She greeted Myra very cordially, demanding a cup of tea “right away.” She

insisted on drinking it standing, only to let them force her into a chair where she chatted for a quarter of an hour, declaring anxiously every two minutes, “Oh, children, the light is forsaking me, I must get back to work!”

When she finally dashed off, she turned at the house and called back, “If you’ll just wait there until I’m through, I’ll have another hour of joy tonight. I’ve worked so hard today.”

“You forgot to add, ‘at my mournful occupation,’” John laughed after her.

“Yes, at my mournful occupation,” she called from the door.

“Why mournful occupation?” asked Myra, puzzled.

“She always says that she’s next in line after the undertaker and the funeral parlor,” John explained. “She makes gravestones.”

“Oh, that really is mournful,” said Myra, endeavoring to assume a slight smile so that they would not think her exaggeratedly sentimental. The words “grave” and “death” were always a stab of pain to her.

“One accustoms one’s self to death,” said Nora gravely, “as to everything else. And that is well. One becomes a little brutal—which is a very good thing for us hypersensitives. We come to feel as much at home among urns and sorrowing angels, as a coffin manufacturer at the sight of a coffin, or a physician at the sight of a wound. When one has as much to do with death as Sophie, and through her I, death loses all its horror, and one comes to see the humor in tragic situations. Ask Sophie, she will tell you some stories of her profession.”

* * *

Nora took her needle-work from a little basket beside her, and asked John to call the maid to clear the table. John begged like a child to be allowed to do it himself, and skilfully and carefully removed all the dishes. When he

returned, he sat silent for a long while, his longing eyes fastened on Nora's flying fingers.

At last, he could restrain his childish desire no longer, and he stretched out his hands. "Oh, please, please, let me stitch a little, too!"

With a smile Nora handed him the sewing and searched her basket for some crocheting with which to keep her own hands busy.

"Gracious," cried Myra, "that wonderful hemstitching! Aren't you afraid?"

"Oh, no," Nora assured her, "John can sew quite as well as I."

"I can, can't I," said John, a blush of pride mantling his cheeks. "I should have been an expert embroiderer or a miniature painter. I have an inexhaustible patience for such things. Otherwise, I have no patience at all."

He bent his head over his work so that his wavy blonde hair fell over his face. His slender, almost too well manicured hands moved with charm and precision, setting stitch beside stitch.

It was an astonishing scene. Involuntarily the thought flashed through Myra's mind, "Thank God, he's not my son. If he were, I think I'd tear that embroidery from his hands and slap his ears with it. And yet—he looks like a painted angel or a saint."

* * *

John had to go before Sophie returned. He waited for her until the last moment, then said a hasty, but cordial, good-bye, and leaving many greetings for Sophie, dashed off.

Ulrich Zeeden gazed after him, shaking his head.

"A strange little fellow," he said.

"A heart of gold," added Nora with a slight note of defense in her tone. "We've grown so used to him here, we can hardly get along without him. He's really like a

loyal little page, always anxious to please and be kind—ah, much more than that, he's inexhaustibly good-hearted and self-sacrificing."

"Yes, there are some really fabulous rumors of his good-heartedness going the rounds." The corner of Ulrich Zeeden's mouth twitched a little contemptuously.

"There *are* many rumors circulating about him—unfortunately," Myra burst forth. She felt her cheeks burning with embarrassment, but she was determined, now she had spoken, to defend her cause courageously. "It looks so ugly, so gossipy, to discuss someone the moment he has turned his back. But because he's your friend and because I think he's very nice, it makes me angry when people say horrible things about him, and I have absolutely no right to tell them to hold their tongues or to punish them for their lies."

"Would you do that?" asked Ulrich Zeeden. "It would be very courageous and really friendly of you, but in most cases I'm afraid it wouldn't be very successful. For whatever horrible things may be said, they are certainly surpassed by the horrible things that are done in private, of which no one has any idea."

"Is that true?" Myra turned imploringly to Nora.

"Ah, my child," she said comfortingly, "it is much too complicated and bewildering for one to be able simply to say yes or no. But there's no reason to have such a desperate look in your eyes. Good and evil are so intertwined that one can never hope to disentangle them and balance one against the other.

"But I will tell you one thing, for I know very well what Myra means by horrible things, and you, too, Ulrich. You mean the affair with Drencker. People say and you know that it is true, Ulrich, and so do I, if I must be candid—that Drencker has bought the little fellow body and soul, so to speak; that he has furnished a charming apartment for him, that he supports him, 'provides' for him, as they

say. That Drencker does not do all this simply to rid himself of his millions in a good cause, all of us know. And that our good John has not attached himself to this, to put it mildly, decidedly unpleasant gentleman, like Alcibiades to Socrates, for the purpose of drinking wisdom from his lips, but merely for a pecuniary advantage, is also obvious.

"Nevertheless, when one looks a little deeper, one discovers something that atones for all these horrible facts. Ever since he was a child, little John has felt a great and unswerving love, or rather a kind of devout infatuation, for a school-fellow of his who possesses everything which he himself lacks—manliness, self-assurance, a somewhat brutal quality. This childhood devotion became an utterly unselfish, utterly idolatrous friendship. Now it happens, that the other boy possesses decided talent, which further compels John's admiration. Neither of them had any money. John had probably never thought of himself as worth very much—he sold himself, sold himself with open eyes and very dearly, too, in order to enable his friend to study, in order to be able to support him in this way."

"And Will Kraft allowed him to do that? You mean he acquiesced in such a thing?" asked Ulrich Zeeden sharply, drawing out his words.

Nora shrugged her shoulders slightly. "I did not mention any names." There was a trace of bitterness in her gentle voice.

"What has Will Kraft allowed? What has he acquiesced in?" Sophie's deep resonant voice suddenly rang out close beside them.

"We've been slandering your friend, Sophus." Nora smiled up at her. "You've come just in the nick of time to defend him."

"Defend him if you can," said Zeeden in a harsh, censorious tone. "Will Kraft has allowed a young,

immature and rather unstable young man, whose friend he is supposed to be, to sell himself to satisfy the unnatural lusts of a beast in human form, and has accepted the purchase price. To me that is about the lowest thing that anybody could do—just as I find a whore-master a good deal more contemptible than a whore."

"Indeed!" Sophie drew up a chair and sat down. "I've let you have your say, now you let me have mine. In the first place, instead of 'beast in human form,' you might say 'human in beast's form'—though that has only incidentally to do with 'my friend', Will Kraft. But I can muster a few points in his defense, too. Notably, that he has talent, not to say genius, and that talent always and under all circumstances has the right to achieve its object. Because work alone is of value, not life. Least of all the moral life of the individual."

"That is a matter of opinion," interrupted Zeeden, "nevertheless, continue!"

"But even if he were without talent, if he could create no work of any value, whom is he injuring? The possibility is given him to work, as he imagines, and as I imagine, for human culture. He is happy. Still happier is old Drencker, who finds himself at the goal of all his desires, having at last escaped the danger of blackmailers and extortioners, and even robbers and murderers, whose life is no longer embittered by the fear of prison, and who for the first time is beginning to feel the blessedness of those millions that all his life long have been only a curse to him.

"But the happiest of all is undoubtedly our little John. He is desired, pampered, idolized. He sees his beauty, which incidentally he knows very well how to prize, in the right setting. He spends half the day seated before his three-leaf mirror, admiring himself, and coddling himself with salves and powders and hair tonics. Do you mean to

tell me he is doing all that for Will Kraft's sake? Don't imagine it! He would do exactly the same thing without Will Kraft! No, not exactly the same, for he certainly has a better side, a tendency to idealism. He would do it remorsefully without Will, and be disgusted at himself. But since he can expend a portion of the sums which are earned by him (for a person of his nature really without effort) on someone whom he adores, he can view himself in quite a transfiguring light. He can do just what he pleases and be a martyr and a saint into the bargain!"

Zeeden moved his hands as if he were clapping an inaudible applause. "A beautiful speech, dear Sophus! Hearing your explanation, makes it bearable. But there's a flaw in it somewhere. I don't know just where. Perhaps it's in defective Christianity again. But I think Nora is shivering, it's time that we went into the house. The evenings are already quite cool."

Myra rose. "Yes, and it's high time that I went home, too. I intended to stay for a few moments and I sit here hours and hours."

"Bosh!" said Sophie, remaining quietly seated, and staring up at her almost as if surprised. "That sounds like a *façon de parler*. Why do you want to go? Have you something better in mind? Or did somebody once tell you that a first visit should never last more than twenty minutes?"

"Yes, somebody did tell me that!" laughed Myra. "I think those are the very words my Aunt Emily said to me."

"And do you mean to say that you have the damnable intention of carrying out all your Aunt Emily's precepts? I thought not, well, don't try them on us! Whatever aunts tell you, you should *eo ipso* do the reverse! So you'll stay and eat with us. The only excuse is the well-known 'something better to do.'"

"There's nothing that I'd like to do better in all the

world."

"Poor child—well, there will be."

Sophie rose and drew herself up energetically. "I can feel my muscles today! Come, Norina, let's make things bright and comfortable inside. It's already decided that you'll remain, Uli."

Zeeden bowed in silence.

With one powerful push, Sophie moved the table aside to clear the way for Nora. With a sudden resoluteness which she herself could not explain, Myra pressed close to the invalid.

"May I help?" She thought they must hear the throbbing of her heart in her voice.

"Oh, thank you so much—I will be too heavy for you."

"Not at all, I am very strong. And if one does not need any particular practice, believe me, it would gratify my ambitions! I could feel that there's something in this world for which I am useful."

"That is an unanswerable argument," said Sophie. "Will you call Martha, then, Ulrich? Or will you be good enough to carry the chair yourself?"

Zeeden had already picked up the chair.

"Really, why don't you have a wheel-chair?" he asked.

"Are you going to ask me that, too?" Sophie flung angrily over her shoulder. "Because this lady must walk! And she can do it very well, too. She has the soundest pair of legs in the world. But she's too vain. If she weren't, she could walk for miles."

The pressure of the invalid's arm did not weigh unbearably on Myra's supporting hands. And the feeling that she was helping overcame her horror to such an extent that even pity disappeared. This gentle woman's desperation over her ruined hampered body had long ago been dispelled, so that her life now knew only its good and bad moments like every one's else. With more good and less bad, perhaps, for her illness shielded her from

the fiercest attacks of base natures; she almost never left the house, in which she was treated as a queen, while no one who was not filled with the friendliest of feelings, ever came to see her.

* * *

As they were sitting together after the meal, over a cup of tea and cigarettes, Gisela suddenly appeared. Myra could not decide just what she felt when she first saw her. She was glad that Gisela had come. At the same time she was disturbed at the idea of being jolted out of her comfortable repose even by a pleasure.

For the first time Myra endeavored to isolate the cause of that disturbing quality which everyone felt in the presence of Gisela. She was not noisy, not even particularly talkative. She would sit without ever stirring from her place, staring in front of her. And yet it seemed as if the atmosphere around her vibrated.

Myra felt this vibration in every nerve, felt her quiet repose being more and more encroached upon by this burning, prickling, disquieting sensation.

It began to seem to her as if the smiling resignation on Nora's face were merely a mask behind which the cruelest despair was at work.

It seemed to her as if Sophie bore up in vain, with the strength and repose of a caryatid, against the intolerable burden.

It seemed to her as if Ulrich Zeeden's deliberate manner cloaked a ceaseless torturing struggle.

It seemed to her as if Gisela were as consumed by pain and sorrow as a house in which the flames are raging, and whose blackened walls threaten at every moment to crash into complete ruin.

And it seemed to her as if she, Myra, were the most unfortunate of all these unfortunate creatures since Olga was dead and she was left alone in the world. In a world,

too, filled with strange, menacing, pain-bringing, terrifying things.

Suddenly she wanted to go home because it seemed to her as if her hostesses were struggling against their weariness out of a sense of politeness.

Zeeden and Gisela left with her and they walked without speaking for some time. Zeeden broke the long silence to address himself to Myra, and to Myra only, “May I take you home, Miss Rudloff?”

“Thank you very much,” said Myra, “but only provided you live in that neighborhood. I am not at all afraid of going by myself.”

Gisela leaned forward in order to speak past Myra. “Don’t put yourself out in the slightest, Herr Zeeden. And it would put you out a great deal if you had to go into the city again and then return to your lodgings. I will take Miss Rudloff home. Besides we’re going the same way.”

Myra hesitated a moment, wondering whether she ought to protest this arrangement. It displeased her to have Zeeden think she had declined his escort in order to be alone with Gisela. But if she asked him to go with her now, Gisela would be offended. She said nothing, telling herself with a quiet defiance that people’s opinions were and must be indifferent to her.

Zeeden took leave of them at the next corner, though somewhat more stiffly and formally than usual.

“Do you like him?” asked Gisela when he was scarcely out of hearing.

“I hardly know him.” Myra shrugged her shoulders.

“He certainly likes you.”

“Why?” Myra laughed between her teeth.

“Why? He likes all the women I like. That’s why he can’t bear me,” she added quickly, almost hurriedly. “That is to say, he’s unlucky with all women, and has never been able to free himself from one dreadful specimen.”

"How is it possible for him not to free himself from a dreadful woman if he feels in himself the capacity for loving others?"

"You ask me?" Gisela shrugged her shoulders noncommittally. "They say that she used to beat him till he bled and that he can't live without that! But he may have some other mania which she pampered, too. After all, what does bind people together? The fact that one of them knows the other's concealed manias, and fattens them and coaxes them forth and fondles them and trains them to turn against their former master like a mad dog."

"And you mean to say that that is the crux of all human relation?" asked Myra sadly, much perturbed. "What kind of eyes do you see life with?"

"With unclouded eyes," said Gisela and laughed bitterly.

"And Sophie?" asked Myra, "and Nora?"

"Sophie's mania is called Nora. And she is the happiest person I know because she can concentrate completely on her mania. As for Nora? What goes on in her mind, nobody knows. I don't even know if she is happy or not."

"I don't know if she can be happy," said Myra dejectedly. "It must be dreadful always to have to take, never to give."

"She knows that she gives a great deal," Gisela contradicted. "Everything for Sophie! Sophie became a human being for the first time the day Nora went to live with her. She was lazy and idle and slovenly and lived on cigarettes, alcohol and cocaine. We tried time and again to shake her out of it—but it did no good."

"And Nora," asked Myra with bated breath, "was she sick then?"

"When she came here? Yes, of course—I think she had made an attempt on her life. She married a syphilitic and had a feeble-minded child, or something like that."

"World, world," thought Myra, "where can I fly from

you? I'd rather be dead and sleep in one of Sophie's beautiful, rose-garlanded urns! How can I, all by myself, ever stand all that makes up human destiny?"

They walked along in silence for a time, each plunged in his own thoughts.

"Do you know, Myra Rudloff, that I have a mania of my own?" Gisela asked suddenly; her voice was softer and more vibrant than usual.

Myra was frightened. She was afraid of confessions. "Good God," she thought, "here comes the morphine! What shall I say to her? I can't help her in any way."

Gisela did not wait for an answer. "My mania," she said, in a soft, hovering tone, without glancing at Myra, without turning her head in her direction, "is to love beautiful, pure, regal women—always those who are above me, those who are too good for me, who in my own opinion are too good for me. Women like you, Myra Rudloff!"

They had reached the house and stopped. Myra was racking her brain in torment for a reply. She could think of none. She gave her hand to Gisela, shyly, and said, "I thank you."

The corner of Gisela's mouth twitched in a hurt, ironic smile. "What for?"

"For bringing me home—and for everything, for what you have just said, too."

Myra's heart was throbbing as if it would burst, but only from a kind of embarrassment. She would have been glad to retract her words. Perhaps it would have been more tactful if she had pretended not to hear or not to understand.

Gisela turned her head away with an impulsive, rather irritated movement. The light from the street lamp fell on her face; it looked wretched, sorrowful, almost decayed.

"Perhaps it would make her happy if I kissed her," thought Myra. "It is sad enough, but it can't hurt

anybody."

She bent forward with a slight, embarrassed smile and laid her lips against Gisela's. She felt Gisela's lips burn like a flame, open like a flower; sharp teeth ground against hers and were pressed into her lips. A small hand clasped her neck, twisted itself into her hair, would not release her.

When Myra drew herself up again, she was somewhat dizzy.

"I don't love her," she thought sadly, "probably she loves me, and I don't love her."

"Good night," she said, laying her hand tenderly and discreetly against Gisela's cheek for a moment. It was as if she were speaking to a little child. "Sleep tight."

* * *

Myra intended to lie down on her divan.

Though it was still early in the afternoon, she had lighted the lamp and drawn the curtains in order not to have to see how the endless autumnal rain poured down the gray walls of the buildings opposite.

She had heaped up cushions and covers on the divan, moved a chair within reach on which was a pile of books. The afternoon would be long and she wished to have no cause to get up again. Neither did she want to drown herself hour after hour in one book. So she had collected a half dozen books with the pleasurable foretaste of a gourmand preparing himself for an exceptional repast.

On the little glass-topped table at the head of the divan, she set cigarettes, chocolate and a vase with a few pale pink, pungent carnations that she had bought in town.

But no sooner had she lain down, drawn a light cover over her feet, and reached for the topmost book when there came a knock on the door.

"Why didn't I lock the door," she thought for a moment

in vexation. “If I had, I would certainly never move. Whoever is there could rattle it as much as he likes.”

But when in response to her “Come in!” Gisela opened the door, she was really glad.

“Oh, how nice it is here!” cried Gisela before she had even said good day. “No, for Heaven’s sake, don’t jump up from there, or I’ll run right off again. You’ve made yourself so nice and cozy, don’t let me get you up. I was going to see Mara Luigi, but she isn’t home, and I wanted to have a look at your room. Heavens, how spick and span we are—my room never looks like this even on high holidays.”

“If you don’t want me to get up,” said Myra with a smile—she was resting on one elbow, the cover in her other hand, still in the act of springing up—“you’ll have to come here. Otherwise I’ll have to put on the light and settle you solemnly in an easy-chair.”

“No, no, I’m coming.” Gisela ran to the divan, pressed Myra back against the cushions and drew the cover up about her chin.

“Do you want to go to sleep, my love? Shall I sing you to sleep and then steal out on tiptoe? Sleep, little baby, sleep!” She knelt on one knee on the divan, clasped Myra about her shoulders and rocked her to and fro.

Myra experienced a slight and not at all unpleasant dizzying sensation.

“Don’t,” she said with her eyes closed, “I’m getting dizzy.”

She felt the rocking movement stop, and at the same time a gentle breath, and soft lips brush very lightly, very tenderly, over her forehead, her cheeks, her eyelids.

It was pleasant, but she resisted this pleasant sensation.

“I don’t love her,” she thought obstinately. “I did not desire her lips—this is the way an animal must feel when it is stroked.”

The soft lips ceased to brush her face and Gisela

crouched down on the divan. Quite irrelevantly she pointed to the flowers. “Who sent you the lovely carnations?” she asked.

Myra turned her head to follow Gisela’s gesture with her eyes.

“I did,” she smiled.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? I bought them myself this morning.”

“That’s strange!” Gisela shook her head. “Are you expecting a visitor?”

“No, why?”

“Because that would be the only reason I’d ever buy flowers for my room.”

“In fact, I bought them because I expected to be alone.”

“It’s very nice of you not to say ‘because I hoped....’”

Myra smiled. “Well then, because I feared I would be alone.”

“That’s just a polite lie,” said Gisela. “Anyhow, I’m thankful that I’m at least worth a lie to you. For I think you don’t lie very often.”

“I don’t know.” Myra reflected seriously. “I think that I lied a good deal as a child, at least as long as I was in the hands of my mentors. But it was cheerless and unimaginative living. I never had much talent at thinking up interesting tales. It was more a kind of denying, very persistent and obstinate.”

“Lying and denying—there are worlds between. You are quite right. But when a child denies, everybody says, it’s lying, or it’s deceiving. And all the while it’s probably just ashamed, or stubborn, or bewildered. I was treated so terribly when I was a child. Why don’t you have children? You’d certainly make a fine, understanding mother.”

“I’ve never thought about it.” Myra shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve always imagined that every mother is good and understanding. But that may very well be

because I never knew my own mother."

Gisela laughed bitterly. "I wish I'd never known mine either!"

Myra was shocked and seized Gisela's hand. "It sounds dreadful when you talk that way! Was she so bad?"

"Bad? Oh, no, not just bad." There was a note of forced lightness in her voice. "She was a worthy, efficient, excellent woman. Too worthy and efficient for my father. He left her and two years later hanged himself. And since I resembled him (naturally I couldn't do anything about it; after all, she chose him for a husband, I didn't choose him for a father)—but because I resembled my father's family, my mother felt that I was hereditarily tainted in advance. You know, there are people—and my mother was one of them—who are so moral that they sniff immorality everywhere. We had to sleep with our hands outside the quilt, and if we forgot in our sleep, and my mother came in to check up, she'd tear the covers off the bed. I swear, I never once knew why she did it."

Myra did not know either, but she did not ask, because she was ashamed to confess her ignorance, and furthermore she suspected that an explanation might be painful.

"That was the beginning." Gisela sprang up and began to pace restlessly to and fro, with noiseless steps, on the thick carpet. "And it went on that way. At fourteen I had my first rendezvous. It was with a boy from dancing-school, a little fellow who was, if possible, more innocent and idealistic than myself. When this transgression came to light, I was subjected to a terrifying inquisition. Had we kissed, did we put our arms around one another, and when and where and how. These possibilities were first brought to my attention in this way....

"The same thing at school. Near the school there was a stationery store where we used to buy our copy-books. The man had picture post-cards in his window—among

others a nude woman, the reproduction of some masterpiece or other. A terrible case was made out of that post-card. Investigation finally brought out which of the girls had stood in front of the shop-window. Parents and pupils together descended on the shop-keeper and forced him to remove all offensive pictures from his window. It became a real sport with us to buy pictures of nudes—during the Bible reading they circulated under the desks with inscriptions and observations. The contagion spread to the whole class, but they had first been inoculated with the virus, and at considerable pains, too.

"In a few among us, perhaps in many, there may have been a painfully repressed, immature sensuality. But children are by no means as shameless as adults—they are much more afraid of being shocked. But the general discussion of the 'immoral picture' removed all obstacles. Now everybody talked to everybody else about 'it.'

"I resisted. I didn't want to have anything to do with it. It may be that I resisted out of timidity, because I felt that this thing, which was just a joke to the rest of the children, might become fate to me. Do you know how children act in such cases? Oh, so cruelly, so lustfully, so sadistically! Because I resisted, I was pursued, the whole class was in a conspiracy against me. I had to see what I didn't want to see, hear what I didn't want to hear, do what I didn't want to do. I was driven to a pass from which I never again escaped."

She folded her hands and wrung her fingers so that the bones cracked as if the thin wrists were going to snap.

"No, how can anybody buy herself flowers like that?" she said suddenly, standing before the carnations. "Why do you do it? Were you thinking of somebody to whom you wanted to give them? But didn't—perhaps, well, because you happened to be put out with one another just then?"

"I have no one in the world to whom I might give

flowers," said Myra bitterly, "unless it is a grave, and that's too far away."

She did not know herself how she came to say it. She blushed violently at the thought that she was opening her heart, an error which she forgave in others with a certain condescending indulgence, but which she hated so intensely that she would be upset for weeks if she caught herself at it.

But perhaps it was not even a need to open her heart. Perhaps it was worse. Perhaps it was the desire—though still quite unconscious—to drape herself with this holy, destructive sorrow, to endow herself with a new mystical charm in the eyes of this ... this....

It seemed as if Gisela divined the feeling. She had started as if she meant to throw herself upon Myra, to overwhelm her with sympathy and comfort and affection —but checked herself and sat hunched over on the end of the divan, her head bowed, her hands folded.

"Promise me one thing," she said softly with a quality in her voice as of joylessness which nothing could ever animate again. "When I am dead, put flowers on my grave. Not at my funeral and not a large bought wreath.

"I like to imagine how I'll receive visits, how I'll lie there and sleep. I love graveyards so—generally those that are a little run down. I don't want any well-groomed gaudy grave—but a gray stone, half sunk already and half overgrown with ivy. Then the beautiful woman in the white dress who stops before it will think of me for a moment, not with grief, but with a gentle melancholy, and will strew a handful of flowers over me. I'll feel them, oh, make no mistake, I'll feel them!"

Myra sat up and taking her by both shoulders, shook her.

"Child!" she said. "Are you asking *me* to do that? I'll hand on the commission to my grandchild! By the time that stone has sunken on your grave, my ashes will have

long been scattered by the wind."

"How long does it take a stone to sink?" asked Gisela in such a comically impatient and plaintive tone that Myra laughed aloud.

"But you're not dead and buried yet," she said consolingly.

"Unfortunately," Gisela said in a lifeless voice but with suddenly flashing eyes. There was bitterness in the words.

Again Myra felt a slight aversion. "She has no right to say that," she thought. "She certainly can't have suffered so terribly.... But then, who can estimate what gives another the right to desperation? Perhaps it is much harder to struggle against one's self than against fate."

Her objection melted and she felt only a warm but helpless pity. With timid hands she began to stroke the soft, tangled, dark hair from the white forehead before her. Those burning eyes were shut, while on that narrow face appeared the expression of quiet, yearning bliss.

As Gisela sat motionless, without breathing, as if her pulse had stopped in her veins, Myra experienced a weird sensation.

"Open your eyes," she commanded in a frightened voice. "I suppose it's this devilish violet light, but you look like a marble death mask."

The long lids opened heavily. The wide-open eyes were a lightless deep abyss to which life and vision returned gradually.

"Believe me, little Myra," she said with her soft ailing child's voice, "I will soon be dead."

"What do the words 'be dead' mean to you?" asked Myra timidly.

"A deep, cool, undisturbed repose." She closed her eyes, and immediately her face resembled a marble mask again.

"Eternal rest. Even in my childhood the words were like a melody, a sweet mysterious seductive song. I heard

it the first time when I was quite small and had no ideas about it. It was a characteristic expression of my mother. This or that person had gone to his eternal rest. And it has never forsaken me, I have always longed to go to my eternal rest."

In her high voice was a sustained disembodied tone.

There was a sparkle and glitter under those dark eyelashes that were like shadows on her face, and several pearly drops trickled down.

Myra kept both her hands clasped around Gisela's blue-veined temples.

"No," she said, without herself knowing what that "no" might mean. "No, no, no!"

The lids were raised like a curtain, and the tear-filled eyes in which the light was refracted, seemed larger and more burning than ever.

"No," said Gisela. "No, no, no! Still no eternal rest, little Myra, sweet, beautiful little Myra! Life streams from your finger-tips, life flowers from your lips, life gleams from your eyes. I feel as if I were already dead, and you were saying to me: 'Arise and walk!' Oh, how hard it must be to rise up and leave a cool and narrow coffin because it pleases some miracle-maker!

"I am dead, little Myra, I have died of a mortal sickness that is called Fiametta. If you would bewitch the dead, little sorceress, you must nourish them with your own blood, but that you know. If I am to live, I must imbibe your blood."

The slender hands fastened like talons in Myra's shoulder, forcing her back on the cushions. Supine above her, lay Gisela's light muscular body, close to her own hovered Gisela's white face with the burning eyes.

Fear, horror, aversion, pity, tenderness and the infatuating throb of her own and another's blood, whirled in a mad maelstrom that engulfed all thought in its brightly foaming depths.

XIII

Myra was glad to get out on the street. The keen east wind and the rain mixed with hail cut her face and felt good to her. She walked so fast that Gisela found it too difficult to keep up.

She felt as if she were being grievously insulted on all sides, and as if she might avenge herself by letting the rain lash her as she hurried through the cold dark night.

* * *

Myra and Eccarius walked down a street that echoed with the cold and was feathered with a fine frost.

“Did you wonder,” asked Eccarius, “why I spoke so ostentatiously about my friends at the table? It was because I have had a little dispute with Miss Peters. Miss Peters is really a splendid person, but somewhat strict in her judgments. Or I should rather say, is somewhat limited in her understanding of things. What she doesn’t understand she tosses all together into one pot and damns eternally. And among such understandable things, of course, is included a friendship like that of Sophie and Nora. She flung about words like abnormal and perverse and unnatural, and intimated that it was no place for you!”

“For me?” Myra was astonished. “How on earth did you come to be talking of me?”

“To be quite frank, we began with you,” Eccarius explained with a laugh that pleaded for forgiveness. “Yes, yes, one never knows how important one is to others or what interesting conversation one makes. Seriously, we

never know who our enemies are or who is going to pick us to pieces next. Conversely, we don't know our friends either or who is looking out for our weal and woe.

"Miss Peters has a heart of gold and she is concerned about you. She was explaining to me today that it is my duty to open your eyes for you. But if I were to open your eyes about Sophie and Nora, with the best will in the world I could only tell you that they are splendid people."

"Nora told me recently that she had known you a long time," said Myra with a gently insistent effort to turn the conversation from herself.

"A very long time." She sighed with relief as Eccarius changed the subject. "I knew her when she was still the beautiful Nora Zeyern, the most popular of dancers, the most daring of riders! She had hundreds of suitors, and, out of those hundreds, of course, she had to pick Hersfeld!"

He stopped for a moment with a bitter laugh.

"He was diseased, wasn't he?" asked Myra.

"Oh, if you know that much, there's no indiscretion in my telling you more. He was 'cured' so-called, as he used proudly to relate to anyone who wanted or did not want to listen to him. But not to his wife and her family."

"Hersfeld was an oldest son and he wanted an heir. And an heir did arrive, but it was covered with pimples from the day it was born. What that most maternal of women suffered with that child can never be told. And all of us, his so-called friends, we looked at the child and looked at one another and knew that it would never be anything else but a child. But not one of us dared say a word to the young mother. Meanwhile she hoped and hoped and cherished the unhappy little worm, rejoicing at the tiniest sign of progress. There wasn't much progress to rejoice at.

"At an age when other children were running around,

shouting and crowing, he would lie on his pillow, hardly turning his head when someone shook something bright before his eyes. ‘He’ll be a thinker,’ Nora said then, and smiled, a heart-rending smile. But when at four years he could not speak a word, and would merely utter an incoherent babble, she hid him and hid herself from the world. She never left her own house, she received no one. She shut herself and her child in the most impenetrable solitude. She still cherished him, played with him, strove tirelessly and futilely to make something human out of him.

“But Mr. Hersfeld needed an heir. In another six months, the unhappy woman was once more in hope—Oh, God, she really did hope.

“At this point a friendly doctor took the matter in hand. That is to say, he let fall a careless, but honestly indignant word about the irresponsibility of bringing babies into the world. And when she questioned him and would not let him go, he asked in great astonishment if she really did not know what was wrong with her child. And since she did not, he told her. Certainly he was entirely within his rights in doing so. But he reproached himself bitterly afterwards. For that very day Nora was hurt by a fall from a hay-loft, and suffered such severe internal injuries that she was never well again. Whereupon Hersfeld procured a divorce!”

“Is he still alive?” asked Myra.

“Why? You made a face when you asked me that as though you intended to kill him if he were. But you can rest easy—he is dead. He came to quite a dramatic end, or rather, his end had quite a dramatic beginning. Imagine, that man intended to marry a second time after he divorced Nora! A beautiful innocent young girl from one of the best families. You have no idea what qualms of conscience Nora suffered at that time. She knew the bride, she knew her parents, and she knew particularly

Hersfeld, her former husband. But despite the fact that she knew him so well, she must still have loved him. Somewhere in the innermost recesses of her heart were still the ruins of a strong passion. And it seemed a crime to her to accuse the man. Besides, everybody would have called it an act of petty revenge. On the other hand, it would be a far greater crime to let the poor girl make such a marriage out of ignorance."

"Good God!" said Myra, "did she do it?"

"Nora was so helpless, she could scarcely move, and the situation was further complicated by the fact that the girl had already been in love with Hersfeld while he was married, and regarded his wife, if not hostilely, at least with suspicion. Nora has often told me that in her desperate dilemma she used to pray for a miracle.

"And the miracle happened. The wedding did not take place—the bridegroom did not appear. When they went to fetch him, he hid himself in the stable and began shooting with his revolver. At last he was overpowered and taken to an institution. He lived a few months longer subject to delusions of persecution and raving madness. Then he died. Softening of the brain. When the cause of his death became known, one of his former cronies observed that it was the first time anyone suspected Hersfeld of having a brain."

They walked on a while in silence, each wrapped in his own thoughts.

Then Eccarius looked up with sudden resolution. Once more his face was irradiated by that fugitive, friendly smile.

"But you have got me off my subject very insidiously. I've told you a long story, but not a word about what I was instructed to tell you. And not only instructed, what I want to tell you of my own free will...."

"Must you?" asked Myra with imploring eyes. "Do you really believe there is anything you can tell me? I know

that you mean well by me, and I am grateful to you for it. But I feel so strongly—perhaps because I am so young and have just come of age—that only I can help myself and that I must help myself. I know that I will not always find the best and the shortest way, and I haven't even any goal, or only insofar as it may be a goal to want to know life whole, as far as it is possible for a woman to do so, its light and its shadowy sides, its merits and demerits. Just as one gets to know a person—whom one loves!"

"If you love life," said Eccarius with an accommodating persistence, "you must approach it very discreetly. And if you have no goal, or only the desire to see as much as possible in the paths of your own selecting, then you should be careful not to end up in a blind alley from which there is no escape. Don't be angry with me, but I have been guilty of watching you on the quiet. I've seen you twice a day at least in the last two months. In the course of the years I have acquired some little knowledge of people, and the impression you make is not that of a person who loves life, but of one who is not afraid of death."

Myra was already ringing the door-bell, and she turned to him.

"Is that a contradiction? Can't one do both—love life and not be afraid of death? Perhaps they belong together. I will make it my motto and write it large over all my days and ways—'Love life and be not afraid of death.'"

"I know a still better motto," said Eccarius, "it is possible to turn the sentence about. Then I will make it my motto."

The maid opened the door. To Myra's questioning glance Eccarius shook his head slightly.

"Some other time."

* * *

They were sitting together in the early twilight of a

winter's day, Nora, Sophie, Eccarius and Myra. It was already dark in the room so that it was no longer possible to distinguish the features of the person sitting next one. But nobody wanted the light.

Myra had asked after John. And Sophie told her with anger and perturbation that he was the victim of some very hateful gossip. Someone had informed his friend, the fat old Drencker, in a very ugly way, that his money was making it possible for young Kraft to pursue his studies, or rather that Will Kraft was squandering his, Drencker's, money at cards and on women.

Nora had defended John. Even though she saw him in no very transfiguring light, and his relationship with Drencker was always incomprehensible and painful to her, she had never ceased to believe that his friendship for Will Kraft was an entirely ideal infatuation.

"And suppose it weren't!" said Sophie stubbornly. "Whenever a human bargain is struck the buyer is to blame. The person who sells himself is always in extremity. And it is bad enough that it is possible for a rich swine like him to buy a share in a human creature. His demand to have him wholly and solely to himself is insolence!"

"Every transaction must be honest!" said Eccarius in his gentle, reflective way.

"No," Sophie became excited. "Whoever buys a human being with his filthy money for the gratification of his base little lusts ought to be deceived. There *ought* to be things that cannot be bought, that really cannot be bought, whether it's love of honor or fame or talent or nobility—the buyer is always the first on the scene, thumping his money-bags and commanding, 'I want that, do this for me, I can pay.' It is not until then that the commodity appears. Do you suppose that the idea would ever enter the head of a poor musician to offer his songs, the most precious things he possesses, to a rich money-

grubber so that they may appear under the latter's name? No, that idea could flower only in the mind of a rich money-grubber.

"I know many such cases—from the most innocent beginnings when the well-fed son of a middle class father has his poor, but talented school-mate compose his love letters for him for a handful of cigarettes—to those first nights at the opera when a gentleman takes his bows as the composer who has never written a line of music, and couldn't write one. Ah, the world is a rather disgusting place! One can only be happy by having as little to do with it as possible. We sit here on our island, eh, Norina? And many as are the ships that touch here, they all voyage on again. No one may settle on our domain. For the rest, all I have to say is, that Drencker should be happy that his fate is not that of the poor fellow who shot himself a week ago because a gang of extortioners were slowly throttling him, and the unhappy man preferred to be dead than always living in the shadow of the jail."

Eccarius shook his head. "To think that this medieval punishment still exists!"

"But there must be some protection for children and people not yet of age," Nora declared, "even when those minors happen to be over twenty-one. There is a very true saying that where there is no accuser, there is no judge. When two mature people live with one another, it is no more the concern of any official body than is the private life of a married couple. Unfortunately, I must say, in most cases. Where there is punishment, there must first have been accusation, and where someone accuses, he must first feel that he has suffered an injustice."

"Paragraph one hundred and sixty-five is a cloak for scoundrels and extortioners," Eccarius objected more vehemently than was his wont, "and no protection at all for children of whatever age. Children endure in silence and make no accusations. When a case does come to

light, then the world cries out in indignation. But there are thousands of cases of such crimes committed against children which never see the light of day."

"That can't be possible," said Sophie, her voice vibrant with emotion. "In the whole world there cannot be a thousand monsters to whom a child is not something sacred."

Eccarius laughed, a harsh, lifeless laugh.

"I will describe to you one case, one out of thousands. One case out of the thousands where the criminal goes unapprehended. I knew a family, a well-to-do and respected family, clever, kindly parents, who had four healthy, talented children—boys. The mother could not take care of the needs of four growing boys unassisted, besides it would not have been the proper thing to do, so they hired a maid for the lads. A half-educated person, as is customary, with an agreeable exterior, good references and all possible recommendations. This maid delighted in nothing more than to inform the boys of matters against which they had been carefully guarded. The unhappy children were thus completely under her thumb. They knew that they were doing forbidden things. They were tangled up in the terrible concept of 'sin' and prayed to God for succor. The infamous woman had an inexhaustible imagination and constantly invented new devices to whip up the resisting and jaded children. They became more and more miserable. Everything possible was done for them, they were sent to expensive baths—accompanied, of course, by their maid. From time to time, one of the boys would resolve to confess everything to his mother—but he got no farther than the resolve. Such things were too frightful to confess to the gentlest of mothers. Perhaps you can imagine what kind of 'childhood' such children enjoyed. Exhausted in body and soul, disinclined to play or work, in spite of their talents hardly able to pass through school, living in everlasting

fear of discovery, of punishment, of sickness, of Hell—and never able to withstand their vices, slinking more and more like shadows through the days, living only in the perilous practices of the night.

"When the maid left to continue her work in another family, it was too late. Not one of the four recovered. One shot himself the night after his marriage. The second remained an unhappy monomaniac and after a complete nervous break-down had to be taken to a sanitarium. The two youngest turned their backs on everything that suggested Eros. One, an ascetic, took refuge in a monastery. The other dragged his way through a drab and joyless world, shrinking from all human companionship. The woman is probably an esteemed children's maid to this very day, under whose prudent care more charges are being ruined."

Nobody said anything. The darkness had slowly filled the whole room, leaving the windows hardly more than pale gray oblongs.

"Oh," said Sophie. Myra seemed to hear her voice trembling with angry tears, and seemed to feel her clench her fist. "She ought to be hanged!"

"Then you'd have to hang a great many people," said Eccarius quietly.

Again the heavy silence weighed on them.

There was a knock, somebody opened the door. A ray of light stabbed the darkness, a voice tore the silence.

"Here is the newspaper," said the maid, stopping in surprise at the door. "Shall I turn on the lights, madame?"

"Yes, do, Martha."

The light was like a trumpet blast. They all bowed their heads to escape its glare, knitting their brows and blinking their eyes.

None of them had the courage to look at the others. Sophie took the paper from the maid and began to read

aloud, the most indifferent things in the world, things that could interest nobody. But all of them feigned interest, and everybody had something to say, so that a lively conversation ensued, made up entirely of trifling remarks.

Eccarius left before the conversation had died down again.

They continued to speak of various things after he was gone. But they seemed no longer able to sustain an affectedly frivolous conversation. Sophie had a saving idea. She proposed a game of scat so that they could sit together for a little longer and have something to occupy their minds.

But suddenly, in the middle of the game, she let the hand holding her cards sink to the table.

“He has one brother in the insane asylum,” she said as if she had been thinking of nothing else all the while.

“I know,” said Nora just as seriously. “And another in a monastery.”

XIV

When Myra reached home she was met in the hall by one of the maids who said—as it seemed to Myra, with an ambiguous and lewd smile—“Miss Werkenthin is waiting for Miss Rudloff.”

Myra felt her heart palpitate, as it had so often of late. She walked more slowly, not wishing to reach the door of her room too soon. She felt that she must have a few moments’ reprieve. But she felt, too, as if the maid had stopped, and she thought that mocking, spying glance was stabbing her back, between the shoulder blades. So she walked quicker.

It was cold outside, cold on the stairs, cold in the hall.

She had been so happy at the idea of her warm, quiet room, of the mild light of the lamp, of an hour in the easy-chair with a good book in her hand. Now her beloved room was quite filled with a strange presence, a cloud of opium and stupefying perfume would assail her, and she would not enjoy a quiet quarter of an hour that night.

Once more she would lie awake half the night with all her nerves jumping, taking one sleeping-tablet after another to induce a few hours of dull unrefreshing slumber.

She was shaken by sudden anger.

“I want my room to myself!” she thought, gritting her teeth like a defiant child, and clenching her fists. “Every animal has its hole into which to creep! I want a room where I can be alone. I must be alone, I must have rest. I don’t want any stranger in my room!”

Exhausted and close to tears, she supported herself for

a moment against the wall. She was considering whether it would not be better to go out again, to take refuge in a coffee-house and read the papers. But she was tired and dreaded the cold dark street. Moreover, she would have to come home in the end, and up until midnight there would be someone constantly waiting for her in her room.

So she walked with sudden decision to her door. She decided to feign a headache. Ah, she would probably have one soon from anxiety and anger. She would simply go to bed, make compresses, and swallow powders, replying to all questions with a curt yes or no. Then, perhaps, she would presently be left alone.

As she opened her door, she felt for a moment as if she were dreaming or insane.

All the doors and drawers of her desk were open. White heaps stood up like little mountains. Her hasty glance took in letters, pictures, books, notebooks—everything in wild disorder.

Before the open drawers Gisela was kneeling in a shirt and black silk underwear, rummaging among Myra's linen.

The worst that one could do to Myra was to touch her unprotected things.

She sprang at Gisela, seizing her bare arm angrily.

"What are you doing here? What's in your mind?" she cried.

Gisela was not in the least frightened. "You come too soon," she said coldly, baring her teeth with a mocking twitch of her lips. "Yes, you come too soon. I know very well what I'm talking about. I mean not too late, too soon. If you had come five minutes later, all would have been over."

"What is the meaning of this?" Myra was becoming more and more enraged, rather than frightened, although the face that had been pushed close to hers for some

hundred seconds, was strange and weird. “What are you doing here? Why are you going through my things?”

“I’m looking for something,” said Gisela, sharply and contemptuously. “You can see for yourself that I’m looking for something. Is it any of your business? I really don’t think it *is* any of your business. I really don’t believe that anything,” she touched Myra’s breast several times with one finger, “goes on in there, in your heart. Or in my heart for you. I’m in the ground, deep in the ground.” With a gentle broken voice and a face distorted by sorrow, she sang, “In the cool ground.” Suddenly in a completely altered tone that was clear and almost businesslike, she said, “I’m looking for your revolver.”

Myra started to glance at the night-table, but with almost superhuman energy checked herself when she saw that Gisela’s eyes were glued to her face, watching every expression.

“What do you want with the revolver?” she asked very quietly. “It’s no plaything for you.”

“What do I want with the revolver?” said Gisela with a plaintive singing child’s voice. “To hold it against my temple, to pull the trigger, to die, to sleep. What a question! What do I want with the revolver? Ai, ai, what do people generally do with revolvers? Ai, ai....” She suddenly began to laugh. “Have you ever heard anybody say ‘Ai, ai,’ before in your life? It’s too stupid! Who can have invented the expression? Ai, ai! Ai, ai!” She began to laugh louder and louder. She laughed so much that the tears ran down her face. She shook her head so that wisps of hair fluttered about her forehead while she kept repeating, “Ai, ai! Ai, ai!”

Suddenly she got up and her slender elegantly shod foot kicked her clothes which were lying on the floor.

“You mustn’t be surprised that I got undressed,” she said, “I did it intentionally because I felt too warm. You’ll probably think it’s not right for me to undress in your

room. If so, I forthwith beg your pardon, ask your forgiveness." She said it very formally. "You'll think a lot of things are not right because you come from a higher sphere of society. In other words, you're just a spheroid!" Again she began to laugh hysterically. "I never did know what that was, but you're exactly what I imagined a spheroid looked like!" She tottered and supported herself with both hands against the commode; her eyes were half shut, her mouth was distorted with pain. "If anybody in all this world loved me, she would put me to bed now. Oh, if I could only lie down so that my brain would get back into place again. It has turned over. But that's the way it feels, exactly that way."

Myra caught her elbow and supported her.

"Come, I'll put you to bed." She made an effort to speak very gently. "Come, you poor child. You can lie down and be comfortable on the divan. Then your poor brain will get back into place again. You are tired and you must sleep. Then you'll be fresh and cheerful again in a few hours."

She took the slender, limp body by the shoulders, and guiding Gisela to the divan, laid her among the cushions and covered her with a blanket from the bed.

She sat beside Gisela, mechanically caressing her cold, and apparently lifeless hands until the girl's irregular breathing grew more quiet. Her limbs relaxed and her head sank deep among the pillows.

Myra sat for a while without moving, for she was afraid she would wake the sleeper. At any rate, it was quiet in her room now.

She looked at the clock. In half an hour Gisela was supposed to be at the cabaret. Myra cast a glance at the exhausted face with its worn features and open mouth. It was hardly possible to awaken the sleeper now and remind her of her obligations. Nor had Myra the slightest desire to do so.

She rose quietly to go to the telephone. She wanted at least to call up the cabaret and tell them that Gisela was sick. Perhaps she could save her a fine in that way. Moreover, the thought was unbearable to her middle-class sensibilities that people would be waiting there, becoming more and more excited from moment to moment, and not know what had happened.

At first she walked on tiptoe, glancing back cautiously like a criminal, toward the night-table, planning to remove the revolver. She wondered where she could put it. No place seemed safe enough. She decided to carry it on her person, and as she did not want it seen, she thrust it into her waist. It felt heavy and cold and gruesome hanging in her light shirt, and although she had tried the safety catch, she thought that at every step the slightest jolt would loosen it, jar the trigger, and drive a bullet through her breast. Defiantly, she told herself that nothing better could happen, controlling her fear in that fashion.

She waited a long time in the telephone booth before she gave her number because she thought she heard steps in the hall, or doors opening. She did not want anybody to overhear her conversation.

When she finally got her connection, she had to repeat three separate times the litany that Miss Werkenthin was ill and could not come.

“One moment, please, I’ll connect you with the office,” said the first, very courteous voice.

“Wait a minute, I’ll give you the manager,” said the second less affably.

“So,” said the third sharp voice, “so Miss Werkenthin is sick. Well, the doctor will decide that! He’ll be at her room in a quarter of an hour.”

“Miss Werkenthin is not at her room,” said Myra with a throbbing heart. “She is at my room.”

“And who are you anyway?”

“A friend of Miss Werkenthin.” No, not even if they had broken her on the rack would Myra have told him her name. “Miss Werkenthin was visiting me and she fainted.”

She heard the mocking intonation with which the voice repeated, “She went to a friend’s house and fainted!”

Another voice hoarse with rage, shouted into the mouthpiece, “She’s drunk, huh?”

Myra heard somebody being dragged away and pacified, and more rude muttering. “Morphine, coke and alcohol, one after the other!”

“Tell your friend,” this was the first sharp voice, and the contemptuous “your friend” was like a blow to Myra, “that while I can understand her preferring the pleasure of your company to an appearance on my stage, I can also assure her that it is no pleasure at all for me to pay her a high wage for nothing or less than nothing. Miss Werkenthin must come with a doctor’s certificate tomorrow or she will be dismissed.”

The receiver was hung up with a bang.

For a painful moment Myra considered phoning the doctor. Perhaps he could be moved to write a certificate.

But she would have to give her name and address. She would have to meet this strange man and take him into her room. She was boiling with indignation. How had she been precipitated into all this?

She returned to her room without making a sound. When she saw her things scattered on the floor, another wave of anger swept over her.

She did not want to go out. But neither did she like to see everything ransacked and thrown about in this fashion.

She turned a chair so that its back was to the desolation in the room and on the divan. She picked up a scientific work and endeavored to concentrate on it. On the divan, the regular breathing was so hoarse and harsh

that it seemed not to come from that delicate body. The disorder behind her signified disturbance too. It was as if the open drawers and doors were uttering a cry for help. And she seemed to have eyes in the back of her head which could see through the easy-chair to the pieces of paper and batiste which stood out white against the dark carpet.

The walking and talking ceased outside. It grew still in the room, still in the house.

The heat died down, the room became colder and colder.

The cold crept from the floor into Myra's legs. She drew up her feet on the chair, but that did not help for long.

Beside her on the floor lay Gisela's coat. She picked it up and wrapped it around her knees. A cloud of dust rose from it. Disgusted, she threw it back on the carpet.

She was shivering with cold and agitation and weariness.

Long after midnight she got up to fetch her own coat from the nearest chair. Her limbs were stiff and hurt at every move. As cautiously as she stepped the boards creaked, and Gisela started up with a cry.

Her eyelids were swollen thick, her hair hung in tangled strands around her pale, haggard face.

"Who's there?" she cried. "Oh, it's you, Myra!" She laughed slightly embarrassed. "I thought it was someone breaking in!"

"I called up the Trocadero," said Myra quietly and wearily. "I think Kayser himself answered the telephone. You missed the performance. He was very angry. You have to bring a doctor's certificate in the morning, or he'll let you go."

"Let him," said Gisela scornfully. "He's ridiculous with his threats!"

Myra shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps you can tell

him that yourself tomorrow. It was unpleasant enough to let myself be treated by such a man as if it were my fault."

"Poor Myra." It sounded sincerely remorseful and without a trace of sarcasm. "You don't know how bad you make me feel. Must your poor little bourgeois soul with its thousand cares be worried about me!" She worked her way out from under the blanket. "I was pretty much in my right mind before, when I was looking for the revolver, believe me! I know exactly what I am worth, and what is best for my own sake and everybody else's."

She sat on the divan, gazing gloomily at her slender legs in their black silk stockings.

"My mother always prophesied that I'd end in the gutter. Even when I was a little girl. And I must end soon if it isn't to be there. I'm sick, tomorrow I may be breadless. My voice is gone, ruined. Tomorrow I'll be hunting a lover at the club, the day after at the café, the week after on the street."

She raised her face which was bathed in tears.

"Give me your revolver, Myra, I beg you. You'll be doing a good deed. I'll write a farewell letter so that you won't be under suspicion. I beg you, have mercy on me!"

"I haven't got it any more," Myra lied. "I've hidden it." At that moment she felt it hanging heavily in the loose bulge on her shirtwaist so that the collar was like a tight narrow band around her neck.

"What will happen now?" she thought. "I'll never get rid of her. It will go on like this. I'll find her in my room every time I come home. She won't have a job any longer, and no money. She'll stick to me like a burr. And that's what my life will be like! Why should all this have happened? How have I deserved it? Only because I let myself be pleased by her affection. Has she any claim on me because of that, have I given myself into her hands

body and soul?"

Shivering with cold, Gisela crossed her bare arms over her breast.

"It's cold here," she said. "Why didn't you come to bed, poor little beastie? It must certainly be very late—much too late for me to catch a car home. Ah, I feel changed. Come, Myra girl, let us both come to bed so that we'll be warm. Do you feel as deathly cold as I do?"

"No," said Myra curtly. "Lie down. I want to read a little more. I'm still too wide awake."

"I'll lie close to the wall," Gisela said. "You'll have room."

"Yes, yes, thanks!"

Myra sat perfectly still again in her deep easy-chair. Again the weight of the revolver made a fine tight band across her neck. She reflected on her conduct and became dizzy as if she saw an abyss which she had crossed without having been aware of its terrible depth.

Had not a voice within her cried only a moment before, "Do it! Give her the revolver! Let her make an end of it, and then you'll have peace!"

If she had done that, there would have been a shot, blood and brains would have spurted, a corpse would be lying in her room, or a dying woman.

She, Myra Rudloff, would have committed a murder!

Out of cowardliness, out of love of comfort, out of petty pitiful selfishness. She had already committed that murder in her mind. All that had been needed was an innocent lifting of her hand....

And then....

She shuddered and cowered.

From the bed came a deep regular breathing.

Myra's mouth twisted into a scornful smile.

"But she would not have done it," she thought, "she'd never have done it."

* * *

A highroad stretched away toward the light. In the dark shadowy corners that the sun never reached, little stained rotting patches of snow were still lying. The fruit trees at either side of the road were laden with little ball-like buds on which a white streak was already discernible. The woods in the distance were enveloped in a reddish veil that betokened new life.

Myra and Sophie were wandering along the road.

"God, it's beautiful," said Myra, opening her mouth to draw the pure invigorating air into her lungs. "It was a wonderful idea of Nora's to chase us both out!"

"Nora always has wonderful ideas," said Sophie with a happy, affectionate pride. "She always knows what I need and what will do me good much better than I do myself. For the most part I never know what is the matter with me. Actually, I feel uncomfortable and I don't know whether I should like to sleep, eat or go for a walk. Then Nora says to me, 'You ought to lie down,' or 'you need to get out into the air'—and it's always the right thing."

"Good God, how beautiful the world is!" Myra exulted. "Oh, Sophus, I'm so insanely grateful to you for making me conscious again!"

"We will walk often in the open together," said Sophie. "I'll show you all the things that I looked at a hundred times long ago, very long ago, at a period when I was desperately lonely and devoured by the need of some human soul to whom I could show them. We must come here when the fruit trees are in bloom, and afterwards, when the whole woods is a garden of dog-roses and May-flowers, and in September when the leaves have turned." She seized Myra's hand, clasping the wrist with a grip so firm that it was almost painful. "You must not go away—that was all nonsense that I preached to you before. We'll have to put your life to rights here. We must find

something for you to do, and you must furnish a nice little home so that you don't have to remain in that horrible pension. Then you'll come after work and chat with us and once a week we'll have to declare a holiday and run around the mountains from morning till night." Suddenly she changed her tone and said with an amusing dryness, "And then when we're tired out, we'll stand on some declivity where we can smell the dinner that God destined for us, steaming out of the chimney pots below, and we won't be able to get down...."

"We'll get down!" said Myra confidently. "If for no other reason, because we can't do anything else. Or shall we turn aside from our goal to seek an easier way? Never!"

At first, while their feet sank in the rustling leaves, the going was easy. But during the last stage, just on a level with the roofs, above the road, there were more pines and spruces and the ground was strewn with needles which in the bright sunlight were smoother than a waxed floor.

Sophie who was accustomed from childhood to the ups and downs of mountains, though she was somewhat out of practice of late, was nevertheless much surer-footed than Myra, who looked for a supporting branch from step to step. Sophie stretched out her hand to her, but Myra declined it ambitiously. Whereupon both of them began to laugh at themselves, at one another, at their little adventure, at the quips they shouted. All that was necessary was for one of them to warn the other that he might slip, to turn the laughter they were trying to suppress into a peal of childish merriment. Myra laughed until the tears came into her eyes. She was no longer watching where she stepped. Suddenly her feet slipped, a branch which she caught at snapped and remained in her hands. She would certainly have fallen had not Sophie, whose one foot was supported against a root, stooped and

caught her and held her upright. They remained for a moment breast to breast, hot, laughing, panting for breath, while their pulses throbbed. At the same moment both became serious. Their faces bent one toward the other—humbly, ineluctably, lips were laid against lips.

Myra closed her eyes. She felt Sophie's feverish mouth on her eyelids, her temples, her cheeks. She heard her hot voice in a whisper.

"Don't move, don't resist, or we will both go plunging down!"

She had no thought of resisting. She had no thought of moving. She stood motionless. Her heart seemed to expand, to grow warm. It seemed to her as if she must flower under these caresses like a young tree in May.

They ate lunch under a friendly enticing red roof, and crossing the silvery lake, wandered toward the station. At times they were boisterous, at times sentimental, but always courteously reserved on the personal theme. They spoke of a thousand things, but not of themselves, not of that which both were thinking and feeling.

At the small station, they sat with other people, silent and tired, waiting for the train. The darkness set in early. The little lanterns cast a melancholy light through the blue dusk. Myra began to feel cold, and pressed her face against her raised coat collar.

At last the train came. They both looked for an empty compartment without stating their intention. They found one and climbed in.

"Now everything will be all right," thought Myra. "I will lay my head on her shoulder and she will say gentle, nice things to me. Then this cold feeling will go away."

Sophie sat beside her, leaning slightly forward, and stared out the window without saying a word—for a long, a long, long time. Outside, fields and forest glided by, shrouded deeper and deeper in the twilight, broken at rare intervals by a lighted window, a solitary lantern. At

last Sophie turned her face to Myra, a face which in the feeble glow of the flickering little gas-lamp looked grave, deathly pale and tense in every feature.

"I told you something this morning, Myra," she began awkwardly, stammering, and yet it sounded as if she had spent the last hour learning it by heart. "Just recollect it as if it were the only thing I had said or done. I told you to go away from here! And now I beg you if you bear me the least—good will—'Go away from here!' I've known for almost thirty years that I cannot live without Nora. I've proved it to myself. I went to the bad in every sense when I lost contact with her, and I became a human being and a worker at the moment she came to me. I have lived for five years in the conviction that I am unequivocally happy. I dare not let anything shake that conviction. I dare not ever think that there is another possibility in life for me than Nora. She would feel it and she would go. She endures her sufferings solely because she is an absolute necessity to me. She would end it all if she knew that I was happy for as much as an hour without her. Perhaps you like us so well that it will be a real sacrifice to give up your friendly relations with us. I would almost say, I hope so." She bowed her head very low so that Myra should not see the quivering of her lips. "But I know that you will make this sacrifice because you have an intimation of what is involved. I have overestimated my powers. It is very bad to have to confess that to you. When you are gone, I will confess it to Nora. But not now, as long as it might deprive her of her peace for a moment. And I would not find the right voice in which to tell it now!" She stared out the window again.

Myra's throat was parched.

"Of course," she said without thinking, "naturally." And again, "Yes, of course, naturally!" without knowing what she meant by it.

When the train stopped, Sophie jumped out and caught Myra's elbow in order to assist her. But she relinquished it again at once, and both smiled with hurt and embarrassment.

They took leave of one another on the platform with a firm squeeze of the hand.

"Get home safely, child," said Sophie, "and get safely through life. And I thank you—for everything."

"And I you," answered Myra in a lifeless voice.

Then she dropped the good firm hand.

For a moment their eyes met, stole one into the other's, then they shifted again, as if frightened, to some bright point in the distance.

Sophie turned. She plunged both hands in her pockets, bent her head and strode away.

For a while she continued to tower above the crowds of hurrying people, then her tall figure was submerged and disappeared.

Slowly, with heavy footsteps, Myra turned toward the opposite stairway.

XV

They sat first in the basket-chairs in front of a café with little lamps that had roses on the silk shades and pearl fringes. There were Gisela, Kramer, Mara Luigi, Will Kraft, John. They ate fruit-ices and waffles and drank a sweet liqueur, in order, as Giesbert said, “to prevent a glaciation of their stomach walls.”

But Mara Luigi who had been dancing, and Kraft and John, who had been to the concert, had not eaten that evening and expressed their cravings for a real beefsteak. So they travelled two doors farther down to a wine restaurant where the orchestra was playing the same pieces in a somewhat different order.

After their meal they went to the nearest bar and drank a Sweden punch and a bottle of champagne, and Mara Luigi danced with Giesbert and Kraft, which caused all the other dancers to stop and stare with interest. Myra felt her vanity somewhat flattered because she was with such excellent dancers.

But the official closing time came. The waiters brought the bill, turned down the lights and drew the heavy purple curtains across the windows. But nobody thought of getting up and going.

At a neighboring table were sitting a beautiful blonde woman and two gentlemen. Myra kept staring at her all evening. The blonde woman regarded everything with a smiling or surprised curiosity, as if she were at a zoological garden, while the two robust gentlemen sat beside her as if it were their task to shield her from every impertinent glance and every poisonous breath.

“Probably one of them is her husband the other her

brother," thought Myra. "There is a place unoccupied at their table, why don't I sit there? Don't I belong among that kind of people? By family, education, training and manners? The smooth-shaven man is certainly her brother—he's the dead image of her. Wouldn't it be much more suitable if I were married to him, and were making a little evening out with my brother and sister-in-law. That would be very nice. But why do I want that? Merely because I have a nostalgia for perfectly plain simple bourgeois surroundings, or because that lovely woman pleases me?"

When the three people had left the neighboring table, Myra began to find it quite boresome and sterile. She was tired and had had her fill, but it seemed to her as if something further must happen in order to give this senseless expenditure of time and money some semblance of justification. She was afraid that it would happen again, as always, when she left a party early because she could not endure the boredom of it any longer. Everybody would say to her next day, "Oh, what a pity that you went so early, it was especially nice later on, we met so and so, and we had such a good time!"

Gisela was all for going to the Club. The others, except Kraft, who never touched a card, not from moral scruples, but because they bored him to death, agreed.

Myra was a little frightened. She knew that it would turn out as usual. Gisela would play and lose. Then Myra would try to save something and place her own bet—with some caution and discretion, and would win twice and lose three times. Or the other way round.

In any case, those hours at the Club always cost a few hundred or a few thousand marks, and for a week Myra would calculate the lost sums in terms of the books she saw in show-windows or handsome wood and leather goods. Or she would look at the beggars on the street whom she could have made happy, and the pale-faced

children, with burning eyes, standing in front of toy shops or confectioners' windows.

To be sure—she herself was not much put out. She could telegraph the bank and in a few hours would have as much money as she wanted. She was not extremely clever at banking manipulations but she did know one thing, she spent more than her interest. Sometimes it gave her an uneasy feeling, almost a slight dizziness. But she scolded herself for a narrow-minded Philistine. She would never have children—and she would not live long. It might even be good not to possess another cent and have, so to speak, to balance on a tight-rope. Such a situation would prove whether the forces of life were strong enough in her. Perhaps she would be happier in some very modest walk of life where she had to work—as a waitress or a shop-girl. Perhaps physical need would be at once an impetus and an absolution for putting her beloved revolver to her forehead.

But it was not merely indifference to life or death that caused Myra to go to the Club with the others. Gisela played with more bad luck than passion, and if she was so insistent about going to the Club or some bar or dance-hall, it was because she hoped to meet Fiametta there. Myra knew this. They had met often during the winter, and Myra was fascinated each time by her eloquent and haughty beauty, and was each time vexed because Fiametta was always dressed in better taste, was more assured in her manner, and above all, travelled in much better company than Myra.

As no one was at hand to attract Myra's attention, she looked at herself in a mirror. She seemed quite a stranger to herself, and yet acceptable. She winked at herself in the glass as if to say, "Never fear, tonight we'll manage to put on as haughty a face as that conceited person!"

* * *

By the time they left the Club they were all in a more or less bad humor. They had all lost except John, who, with his hands full of bills, was running after Kraft and with tears in his eyes and a pleading voice, trying to force the money on him.

Will Kraft refused it with a scarcely veiled irritation, his hands plunged in the pockets of his jacket.

Both of them made Myra feel sorry. And Kramer made her feel sorry too, for he had lost heavily, and was now quite pale and monosyllabic.

And Giesbert and Mara Luigi made her feel sorry: they were bandying reproaches for not having bet at least on different sides of the table. Under their harsh muttered words was something like a hate that has been smouldering for years.

And Gisela made her feel sorry, because she looked wretched and decayed, like a chronic invalid—and because she had not met Fiametta.

And she felt sorry for herself—Oh, she felt so sorry for herself!

They were all in a bad humor, but nobody wanted to go home and get over it by himself. All of them were expecting some compensation for this squandered night, some mad intoxication, some vast jollification—sensation, experience, joy, or an hour's oblivion of all vexations.

"Where do we go from here?" asked Giesbert, swinging his cane with somewhat affected high spirits. "Heads up, ladies and gentlemen, heads up! As everybody knows, the tom-cat doesn't really go into action till morning! Forward to our sweet Emil's! I wager that the overwhelming majority of our distinguished little company will feel quite at home there."

They turned down a quiet dark side-street where stood a quiet dark little third rate middle class beer-shop. An elderly woman, bare headed, with a shawl around her

shoulders, seemed to be waiting for a dog that was sniffing around, and which she called and motioned to from time to time.

Giesbert appeared to know her. He greeted her with a friendly slap on the back, and asked her to open the door.

The old lady undertook to guide them, and amidst constant cries of “Watch out!” they went up and down stairs, across an unlighted yard, through narrow doors, and tiny pitch-black passages between thick baize curtains, until suddenly there was a confusion of lights, sounds, colors and voices.

The large long room, bathed in lilac light, was decorated with impeccable taste. Black and lavender were the dominating colors. The thick carpet was black strewn with lavender flowers. The polished panelling, the marble mantelpiece, the velvet hanging covered with wildly fantastic lavender designs were also black. On the cornice of the panelling were black bronze and black wood-carvings, standing out against the lilac wallpaper.

“How pretty!” said Myra her eyes wide with surprise. “How does it come to be here?”

“Oh, his friends have furnished it for him,” said Giesbert with a rather ironic smile. “As a kind of private establishment! Why shouldn’t it be pretty? There are very wealthy people among them—and some very well-known artists—painters, sculptors, interior decorators—or what have you! In return, little Emil provides them champagne and company!”

“Emil!” called John to a slender, sinuous, dark-haired man. “Show our ladies your establishment!”

Emil was all graciousness. He opened a narrow door, and they entered a dimly lighted, somber room, in which were standing a dozen brown tables. The light willow chairs had been piled on them, and the whole room was embellished with advertisements of beer and tobacco companies.

At one table in a corner a pair of young fellows were lounging with cards in their hands.

Next door was the real beer-shop whose window gave on the street. More chairs and tables, the tank with its brightly polished taps and a player-piano against the wall. The place was in almost total darkness, only a little night-lamp above the buffet was reflected in the metal trimmings. In one corner they saw two shadowy figures that seemed to be wrestling, and heard suppressed gigglings.

They returned to the first room, and Emil, as he was called on all sides, assisted them to find a cozy table and the necessary number of chairs.

Myra regarded the people around her with a mixture of curiosity, sympathy and aversion.

Not far off, there was sitting a fat black-bearded man on whose broad and hairy hand a rosy solitaire flashed and sparkled. And that fat-fingered hand adorned with rings was toying with the head and shoulder of a pale young lad, clad in what was obviously an outworn Sunday best. He seemed half brazen and half embarrassed.

At another table was seated a distinguished looking old gentleman, whose finely chiselled features and gray Van Dyke, betrayed the thinker. One of his slender white hands lay at the base of a champagne glass, the other accompanied his long discourses as if he were on a platform or in the pulpit. His handsome blue eyes glowed as though afire with youthful enthusiasm. Opposite him, sat a broad-shouldered, bull-neck soldier, with a good-looking honest peasant's face, grinning, flattered but uncomprehending.

More even than the men, the women attracted Myra's attention. They ran the whole gamut of types. Some had on dark jackets, with lapels, breast-pockets and stiff collars. On their mannishly cut hair they wore small

men's hats. Others betrayed themselves only by a slight overpainting. The sharp features of a few expressed intelligence and character. There were others who verged on the cocotte.

One in particular Myra thought very beautiful. She was tall and slender, had short golden brown curls and the build and features of a Greek boy. She was sitting with a big party having a very good time, and laughed a lot and seemed slightly drunk.

A sweet provocative muffled music issued from behind the curtain. Two young soldiers in uniform had clasped one another around the hips and were swaying, body to body, in waltz rhythm. Despite their heavy boots, they stepped as delicately and discreetly as women dancers—not a step was audible.

"Ah, Emil," said Giesbert, "how real life is here! When I think I'll get a bottle of champagne, I get it, but when I think, I'll get nine bottles, I don't get them!"

"No, no, Mr. Giesbert," said Emil, smiling, "you can have nine bottles too!"

They drank champagne, and champagne with red wine, and champagne with Port, and Benedictines, and Sweden punches and flips and champagne.

Myra drank somewhat prudently, and it amused her to watch how one after the other, they began to talk nonsense.

But although she was still mistress of her tongue and her thoughts, she felt her blood pulsing somewhat faster and the music lap her nerves in a warm stream. For a moment, as she closed her eyes, she felt a desire, and actually visualized herself sitting by the Rhine, on a terrace, or in a garden, listening to old sentimental folk songs from the water, and drinking a fragrant "Maybowl" with trusted friends.

When she opened her eyes and saw the room with its morbid color-scheme, filled with smoke and fumes, she

was overwhelmed with aversion and misery.

They had become quite merry at her table. All had soft, parted, burning lips and glowing eyes. All laughed and nestled into their chairs as into a caress, or groped for one another with their hands.

"Intoxication, intoxication," Myra thought, "I must force myself to feel what the others feel! I had such a nice warm sense of well-being before, a soft gliding dizziness. Why has it gone and left everything so stale and horrid?"

She tossed off two glasses of champagne quickly, one after the other. But she simply felt a dull heavy pressure over her eyes. She held her hand over the glass that Kraft wanted to give her "to make her happy."

"No, thanks, please, I have a head-ache, and I won't become happy anyway."

"Take a little coke and get rid of your head-ache," suggested Gisela.

"Perhaps." Myra was ready for anything.

From all sides little gold and silver boxes were offered her.

She took a pinch of the white powder on the back of her hand, and snuffed it up her nose. She had an impression of powdered snow when she saw the white crystals. The room was close and stuffy and the idea made her feel better. It was as if she were breathing pure clear winter air. The top of her skull opened and the depressing fog that had weighed down her brain all evening disappeared. The veils seemed to be torn from her weary eyes. Everything seemed nearer and clearer, firmer in its outlines, brighter in color.

"Thank God," she said with relief, "I'm beginning to understand. It really is a glorious feeling."

But the effect wore off quickly. She tried it again.

Her head was clear, her thought firm. She felt well and secure.

Giesbert was paying her rather thick-tongued

compliments. “Shplendid, little Rudloff, shplendid! The little girl can carry off a thing or two! My highest reshpects! She’ll drink ush under the table, Will, and ‘shnow’ us under the floor, into the cellar, under the cellar. We jusht won’t be there at all, she makesh ush look shmall, sho shmall!”

Mara Luigi had changed places with Kramer in order to sit beside Myra. She laid both her arms on the arm of Myra’s chair and spoke to her in a low voice.

“Tell me honestly, why is it you don’t like me? I’ve always liked you so immensely. From the very first moment—I’m right in saying that, am I not, Gisela? But at the same time, I’ve always had the feeling that you couldn’t abide me. I’m too feminine for you, eh? But, believe me, the externals have very little to do with it! Or do you prefer bobbed hair? Shall I have my hair bobbed?”

“Myra is the only woman in the world I’d ever marry,” declared little John like a sleepy child. “I’d marry Myra right off, if I were a man!”

“God, what a fore-leg the lady has!” Kraft put his hand around her wrist admiringly. “Show us your feet too!”

Laughing, Myra pressed her crossed feet against the edge of his chair. He stroked her ankles in their sheer silk stockings.

“Yes, you may stroke them,” John conceded magnanimously, “you may stroke them because it’s Myra, that’s why.”

A great and almost thrilling joy surged over Myra. She felt herself beautiful, desirable and desired.

“She has the most beautiful legs in the world,” said Gisela, pulling back Myra’s skirt to her knees. Myra let her do it without protest. For the first time, in a burst of pride, she realized herself what perfect slender legs she had.

The girl at the other table, who looked like a Greek

boy, had been constantly trying to attract Myra's attention. Every time that Myra glanced up, the Greek boy would carry her glass to her mouth. At first she had done it as if by accident, now she smiled as she raised her glass. Myra smiled back and drank to her.

Presently the girl wanted to get up. The people at her table laughed and tried to restrain her. But she would not be deterred.

Glass in hand, she came over to Myra. The effort to walk without staggering, lent her movements an especial grace.

"I want to drink to you," she said with a challenging little laugh.

Myra raised her glass. They drank.

The stranger hesitated. "And—I'd like to give you a kiss, too—that is, if Gisela will allow me."

Everybody at the table laughed aloud and shouted remarks.

"Oh, I allow you," said Gisela ironically.

"There is nothing for her to allow," Myra contradicted haughtily.

The stranger bent quickly, and Myra felt against her lips a hot open wine-wet mouth—for the space of a second. She closed her eyes, and since her head was pressed back into her shoulders, and Kraft still held her feet on his chair, she became so dizzy that she gripped her chair with both hands. She felt as if the chair were tipping, the whole room swaying, as if she were on a swing that was plunging through the air, or on a ship whose planks were sprung and were being sucked into a raging whirl-pool.

She sat up and pushed away the stranger almost violently in her need for air.

At the same moment, she saw Gisela jump up, deathly pale, with her mouth distorted, her head stretched forward like a panther ready to spring. Her burning eyes

were staring at the entrance door.

Involuntarily Myra followed her glance and saw the dark curtain fall into place behind the latest arrivals.

Beside Ulrich Zeeden's somewhat stooped figure stood Fiametta, on the arm of a tall, slender elegant man.

Her eyes were large and clear and unsurprised, but full of a probing curiosity and of a warm velvety sheen. To Myra it seemed as if those eyes were not an arm's length away from her, so distinctly could she observe the play of the lids, the flecks of light on the brown iris, the shadow of the lashes.

Those eyes were raised with a soft gleam to the man at her side as if they had had more than enough of the scene before them. Her lips moved. The man nodded in agreement. All three turned, and the curtain fell into place behind them again.

Gisela seized a glass from the table and flung it with a bitter laugh at the door. Giesbert and Kraft instantly caught her wrists. She resisted, trying to free herself, but finally dropped her head on her breast, and began to cry, loudly, unrestrainedly, hysterically.

The other people, occupied as they were with themselves, nevertheless watched her attentively.

Myra began to tremble in every limb.

"Go!" she muttered. "I must go, must go, must go!"

She felt as if she would join in that strident weeping the next moment, or throw herself on the floor, or overturn the table and trample the glasses and bottles under her feet.

She was glad when she found herself in the street at last, in a cold blue dawn, and still gladder to be in the taxi that they all took.

The air brought her to her senses. She felt beastly wretched.

She made the others swear not to cause any unnecessary commotion on the stairs or in the halls. But

the more she pleaded, the more exuberant they became. Kramer had lost control completely. He was all for knocking on Mrs. Meidinger's door and ordering her to send him up a pretty girl.

"It's no more than her duty," he babbled. "She's the mother of this establishment. What's to prevent her putting it on my bill, she puts everything else on it."

When Myra opened her door, Giesbert tried to crowd in after her. She pushed him out, but he embraced her and a tussle ensued in the open door in the course of which Giesbert hugged Myra and covered her face and neck with passionate kisses.

Suddenly the door of the next room was opened with a bang, and Luisa Peters emerged in an amazing big-checked dressing-gown, with her hair done up for the night in two long smoothly plaited braids. She forcefully commanded quiet.

Little Marga Luigi found her unexpected appearance so comical that she bent double, shaking with laughter and pointing her finger at her.

Myra took advantage of Giesbert's astonished about-face to slip into her room where she shut and bolted the door.

She staggered against the bureau with which she supported herself, trembling in every limb. Burning shame was devouring her, gnawing at her inwardly, hollowing her out.

She bent double but she could not escape the incessant gnawing pain. She wished she could get away, but she knew she did not have the courage or the strength to pack a suitcase. But she must get away, at least out of that house, before morning. It was unthinkable that she should ever cross the dining-room again. Unthinkable, too, to wait for Mrs. Meidinger to give her notice that she could not tolerate such a person in her house.

She abhorred, she loathed herself. In addition she felt

physically wretched—dizziness, weariness, a galloping heart, the gall-like bitterness with which the cocaine burned her jaws.

She felt that she must come to some decision, but she did not know what.

Her thoughts sought feverishly for something to which they could cling, sought some person to whom they could confess, and who would have the power to absolve them. She was seeking someone who would protect her from herself, to whom she could kneel, in whose lap she could hide her face, and who would lay kind, strong hands on her head.

"Mother!" a voice cried within her. "Mother!"

Her thoughts turned to Sophie—but Sophie repelled them. In that serene little house, which had always been so comforting a refuge to her, she would be a disturber of the peace. Not through any fault of hers, she thought bitterly.

Olga—Olga alone was salvation. She would press the revolver to her forehead, would think that it was Olga's cool, firm hand.

And Olga's hands would efface, erase, all the painful things, the shame, the remorse, the disgust and grief and hopeless despair. In another moment all that could be effaced.

And if she was dead the next morning, everything would be explained. Of course, little Mara Luigi would not understand it: she would always declare that Myra had been "so cheerful last night."

But Fiametta would understand. She would recall the previous night. For she had seen Myra, oh, Myra still felt the impact of her glance, and Fiametta would hunch up her shoulders with a sudden shudder at the thought that she had glanced at a dying woman.

Luisa Peters would say, "Poor child, she drank to find the courage."

Sophie would be very shocked—perhaps she would be grieved too. But what concern was that of Myra's! Sophie had not given a thought as to what became of Myra. And she had Nora....

It must happen quickly before anybody woke up in the house. In twenty seconds it would be over—all over.

At that moment when she took the revolver out of the box, there was a knock at the door.

Myra stood motionless, holding her breath. Perhaps she ought to do it now, at once, quickly, spurred by that impatient knocking.

Then it would be over, then whoever was outside there could enter, for all she cared.

Would it make a loud noise? Probably she wouldn't hear it herself—she hoped not, though of all the senses the ear must function the longest. Ah, perhaps it wouldn't happen so quickly, and she would hear them breaking down the door and the shrieks and cries.

"Please, open the door!" called the voice outside; it was as pleading as it was commanding. "Please, Miss Rudloff, open the door a moment!"

It was not Giesbert, or Mara Luigi, or one of the maids. It was Luisa Peters.

Perhaps she was sick and needed someone. She would hardly be rattling Myra's door in the middle of the night to read her a moral lecture.

Myra tossed the revolver carelessly into the box and opened the door.

Luisa Peters forced her way into the room. She stood broad and robust, and a little ridiculous in her big-checked dressing-gown, in spite of her pale face.

Her quick alert eye instantly noticed the open box and the revolver with the butt sticking out.

But she did not betray this by the slightest gesture.

"I must beg your pardon, Miss Rudloff," she said with a good-natured smile. "I complained because I thought that

you came home in a rather happy condition. But I saw at once that you weren't well. You must lie down immediately—you can hardly stand on your feet. Can I help you? You had better believe, I know something about taking care of sick people!"

While she was speaking, she took Myra's hat from her tangled hair. She unbuttoned her dress. She held Myra like a doll, turning her this way and that with her strong arms. She removed the hurting hair-pins from the loosened knots.

Suddenly Myra felt the warm presence of a human being, felt those good, strong, solicitous hands. It was as if all her festering wounds broke open and warm blood washed away her pain. She began to weep, unappeasable gentle tears, releasing her, rinsing her of pain.

"I am still too much a child," she said, while the tears streamed down her face. "You will think I am drunk—but I am perfectly serious. I am still too much a child to run around the world so horribly alone!"

* * *

For three days Luisa Peters held Myra in gentle captivity. She did not leave her alone for a moment, had her meals served in her room and turned away everyone with the announcement that Myra was sick.

Myra was perfectly satisfied with this arrangement. She herself would not have found the strength for this lie, and yet she felt the absolute necessity of separating forever from all the people among whom she had lived during the past year.

The very first day Luisa Peters endeavored to convince Myra—which did not prove difficult—that her associations were altogether unsuitable and that the best thing she could do would be to turn her back on that city and all her so-called friends.

On the third, in the morning, she told Myra a great

deal about her native city, of its far-famed cleanliness for which she was constantly longing, of its people who were reputed stiff and formal because they did not wear their hearts on their sleeves—although they were honest and courageous and pure. She told her, too, about her beautiful little step-sister, Gwen, who was about Myra's age, though still a child, the carefully sheltered pet of the whole house. She would be a more suitable companion for Myra than these horrible females here.

In the afternoon she helped Myra pack her suitcase. Myra wanted to go away, to go to the clean city where the swift white little boats crossed the blue waters.

Myra was quite touched by so much kindness and more so, if anything, by Luisa's confidence.

She smiled, a sad and knowing smile, when at parting Luisa Peters took her in her arms and kissed her on both cheeks.

"At heart I'm at least ten years older than she," she thought sorrowfully, "for I know what, God be praised, she does not even suspect—that she's in love with me! Because she has little of the talent of 'the horrible females,' she'll never confess it to herself. Probably she'd have to shoot herself, if she admitted it. God grant, that she never becomes conscious."

The only person whose hand Myra wished to shake once more was Eccarius. There was much sympathy in his face. Perhaps Luisa Peters had informed him of more than Myra gave her credit for knowing.

"There is something that you still have to tell me," said Myra with an attempt at smiling, "I've often thought of it on sleepless nights and have wanted to ask you—and then I've always forgotten. Do you remember when we were walking out to Mrs. Hersfeld's one day"—a sudden shyness prevented her from mentioning Sophie's name —"I said that my motto would be 'Love life and be not afraid of death!' But you wanted to turn the motto

around....”

“Yes,” Eccarius nodded gravely. “‘Love death and be not afraid of life!’ Or in other words, and this is my life’s motto, a good motto for a long journey, ‘No one ought to die until he has learned to love death!’”

XVI

Somewhere
The long white roads lead well away:
Somewhere
Will lead me home on earth, some day.

Myra was sitting on the terrace with the older women, with Mrs. Peters, with Mrs. Borgessen, with Mrs. Wietinghoff, and with the young Mrs. Vandahl who because of her condition felt a little awkward and preferred to sit still in her basket-chair rather than amuse herself with the “young people” in the garden.

Nearly all the women had some knitting in hand at which they worked more or less attentively. The conversation flowed along quietly, without haste, but also without stopping.

Myra looked down at the white net through which, also without haste but without stopping, she plied her needle in and out, silently rejoicing that she did not need to take part in the conversation. All she had to do was keep her eyes on her work. She need only look up and speak when she was spoken to. As a result, she seemed demure and young-girlish, and nobody ever suspected what a gloriously comfortable feeling that was.

She had sat on that terrace frequently in the last few months, but that day for the first time she felt the beauty of the garden, the quiet voices beside her, the clear calls from the tennis court, everything—colors, fragrances, sounds—with a sense of ease and comfort and grateful enjoyment.

For weeks and weeks she had lived in a state of secret apprehension like a criminal in flight. A hundred times, she thought she saw Gisela or heard her voice. A hundred times, when she tore open a letter from Luisa Peters, she expected to read that Gisela had come to some horrible end. A hundred times her heart had throbbed so violently that she had had to struggle for breath. And a hundred times her fear and anxiety had been unnecessary.

She often repeated to herself that there was really no need to fear a scandal, since the opinion and favor of these people was of no account to her anyway. And yet there were moments when she had to confess to herself that it would be less terrible to learn of Gisela's death than to see her suddenly appear from somewhere—here on the terrace of the Peters' house, for example. Some vexatious scene was sure to result, an unsavory scene of which she would willy-nilly be the central figure. She could picture it to herself down to the smallest detail, so that she would turn pale and blush, and the blood would hammer in her veins.

More than once she resolved to affect an astonished and injured expression, a bewildered smile. When she had found her poise sufficiently to deny the acquaintanceship, they would, they must take Gisela for a mad woman and have her put out by the servants.

Myra went over and over it during her sleepless nights. She saw Gisela's face as distorted with hate and pain and vengeance as at that moment when she had flung her glass after Fiametta.

And she would hear herself saying in a very clear and calm voice, "I am so frightfully sorry, Mrs. Peters, to be the occasion of such a scene in your house. But I assure you I have never seen this—lady before in my life."

It would make a very good impression if she paused for a moment before the word "lady," much better than if she were to say "person."

Perhaps it would be cleverer yet to go right up to Gisela and speak to her in a big sister tone. “Won’t you tell me where I have met you before? Where did you learn my name? I know you, of course, but for the moment I can’t recollect—won’t you help me? Did we perhaps go to school together?”

Or might she not produce the best impression by playing the terrified maiden, by fleeing behind a chair and trembling, or by seeking protection from the ladies. “Help me! What does she want with me? Do you understand what she wants with me? Do you know her? Do you know who she is?”

Yes, perhaps that would be the most natural course for a well-bred and somewhat timid young lady when attacked by a lunatic....

She would lie, lie to the limit—although she really did not care very much for the opinion of Mrs. Peters, or the opinion of Mrs. Borgessen. But she wanted peace, she wanted to be completely enveloped in an invulnerable cloak of propriety and convention. She wanted never again to be exposed, never again to let the shirt be torn from her shoulders. Never again should a contemptuous glance strike her. Her skin had become sensitive, so incredibly sensitive—a glance in which she did not read kindliness and friendliness hurt her.

Oh, how well she understood Olga Radó, who had denied her, pitilessly denied and handed her over. She had been hunted till she was worn out. Her skin had been seared with contemptuous glances. She could not endure another glance and did not mean to. She was afraid of glances, her fear of them amounted to the paltriest cowardice.

But she had not been afraid of a loaded revolver....

Now Myra had reached the same pass.

She was prepared to die rather than endure contempt. And prepared to lie, with a straight face, with a clear

voice, to lie cold-bloodedly, not for any personal advantage, not ever for the sake of respect, but from shame, from the profoundest, most abysmal shame, in order that the protecting mantle might not be stripped from her naked soul.

Of course, she had never loved Gisela. But sometimes it seemed to her as if she were capable of denying even her greatest and most sacred love.

That was when she trembled with fear of the Moebius girls. Might it not be that she would suddenly see Fannie's and Emmie's reddish blonde heads bob up? Might she not suddenly confront one of them, totally unprepared?

Yes, and in this case it would do no good to declare them insane. No one would ever question the sound intelligence of the Moebius girls. Certainly no one here.

But what could they convict her of after all! Myra could meet every attack with a counter-attack. Myra had met Olga Radó at the Moebius house. "Our cousin," they had proudly called her then. All she need do was inquire of them about their "relative," and ask with surprise if it were true that Olga Radó was dead. Had she really shot herself?

Only, she must not weep as she asked it....

And whenever Myra thought that she must not weep, the tears would begin streaming down her face.

But presently she would grow calmer. She was no longer thinking of the possibility of such encounters. The last year seemed to her somewhat unreal, vague and meaningless. The memory of Olga Radó persisted. But she now remembered most vividly the first period of their friendship, and the pure adoration she had felt for Olga's intellectual superiority, her accomplished manner, the distinguished and captivating quality of her entrances and exits. Myra was inclined to think less frequently of her burning tenderness, of the agony of a farewell which

could not even be called a farewell—less frequently of her death.

Sometimes she would find a touching and painful pleasure in imaging that Olga was still living and would suddenly appear in these circles. Among these elegant, assured and clever women, she would be the most elegant, the most assured, the cleverest. If she but wished, she would succeed in ravishing this cool, reserved and self-conscious company in half an hour.

But the more clearly she had visualized the picture of the living Olga, the more her remembrance had paled in the last few months. Now and again it seemed to her like the giddy whirl of carnival night, and she was convinced that no one had a right to discuss a confidence of that time, any more than one had a right to remind a lady in the sober light of day that one had kissed her under her mask at the carnival carouse.

Myra had taken off her mask and costume. She was once more Myra Rudloff, and it would have been tactless to allude to any fugitive half forgotten connections.

So completely was she Myra Rudloff that she sometimes wondered if there were not someone of her own name to whom she could attach herself or whom she could attach to herself.

So weary was she of her young freedom.

Or perhaps of its restriction.

If she had an older relative with her, she could take lodgings and live more according to her taste. For, of course, it was forbidden her to live alone, just as she must not stay at a hotel, and just as there were a very few pensions, coffee-houses, restaurants and even streets that she might frequent.

Sometimes it struck her as absurd when people said in quite shocked voices, “Good Heavens, you mustn’t go there. One can see that you’re a stranger here!”

But she always acquiesced. She knew too well that she

herself had lost her standards. For a while she had thought defiantly that she was old and stable enough to permit herself any associates, any book, any manner of life. Then she had found out that she could not swim in the troubled, swirling waters into which she had plunged. When she was close to drowning her pride had forsaken her and she was submissive and grateful that a firm hand had pulled her out.

She no longer felt secure. She had thought she could plunge into the sea without danger—now she was glad when expert hands prepared her bath for her.

Sometimes she was slightly embarrassed when an astonished glance rested upon her because she let slip that she had read a book, or seen a play which were strictly forbidden to young ladies of "her station."

Sometimes she had to fight down a free and easy manner that had become so natural to her in the last few months that she noticed nothing improper in it.

Sometimes she thought almost with gratitude of Aunt Emily. At least she had taught Myra how to hold her knife and fork, and it would have been bad had she had to pay attention to such details and live in fear of violating etiquette. But in all matters of form, her "good training" had become blood of her blood.

From time to time she was in doubt as to whether a young lady of good family might go alone to the opera, or might be invited by an acquaintance whom she had met in the city to partake of a tart in a pastry-shop. Then she would think in a flash, "What would Aunt Emily say in so difficult a dilemma?" And as Aunt Emily averred nearly everything to be unseemly, reprehensible and immoral, Myra could feel in obeying her that she was leading a blameless-life, even in the eyes of the sternest critic.

She had already considered if the most sensible course were not simply to summon Aunt Emily. Then she would

have the infallible oracle in all matters of propriety at her elbow. She could rent a house, take the furniture out of storage, have a home, receive visitors, give little parties. Besides, there was no occasion for contentions of any sort. Even Aunt Emily could have nothing to say against her present associates.

Myra was tamed. It made quite a difference whether one viewed the world, the blooming laughing world, always from the inside of a cage, against whose bars one continually batted one's head and wings in an effort to escape, if just for once. Or whether one were flying back, tired out at evening, somewhat scratched and ruffled, to steal voluntarily into the comfortable cage and find refuge there.

Of course, the door would always remain open now, Myra was of age.

Instantly she recalled that she had come of age a few months too late. Otherwise Olga Radó would still be living, living with her, free at last of all cares and debts and worries, in a beautiful cozy home such as she had always wanted. She would be alive and happy, her laugh would still ring out for the world's delight—and her bell-toned voice, and her beautiful proud face and her delicate, strong hands. Yes, none of these would have been destroyed, annihilated, extinguished—had there been no Aunt Emily.

And hate blazed up in Myra again like a red flame.

The voices from the tennis court drew nearer. White flannels flashed amongst the blackish-red foliage of a purple-beech and the golden-yellow leaves of a maple. The first pair turned the corner, passed the rose-trellis, and approached the terrace—Gwen and Fred Wietinghoff.

Mrs. Peters smiled in greeting to her beautiful daughter. The smile still further revealed her long prominent, rather uneven teeth, stopped with all kinds of fillings, embellished with specks of white porcelain,

encircled with threads of gold as fine as a hair. Her teeth were the same color as the big dull gray pearl in her beautifully shaped ear and gave the same impression of some infinitely fragile, infinitely precious object which must be preserved at any price and with the most tender solicitude. Without the teeth her regular, somewhat withered but haughty features, crowned by a pile of carefully waved blonde hair carefully restrained by a net, regardless of fashion, might almost have been called handsome.

She smiled proudly and complacently. She had every right to.

Myra was delighted anew by the lovely firm way in which Gwen set down her tiny foot with its springy ankle, and by the slender firm body under its white dress, and the curly hair glistening and fluttering in the sunlight.

The sight of her filled Myra's heart with a buoyant delight—but it did not throb faster by a single beat.

She was just as pleased to see Fred Wietinghoff, who was walking beside Gwen. He was much taller than she, broad-shouldered, and narrow in the hips, all the contours of his muscles showing under his silk shirt. He looked like a twenty-year-old. But when the light fell on his face, a network of sharp little wrinkles was visible in his clear, golden brown skin around his eyes and mouth, and a few white threads in his smooth metallic blond hair, at the temples.

But she was pleased, too, when she saw Vandahl whose eager eyes were seeking out his young wife from a distance, and blinking a greeting to her.

And she was pleased when she saw Henry Rantzau and young Lucius appear behind the others, plunged as deeply in conversation, which the younger man was accompanying with sweeping gestures, as if they were strolling somewhere across a lonely field, and not going

to meet a group of people who were expecting and watching them.

"My dears, I'm dying of thirst!" It was Gwen's first utterance as she took the last steps of the terrace at a bound.

She ran to the tea-wagon behind Myra, and poured raspberry juice and ice water into a cut-glass goblet.

With the utmost composure, Fred took the goblet from her as she was about to carry it to her lips and drained it at a draught.

"What is the meaning of that?" she asked amazed and angry.

"I'm sacrificing myself for you again," he said with unshakable equanimity. "I've warned you against inflaming your lungs. I beg you, when you are thirsty, drink tea. May I pour you a cup?"

"I *will* drink water!" Gwen stamped her foot in annoyance. "Give me that carafe, I'm dying of thirst!"

"You won't die of thirst for some time yet," replied Fred. "You're really hardly thirsty at all, but since you've never suffered from thirst in your life you have no standards by which to judge. Drink a cup of lukewarm tea, it will be very good for you."

"But I don't want lukewarm tea," said Gwen between laughter and anger. "I drink hot tea in winter and ice water in summer. I'm going to drink water and if I get inflammation of the lungs, it's no concern of yours."

"Good heavens," said Fred pityingly, "what a little sixteen-year-old! You're not so young any more that you make yourself 'cute' that way. Probably you think it's very romantic to toss off a glass of ice water in a fit of youthful impetuosity when you're overheated with playing, and then be carried off by inflammation of the lungs in the flower of your youth." He was sitting on the arm of a basket-chair, swinging his foot in its heelless shoe. "Inflammation of the lungs is a horrid malady with

phlegm and spittle—not in the least poetic. In fact, there is no poetic sickness." He straightened his shoulders slightly. "Only health is poetic, but everything from a saber cut to typhus is prosaic and disgusting and mostly connected with bad smells."

"Oh, Fred, you're disgusting." She turned her back on him. "You're positively not fit to enter a drawing-room. I'm going to tell your mother so."

"She'll think you're slandering me!" He smiled complacently and somewhat mischievously. "She knows you can't bear me."

Vandahl had moved a stool beside his young wife's chair. Myra observed how his big well-formed hands caressed the folds of her dress stealthily.

A radiant stream of tenderness was constantly playing on him from her soft brown eyes.

Myra was a little anxious on her account. She looked so happy, and apparently worshipped her husband so idolatrously. If only she had finished with her hours of pain! The wish burned in Myra's heart like a mute prayer.

Rantzau and Lucius were leaning against the stone balustrade. Myra could catch disjointed fragments of their conversation when the others were silent.

"Why not? The electrons that are thrown off by the so-called cathode rays have a velocity of something like a quarter of a million kilometer seconds."

It was Rantzau's deep, vibrant voice.

Gwen seated herself on the arm of Myra's chair and put her arm around her shoulders.

"Protect me, Myra," she said, "everybody makes me angry and seems horrid to me. You are the only person here whom I really like!"

"Oh, Gwen," Myra smiled up at her, "it's a good thing that you don't have to cross any bridges tonight!"

Gwen's face grew serious. "I'll kill somebody yet," she said as if she were telling a fairy-tale, "and I'll bury the

corpse in a cellar and steal everything valuable and bury that in the forest. Then I'll go somewhere, to the courts, to the police or the senate and tell everything. Then everybody will laugh and pity me and say, 'Poor child, she has a fever, she's delirious—that's Mr. Peters' little daughter! get a car, and take the youngster home, her mother ought to pack her off to bed, she's got the measles.' And then the bailiff or an officer will take me home so that nothing may happen to me on the way. Oh, Myra have you had any of the short-cake? Deuli makes them simply divine! They make life worth living. But I've never yet been able to eat enough of them. I've stipulated that when I get married I want you to give me a bath-tub full of short-cakes. And on my wedding-day I'll eat short-cake from morning till night. Eat something, Myra—I really believe that you live on air and love."

"On air perhaps," said Fred dryly, "as far as I can judge your consumption of the other so-called popular commodity, I couldn't last a week on your rations."

Myra took good care not to understand his remark.

"I'd like to live on air," she said, breathing in the breeze that came from the garden. Despite the fragrance of the roses, it was strong and sharp and smelled a little of the sea. "On pure fresh air!"

XVII

Myra sat beside Gwen in the car.

"My hair looks something terrible, doesn't it?" said Gwen. "If mamma sees me like this, she'll begin to lecture me. How do you manage to keep your hair in place? You danced too! Mamma would be delighted with you. In fact, mamma likes you a whole lot. She's always holding you up to me as a model. But even that doesn't make me dislike you. I'm really quite smitten with you, really—but I think you don't like me."

Myra laid her arms lightly around her shoulder.

"Silly little Gwen," she said, smiling. "You don't know what you're chattering."

"That's nice," said Gwen, cuddling up to her like a little kitten, "leave your arm there, it feels nice. I know very well what I'm talking about. Mamma always says 'Don't talk, you're dizzy with dancing,' because she insists that I talk so much nonsense after a dance—more than usual. But I'm really not dizzy with dancing, and I know that I like you a lot, and I know too that you don't like me. And you don't contradict me either, you're much too honest for that. You say, 'Don't talk nonsense, little Gwen,' which is what people always tell little children when they happen to hit on the truth. But I don't want to embarrass you. Your eyes look very sad now because you don't know how you're going to get out of this mess."

"I was thinking," said Myra honestly, "that you are a very charming little creature and that I like you very much indeed—and that nevertheless I disavowed you today and said you were not my friend."

"At the table," said Gwen seriously, "I felt it. But it

doesn't make me angry with you." She smiled. "You oughtn't to admit it either, if you want to keep in the good graces of my dear Henry. Did he tell you what a beast I am?"

"He said nothing at all," replied Myra, shocked. "How on earth did you know that I said it to Rantzau?"

"Because I know *him*!" said Gwen triumphantly. "He hates me like—like sin would hardly be the proper expression. But I know he does, and I know why."

By these words and by the expression of Gwen's face Myra felt somewhat repelled. "She's like every other woman," she thought contemptuously. "She thinks that Henry Rantzau hates her because he loves her and she doesn't love him! Now she'll tell me that she broke with him on some occasion. It's the only thing that these little creatures can get through their heads."

"Shall I tell you why your friend hates me?" A thousand little imps were dancing on Gwen's face.

"If you like," said Myra somewhat coolly.

"I've taken his friend away from him!"

"What does that mean—taking a friend away? Can a woman take a man's friend away from him?"

"From Henry? Oh, yes! For he wants his friend all to himself, hair and hide, body and soul. Don't try to pretend, dear little Miss Innocence, that you haven't noticed what the whole town knows!"

"Strange," Myra shook her head, "all that a town knows!"

"Stranger yet is all that it doesn't know!" said Gwen with a laugh. "All that goes on in its midst without anybody's suspecting it. But Rantzau is known because he's a public menace. He has an influence over young men that is nothing short of uncanny. He's always got a circle around him that idolizes him. And I don't like that...."

"You mean when somebody else is idolized?" teased

Myra.

"Yes, exactly," declared Gwen defiantly. "That one thing I can't stand at all is to see a man idolized by men. I don't know if I can explain it, but you see the essential thing about human beings is their sex. The great two-fold division of all life—it's not my own idea, of course. Later on there's the division into races, with the races dividing into nations, the nations into classes and families, each of them struggling against the others. I am a bourgeois as compared with the nobility and an aristocrat as compared with the plebs. But first and foremost I am a woman in contrast to a man, and the most unpardonable insult that can be offered me is one to my sex. Don't you understand that? If a man can't see me because he worships another woman, that doesn't wound my vanity. But a man for whom no woman is good enough, who prefers men, who is contemptuous of my whole sex—oh, it drives me almost insane with anger. Rantzau is incorruptible—I know that—but I lure away his favorites, one after the other. Ever since I could think, no, ever since I could feel, we've waged a bitter war. Do you know, Myra, sometimes it seems like a holy mission to me and not just an amusing game!" There was a strange light in her eyes, they blazed like blue jewels. "He loved Fred Reimer, for example, loved him insanely. But Fred is very happily married today. What do I get out of it? Well, sometimes when I see his wife, I think, 'You owe it to me and you never even suspect it.'"

"What a queer mixture you are." Myra looked at her, shaking her head reflectively. "A well-bred, sheltered girl and yet...."

"And yet? Go ahead and say it!"

"Oh, nothing. But tell me, how does it happen that your parents don't notice anything—Henry Rantzau, for instance, whose reputation the whole town knows?"

"Don't you know, Myra," said Gwen with a superior

smile, “that parents have an unerring eye only for what doesn’t exist?”

* * *

“I’m coming out directly,” called Gwen from behind the door of the bathroom where one could hear the splashing of water and the pelting of a shower. “Take a seat, Myra, and pick up a book! I’ll be ready in five minutes.”

“I have time,” said Myra quietly.

But Gwen wished to shorten her wait for her. “You’ll find something to look at. There’s a package on the table. I bought myself some stockings today. See if you don’t think they’re stunning. But you mustn’t open what’s under them, something flat in tissue paper. Ah, I’ll show it to you anyhow. Go ahead and open it!”

“I’m not curious.”

“Go on, go on, open it. It’s better that you should look at it when I’m not there. Then I won’t have to blush at least. Hurry up, I’ll be out in two minutes! Do you hear? I’m already emerging from the crystal flood, and when I’m halfway dry, I’ll be out there!”

Myra removed the tissue paper. She looked into Fred Wietinghoff’s face, lifelike and expressive. She felt a flash of pleasure pass over her as she studied the handsome features, and almost at the same moment a childish desire to steal the picture so that she could always have it before her eyes, and could delight in it when she was far from here.

For she was perfectly conscious at that moment, without thinking about it at all, that she would leave Hamburg in a very short time. She had never yet thought of the change, but suddenly she saw herself with visionary distinctness, so self-evidently that there was nothing terrifying about it, in a state of loneliness in which this picture would make pleasant company for her.

She started when Gwen leaned over her shoulder.

"Handsome picture, what?" she laughed. "You started so just now that I might imagine you have a little weakness for the gentleman. Confess the truth, Myra! Out with it. You were so lost in the picture, so lost that you didn't hear me coming."

Myra put down the picture without glancing at it again.

"Because my thoughts were somewhere else entirely," she said, still rather distractedly.

"Too bad," teased Gwen, "where else if not with Fred? Certainly not with me, I'm afraid. Very far off? Don't you want to tell me where?"

She laid her soft bare arm around Myra's neck, pressing it against her cheeks.

"I don't know where myself," said Myra. "Not in the past and not in the present. Somewhere I've never yet been. Perhaps in the future. I have a feeling, quite indistinct and hazy, of a snowed-up lonely house."

Gwen shook her by the shoulders.

"Come out of it," she cried, "you're supposed to be here and not in any snowed-up lonely houses. How do you like our friend, Freddy?"

"*Our* friend?" repeated Myra with a smile.

"Of course ours. He's your friend as much as mine. He thinks a great deal of you, a great deal!"

"He only says that to make you jealous," said Myra consolingly.

"Make me jealous!" Gwen laughed aloud. "No, I'm not that petty. And besides, you mean too much to me. I'm always very proud, really, my heart is filled with pleasure when I hear people praising you. And Fred praises you very often...."

"He would send me his picture if he really thought so much of me," thought Myra. "If it weren't all just silly talk, he'd send me his picture. I don't want anything more of him than that."

“Do you really like him?” Gwen asked it lightly. But Myra felt something watchful, almost lowering in her look.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“He’s good looking and has a very agreeable disposition,” she said indifferently.

“Nothing more?”

Myra did not want to reply. “I don’t know much more about him.”

“He is discreet and trustworthy,” said Gwen after hesitating a moment. Then she laughed through her teeth, “And he has very good taste!”

“Perhaps,” said Myra somewhat guardedly.

Sometimes she had a feeling of fear in the presence of this fair-haired child. Frequently she was afraid to put a question because she did not want to hear the answer—an answer that would tear off the thin covering of the abyss.

Suddenly Gwen stroked her cheeks with a childish gesture.

“Don’t be angry,” she said gently.

Myra laid her lips against that soft little fragrant hand.

“Why should I be angry at you, you child?” she asked, smiling.

But she knew very well that she had been angry.

“Tell me something!” begged Gwen. “Yes, sit right down beside me here and tell me something. I’ll lie down, I’m a little tired from my bath, and you sit beside me and we’ll jaw a little.”

With one hand she drew Myra fawningly to the divan, with the other she held together her kimono of peach-bloom china crêpe which showed every line of her slim, soft body.

She adjusted her mountain of pillows and made herself comfortable on it.

Myra sat quiet and erect beside her on a chair. She

always felt rather stiff in the presence of so much sinuous grace, and a little frosty in the warm breath of this sunny creature.

"Do you know, Myra," said Gwen after a while, "that I haven't got a step closer to you since the first day you came here? You allow me to call you by your first name. Sometimes you call me by mine, but mostly you omit it because it's so counter to your nature. No, no, you don't have to make a polite denial! You are quite a stranger to me. Never, never, never do you tell me anything of your own volition. Sometimes you'll answer one out of ten of my questions. I don't even trust myself to ask you questions any more for fear I'll frighten you away so that you'll never come back again."

"And what do I know of you either?" asked Myra without looking at her. "You are just as much of a stranger to me. You have a very childlike and open nature. My own, perhaps, is more reserved and cold, but there may be a hundred times bigger and more serious secrets hidden behind your innocent little mask than behind my reticence."

"That's still another matter," Gwen interrupted sharply. "I can't ever tell you anything, either, because you always put me off! Many times I feel the need of confiding in you, something that is worrying me, or simply occupying my attention. But you always turn me aside, or you make such a face that the words stick in my throat. As if, Heaven help you, you didn't want to know anything about me, in order not to despise me. Or as if you already knew too much and were afraid of permitting any affection. Then again I feel that you really are not cold and lacking in understanding, you are not a prude, and you have no right to be.... Oh, Myra, don't be angry with me for saying that! But you can never make me believe that you've spent your life sitting and knitting in a quiet friendly way with a lot of old ladies."

Myra laughed. “I’ve never tried to make you think so.”

“But you act that way,” said Gwen hopelessly. “You’re like a stone that won’t give off a spark no matter how hard you strike it. Oh, Myra, I can’t get rid of the feeling that I could strike a whole series of fireworks out of you —such glorious fireworks! Am I not steel enough, or what is the matter? It torments me terribly....”

She was so shaken with emotion that the tears came into her eyes. She stretched her limbs as if in convulsions and tore the silk cushions with her teeth.

Suddenly she sat up, and throwing her arms around Myra’s neck, rubbed her face, between tears and laughter, against her shoulder.

“Tell me, Myra,” she wheedled, “tell me what I’ve known for a long time. Some time in your life you have been in love with a woman. You know how it can be— how heavenly it can be! Why don’t you like me, Myra? Am I not good enough for you? Not beautiful enough? Or do you think I haven’t had any experience? Or do you think I’d betray you? Why don’t you say something? Do you despise me so that you don’t think I’m worth an answer?”

Myra gritted her teeth and sat a little more stiffly. “I don’t know, my child,” she said with a labored smile and lifeless eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why do you suspect me of such a thing?”

“Stop!” said Gwen almost angrily, laying her hand on Myra’s mouth. “I don’t suspect anything—I *know*! You can keep quiet as long as you like. I’ll never force you to tell me, but I won’t let myself be deceived. And I won’t let myself be pointed out as a mad woman. I know that I’m right. Not because, as you’re thinking now, I’ve heard some gossip. I have a feeling for such things. Dear little Myra, if you were to sit in front of your mirror for a week and practice a face for me like a stone mask, it would still bear the stamp. Your hands would have it, and your

eyelids and the corner of your mouth—here—this corner of your dear proud, yearning mouth. Promise me, Myra, promise me one thing—I believe that you live like a saint and want to live that way—but I know too, that you can't. You can't do it much longer. But when it gets too much for you, call me. I would like to kiss you until your yearning mouth is quite sated. I would like to see you bloom in all your tenderness you rose of Jericho! And if I could not bring it about, at least I should like to be present. Oh, Myra, you're making a face as if I were saying hateful things. The ecstasy of the beautiful human body *is* beautiful, and the throbbing pulse and the gasping breath of someone we love is the most beautiful music in the world. Everything else, art and sport, and alcohol and morphine, are just miserable attempts at substitutes for the one real thing—for love."

"So many things are called love!" said Myra with a bitter taste in her mouth.

"I call love the thrill of the blood and the ravishment of the senses. And it is something I should like to give everybody." Gwen sat up and the soft silk slid from her wonderfully modelled shoulders. Her eyes blazed with blue fire.

"Well, not everybody, but the beautiful, the profound, the warm, the sensitive, those who hunger and those who thirst, and I would like to give it to them because I am capable of giving it, because I am rich, because God has given it to me. And God gives no man anything to keep for himself but He cannot be too lavish because He has to give to so many. We are here as God's stewards, we are here to save Him trouble, that is why He gives us so much, in order that we may share it with the most worthy."

Myra shook her head. "You talk like the angel in a Christmas story, and you come out with these lovely theories in a Christmas story voice. Sometimes I have a

feeling that you have no idea what you are saying. You are like a strip of garden in which a strange hand has strewn all possible seeds, so that it is surprised itself at all the gay flowers that come to light. But I am afraid I know the gardener who has made such a wildflower garden out of you!"

"Myra," wheedled Gwen, "tell me one thing, please, please, tell me. Are you in love with Fred?"

"Nonsense," said Myra in a hard voice. "What makes you think such a thing?"

"Perhaps not love," said Gwen hesitantly, "perhaps you call 'love' something else. But don't you feel that he's wonderfully stimulating?"

Myra made a face, and without answering, rose and went to the window. She heard the soft silk behind her rustle and crinkle. Gwen thrust her sinuous body between Myra and the window-pane, beyond which lay the wintry garden. Her angelic face was suffused with red. Her large eyes under their long lashes were filled with tears. Her blonde hair, tousled and damp from her bath, trembled in ringlets and curls about her childish face.

She pursed her lips as if she were struggling against violent tears and clung to the folds of Myra's waist with her soft little hands.

"Do you dislike me so much?" she asked shyly. "Do you? Am I really so distasteful to you?"

Laughing, Myra kissed her round firm cheeks with their peach-bloom complexion.

"You are very sweet!" she said sincerely.

* * *

"I'd rather not," said Myra, knitting her brows slightly.

"Myra!" Gwen stamped her foot angrily. "I can't understand you! How can it hurt you to go too? And you would be pleasing me so much! We had it planned so nicely. Really no sensible person can see anything wrong

in our going together....”

“But your parents,” Myra objected.

“You will simply be doing them a favor if you don’t let me go alone to visit a bachelor in his apartment! For I’m going anyway! But it would be much nicer if you’d come too. And Fred will show you his library!”

That was the only thing that could tempt Myra as Gwen knew very well.

Myra would very much have liked to see the rooms and the books. She felt something akin to envy when she thought that Gwen and Fred would enjoy tea and a pleasant hour of conversation in what was undoubtedly a very pretty and tasteful apartment—while she would not be there. Because of stubbornness, because of obstinacy, because of a silly shyness.

She had done many other things which had still less to do with conventionality and propriety. She had done them from passion, from caprice, from pity—or from stupidity. For the first time in her life she was anxiously resisting an innocent dereliction from the conventional such as this tea with a young unmarried man.

Suddenly all her defiance rose within her. Why should she deny herself a pleasure because these well-born and highly conventional families could thenceforth refuse to receive her in their expensively furnished and meticulously clean houses? Let these families first so educate their sons and daughters that they did not wantonly strive to disturb the hard-won peace of a poor defenseless Myra Rudloff.

“I’ll go with you,” she said, gritting her teeth.

Gwen clasped her jubilantly in her arms.

* * *

A soft, but bright light streamed over a noble polished table. Gleaming bronze. Deep luxurious carpets.

“Isn’t it beautiful here?” asked Gwen, and strutted

about proudly, showing this and extolling that as if it were all her property, or rather her own handiwork.

She moved through the rooms with an assurance that gave no indication that she was visiting them for the first time.

“And you must see the Corot!” Whereupon she rushed into the adjoining room, and lit a concealed lamp that cast a flood of light on the picture.

Myra followed her, an ironic smile on her lips.

“I thought I was supposed to go with you so that you could explore this place!” she murmured. “But you really seem to be quite at home here.”

Gwen laughed, not in the least offended or embarrassed.

“Haven’t I ever told you that I was here before? Not alone, of course. I came to tea then, too. Old Mrs. Wietinghoff was here and mamma. Wait, some member of my family was with me. Fred, who was with me when I had tea here before?”

A newspaper rustled in the next room.

“What did you say, dear?” came Fred’s voice.

“Idiot!” she said in a low voice.

Myra laughed too. It was very easy to see through the whole affair, and take in at a glance the tangle that a word had uncovered. She told herself that it was all right. But she did not feel any sincere pleasure. Her feelings said to her, “Go, you are superfluous here, perhaps even in the way. You are playing a part which has been forced upon you, and which doesn’t suit you.” But she would have scolded herself for being a silly prude if she had given in to this feeling and gone.

Gwen put her arm around Myra and drew her toward the door.

“What does Fred mean?” she asked as she stood in the door. “I don’t recall that we ever herded swine together.”

Fred laid down the paper with some embarrassment.

"Why the image, Miss Peters? I trust you will pardon me for glancing at the paper a moment while you ladies were out of the room. Have I absent-mindedly said something improper?"

Gwen sat on the arm of a leather chair and dangled her legs.

"Improper? Oh, no, it's all right," she said magnanimously. "You only addressed me familiarly through an error. You are so accustomed to having visitors whom you address familiarly, that it never even occurs to you to do anything else. Moreover, I just observed in the next room that you are an idiot!"

"Which clarifies matters perfectly." Fred bowed slightly. "But my dear Miss Rudloff," he turned to Myra, "let us make the extraordinary and highly improbable assumption that I did not make a mistake in identity, but really blurted something out, as they say. It would simply be a further proof of how much inferior men are to women in the arts of lying and deception.

"A woman simply could not blurt out something and address someone familiarly. She simply couldn't carry damaging letters around in her coat pocket for a week just because she forgot to take them out and destroy them. She simply couldn't be trapped under any circumstances.

"But a man is so simple, so transparent, so trusting, so innocent...." His manner was intentionally sanctimonious.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!" Gwen interrupted. "Stop, my friend! The woman may be more discreet, more distrustful, more anxious—but only because she has more to fear. Once let a man get caught, let him be observed, or let him blurt out something, or let his correspondence be found—what then? He denies it! With a coolness, with a face as if—well, with cheek, in short! I know hundreds of cases...."

"From your own experience?"

"No, thank God! It 'simply couldn't happen to me in

any case.' But let me go on. You're just afraid that I'll say something to the point, and that's why you're trying to get me off the track...."

"Why should I be afraid?"

"Because you're vain like all men. In the first place, you don't like anybody but you to say something good, and in the second, you don't like to feel that somebody sees through and through you."

"But *you* haven't let *me* go on. I was going to say, why should I be afraid that you would say something good, something to the point? The fear would not be well founded."

"Oh, Myra, he's common. Don't you think he's simply frightfully common to talk to me like that? But I'm going to say just what I wanted now, straight out. I know hundreds of cases of men who deceive their wives. And when the wife thinks she has finally got some irrefutable proof in her hands, when she has jealously watched her husband for weeks, and has finally seen him or found a letter—what happens then? Then the husband explains that his wife is blind or stupid, she is mistaken, or it was Miss Mayer with whom she saw him, or the letter is quite innocent, or it is a practical joke on the part of a crony. He goes into a rage or he laughs. In any event, he's in the right...."

"I'm astonished!" Fred leaned far back in his easy-chair, crossed his legs, joined his finger-tips and shook his head at her. "I am astonished! Such fullness of wisdom in such a little curly head! You must have had all the assembled washwomen, cooks and children's maids of all your acquaintances instruct you in their marital experiences."

"Good heavens!" Gwen's delicate nostrils twitched contemptuously. "As if the upper ten were any different! To be sure, they call their hang-out a Club. But they deceive their wives just the same."

“Those less decent souls excepted,” said Fred in his measured way, “who do not marry in order to escape that embarrassment. But may I add an observation to your argument, young lady? Why is the husband believed when he offers the most threadbare explanations, when he declares the most striking proof of his infidelity to be innocent? Because women are so anxious to believe! Why do the wives look for proofs? Because they want divorces? Oh, no! Because they want their fears quieted. How is a matter of no moment. There is no more ghastly bare brutality than to tell a jealous woman to her face, ‘You are quite right, I love somebody else!’ A fig for the man who could do such a thing!”

“But why are women so petty and so—so horribly silly?” asked Gwen, her face blazing. “Why do they let themselves be deceived and rejoice when they are deceived still further?”

Fred joined his finger-tips and reflected for a moment.

“Perhaps it can be explained in a single sentence,” he said with a rather malicious smile. “Women always love most that which is closest to them, and men that which is farthest from them. Or to put it more clearly, a woman loves that man the most who has most often possessed her—and a man loves that woman the most whom he will never possess.”

A shade of melancholy passed quickly over his face.

“Shall we look at some illustrations?” he asked, springing up. “Have you any special preferences? Doré or Rackham, Cornelius of Bayros? They’re all here. See, this is beautiful! Do you feel the same enjoyment in handling buckskin? Or do you understand anyone’s taking a really insane delight in it? Just feel this,” he handed Myra a flexible volume in red leather. “Isn’t it splendid?”

“Yes, it’s just like velvet!” said Gwen crossly, swinging her dangling legs faster.

“Velvet!” He shrugged his shoulders indignantly. “This

low little person is trying to provoke me! There are silly people who mean to flatter such leather by saying it's like velvet! As a result, I have a real aversion to velvet. It always gives me a horrible dusty feeling under my fingertips."

Myra opened the book. Her glance chanced on the graceful curlicues of an illustrator whose peculiar style was unfamiliar to her.

"For God's sake!" Fred laid both hands with fingers spread, on the pages of the book. "You may feel the books, but you mustn't look at the pictures. They are not for young ladies. Afterwards, you'll tell Auntie that I've been showing you improper pictures. But I really have young ladies' books in my library and only keep this single volume because of its beautiful binding."

"Are they pictures that one shouldn't look at?" asked Myra calmly. "I know a great many such and they always fascinate me."

"Of course, you may look at them." Fred took his hands away and drew himself up. "I was only jesting. Any sensible person may look at and enjoy them. Look at them as much as you like. Moreover, the book is a rarity. It has been suppressed. You probably know that the illustrator has been banished?"

"No," said Myra in surprise. "I didn't know it! But why?" She eagerly snatched at any subject of conversation that would permit her to take her eyes from the book. She was rather afraid to turn over the page, and even more afraid, if anything, of appearing prudish and cowardly if she put it down without looking through it.

So she laid it open on her knees, glancing rather deliberately in the other direction—for example at Fred's assured and reassuring face.

"Why!" Fred shrugged his shoulders. "Probably a temperance union would expel Kotanyi Janos, too. Not because he drinks, but because he manufactures paprika

and paprika helps along the thirst. Mankind is divided into four classes. Two of these classes, the extremes, belong together. The first class (sequence has nothing to do with rank or I would begin elsewhere) are those who thirst but do not drink. They are the happy ones. The second class comprises those who have thirst but nothing to drink. They are the revolutionists. The third class—those who have all they can drink but are not thirsty. The hypocrites and the bourgeois. The fourth class—those who drink and who are thirsty. They are the happiest of all.

"Then, of course, there are numerous smaller subdivisions. For example, those who stand before a spring but cannot drink because they have no glass. Or those who drink and suffer stomach-aches afterwards. Or those who have a perfectly marvellous thirst, but eat something hot anyway, so that the hock will taste all the better afterwards. Or those who sit in a wine-cellar and go thirsty because there is no white Burgundy. And there are people to whom champagne only tastes good mixed with Port, or with Angostura, who like the sweetness only because there is a trace of bitterness along with it. Or people who pour dark and pale wines together, who mix heavy warm Bordeaux with thin-blooded bubbling champagne in order to make it fizz. Ah, yes, there are tipplers of all sorts, and each believes that his taste is the best. Here is Frederick the Great with Menzel's illustrations; that looks better in your thoughtful hands. But first and foremost, there's our tea inside, gentle, mild, friendly, thought-provoking tea—it will stimulate us to more profitable conversation. This way, ladies."

* * *

One, two hours had passed. It was Gwen and not Myra who first glanced at her watch and said that they must go.

Fred helped them on with their coats and kissed their hands in gratitude. They had to promise to come soon again. Myra promised gladly. The distinguished beauty of these rooms fascinated her. And Fred made a good impression, like most people, when seen among his own things. She looked forward with pleasure to the next chat they would have together. All the fear that had originally restrained her, had disappeared.

But as she opened the heavy street door, she started and turned pale with terror.

"For God's sake, Gwen, stay back! Your uncle, Senator Borgessen is passing! Suppose he sees us! What shall we tell him if he asks us where we're coming from?"

"From the dentist!" said Gwen with a laugh, pushing Myra out on to the street. "People like Fred always live in houses where there are dentists. But Borgessen! Why should I be afraid of Borgessen? He has at least as much reason to be afraid of me as I of him! The whole town knows that he has an affair with his cook. Moreover, he goes to the city every three weeks and throws away his money gambling. He can't do it so well here. His money and Aunt Fanchette's. Poor Aunt Fanchette! But she smells of sweat from the arm-pits—brr! Haven't you ever noticed it? Such women deserve their fate!"

* * *

The air was full of early spring.

There had been terrible storms so that one could not sleep at night, but sat up in bed with a beating heart and listened to the clatter of the tiles on the roof, to the shaking of the windows, and the banging of doors and thought with a shiver of the ships at sea.

Suddenly the storms had stopped for breath.

So abruptly, so without warning, that the silence was even more uncanny than the commotion. The air was heavy, full of sunlight and sweetness, and a strange

fragrance as if it had been borne over fields of hyacinths and had never known tar, fish or salt water.

The people on the street looked at each other as if to say, “Well, what on earth do you think of the weather?” And wherever two acquaintances met, on the street, in the street car or in a shop, they said, “Well, what on earth do you think of the weather?” And all who heard it, made an effort to conceal a smile on their wooden faces, for they had just heard their innermost thoughts revealed.

Myra could not conceal her smile. But there was something so ingratiating, so deluding, about this still, soft air, this caressing sunlight, all this quite improbable and impossible spring, that she was suffused with a warm happiness which sought some expression. And as she could not sing, she smiled.

This was not occasioned by the spring alone. It was the feeling too that she could endure the spring without suffering. She felt well, like someone who moves his limbs for the first time after a long illness, and thinks every breath is a heavenly grace.

“I’m well again,” she told herself over and over like the refrain of a song. “I’m well again, well again!”

XVIII

Gwen and Myra were sitting in a compartment of the moving train. Two elderly ladies, black, stiff and erect, were sitting opposite, watching them sharply.

From time to time, Fred would come through the aisle and make faces, with the desired result that Gwen nearly died laughing.

But if she controlled herself with an effort, she did everything in her power to make Myra laugh.

“Such shamelessness,” she said with pretended indignation. “Just see how that fellow stares in here every time he passes. Next time I’m going to report him to the conductor.”

With an offended mien, she pushed her travelling cap on tighter in order to lean back and cross her legs.

But Myra was not to be made to laugh by any such antic.

“Oh, don’t imagine that he stares in here because he likes your appearance!” she said quietly. “He is either a criminal or a detective looking for a criminal. You can see that at a glance.”

“Good heavens, no!” Gwen continued the game in the highest spirits. “Don’t frighten the wits out of me! I read such a horrible story the other day—about a hardened criminal who was travelling in women’s clothes. Of course he was smooth shaven. But he had such a heavy growth of beard that he had to shave twice a day.” She spoke in a low voice, though just loud enough so that attentive ears could catch every word. With that her glance strayed with intentional carelessness over the rather downy face of the lady sitting opposite. “Just

imagine, he was alone in the compartment with a young woman, on a long journey, and she saw—of course, at first she thought she must be mistaken—but she saw more and more distinctly that the face of the lady sitting opposite was gradually becoming covered with a growth of stubble! It must have been terrible! I think I'd have died of shock. As it was, I made a resolution never to travel alone. That's why I begged you so hard to come with me today."

"I was glad to do it," Myra assumed a worried expression, "if only Emma will take good care of the children. Bubbie was coughing so hard again this morning."

This was too much even for Gwen. For a moment she stared at Myra's immobile, serious face, then she burst out laughing, covering her mouth with her handkerchief and coughing in spasms.

When at last they got off the train, they stood on the platform doubled up with laughter.

Myra stared after the departing coaches. She had not been mistaken—a black-gloved hand rubbed the window clean, and a pointed nose was poked against it. An attentive glance followed her.

Gwen raised her hand to wave farewell, but Myra held her arm.

"Don't," Gwen tried to tear her arm away. "What do I care for the old witches? Good-bye, dear train, run along or run off the track! No, better not do that, there may be some nice people on you!"

"Come," said Myra, "Fred is standing here closing and buckling his travelling bag, just in order not to attract attention—like a real detective. But we agreed that we should leave the station first. Come. He's looking quite desperately in our direction."

They passed through the gates and the waiting-room out on to the street, which lay in a glare of sunlight. Five

minutes later, Fred approached and tipped his hat.

"If I may make a suggestion to you ladies," said Fred, "we will get my travelling bag from the station now, and armed with that, you can seek accommodations at a hotel. Ladies without luggage—that would never do! And you can't tell every chambermaid and waiter the story about the lost last train."

"And you?" asked Gwen.

"I'll borrow some kind of a suitcase from an acquaintance. We can provide ourselves with the most essential requisites for spending the night here on our way to the station. Then you can pack them in my bag and betake yourselves to the 'Emperor'. In the meantime, I'll look up my friend, Schmid, and borrow a suitcase with which to inspire confidence. In half an hour I'll come to the hotel, go to the dining-room, and be insanely astonished to find you there. Agreed?"

"Splendid!" Gwen was again dancing for joy.

"Stop! Stop! Stop! No pirouettes and toe-dancing, if you please! I beseech you, Miss Myra, watch out for the child, she's going to queer us in the hotel and all over town. I don't know whether I dare leave you alone with her for half an hour."

"It is only your presence that makes her so exuberant," Myra assured him. "When she is alone with me, she is perfectly rational."

"Indeed!" There was an odd twitch at the corners of Fred's lips, his short sharp glance flew from Myra's face to Gwen's.

* * *

The early twilight had already fallen. Gwen drew the yellow curtains over the windows and turned on all the electric lights—the chandelier, the lamp on the night-table, the bulb over the wash-basin and the commode—so that the big hotel room was bathed in light.

"That's how I like it." She drew herself up like a purring kitten. "I must have light and warmth." She tried the register under the window, a scorching heat poured out. "It's beautiful! Like that! I detest a cold bedroom. At home the heat is always partially turned off because mamma thinks it's unhealthy to sleep in a warm room. When I'm married, my bedroom will have to be as hot as a hot-house, so that I can sleep without a night-gown or covers!"

She opened Fred's bag and took out their small purchases. When that was done, she rummaged on.

"Just see all the things he has in here! Wonderful soap, smell it, Myra! We'll just keep it here. And a mouth-wash too. Shaving cream—we don't need that. My God, how many brushes! Splendid, buckskin slippers. Not having any slippers with me is the most unpleasant part. I hate running around bare hotel floors in my bare feet. I must see what kind of pajamas he has. Violet and white. Very pretty. Do you want to wear pajamas? I think they're very uncomfortable. But they're very nice to take breakfast in in the morning. Do you know, I think they're better looking on homely people than on pretty ones. Because you don't see their necks and arms. But I'd like to wear them sometime just to see if they suit me, *bleu électrique* perhaps. And you must have strawberry ones, not *fraise*, but strawberry-colored. Judging by the French-German color designations, the French really are color-blind. We call *fraise, fraise écrassée*, and are surprised that we've never seen *fraise*-colored strawberries! Have you never had a shop-girl tell you, 'We haven't got that in blue, only in *bleu*'? Oh, the world is too idiotic. I have such a craving for some good alcohol. What drink do you like best? Do you want the right hand bed or the left? I suppose I'll have to do up my hair again. Shall I wear the cap? It's probably the most ladylike-looking. Are you ready? Shall we go down? How is it that your hair is

always faultless? It isn't so much shorter than mine. Do I look presentable? From the rear, from the front, from all sides? All right, then give me a kiss and come."

Gwen turned again on the stairs. She brandished the key of their room at Myra before dropping it into her purse.

"The key! I took it out of the lock. They mustn't find a gentleman's bag with shaving materials and pajamas in our room. Fred must take it away as soon as he comes."

Myra was a little frightened at the big bright dining-room. She had completely forgotten how to look for a table, how to treat waiters, how to run over a wine-card. It was like an examination. And the worst of it was, that she could not defer the answer to these questions with a "We're expecting someone."

As they entered, her first glance rested on a mirror, and in that mirror she saw Fred's face. He was glancing up over the paper, which he held in both hands. His eyes, which were big and candid and of a deep luminous blue, looked a greeting at her. From his glance, from his firm bright face issued a current of repose and security.

How good that he was here! How good that he was here!

Presently she saw his broad shoulders and fair head in front of the mirror.

Gwen began to giggle and nudge Myra. She made a motion as if she intended to rush over and frighten him by a slap on the shoulder. But Myra held her arm tightly.

"He has seen us," she said softly, "just walk past as if you didn't notice him."

Myra heard his chair scrape behind them and his quick, long stride.

They greeted one another with complete astonishment. Fred looked for a larger table—he had purposely seated himself at a small one—and ordered the waiter to bring over his things.

Carefully he selected a small supper and a good wine.

"Afterwards, we will have champagne," he said when the waiter was out of ear-shot. "Of course," with a hunch of his shoulders, "I will happen on the idea when he's here. 'Really, my dear ladies, we must celebrate this meeting with champagne!' Doesn't that sound quite credible?"

"Very," Myra agreed with a laugh.

"Good heavens, the bag!" Gwen put her hand to her open mouth in terror, glancing from one to the other with her big frightened child's eyes. "Fred, you must take your bag out of our room! What will the maid think of us? But don't get caught, or they'll have you arrested as a thief! That would be a wonderful joke. Watch, I'll give you the key without anyone's noticing."

She rummaged in her purse, which she held under the table on her lap, drew out the key, squeezing it tight in her effort to hide it in her little hand, and thrust her clenched fist under the table.

Fred took the key from her, and slipping it into his trousers pocket, leaned back laughing in his chair.

"Wonderful!" he said, showing his firm white teeth, "now the whole room has seen you pass me the key without anyone's noticing you! Well, I don't mind. I don't feel that I'm compromised any further. You look pretty enough!"

He said it rather disdainfully, with a mocking twitch at the corner of his mouth. But his lowered eyes ran over Gwen with a glance in which there was something intimately appraising, and at the same time, burning and absorbing.

"What am I doing here?" thought Myra with a sudden pang. "Why must I be the witness of their affection? Simply because they want to guard their reputation? Ridiculous. They have certainly been alone together a hundred times before. They can't be afraid that

something will happen that has never happened yet. These two people know one another completely and without reserves. I've been aware of it for months. How could I have forgotten it again? What am I doing here?"

Fred filled his glass.

"To good honest comradeship!" he said.

"I'll drink to that!" Myra raised her glass.

Fred tried to meet her glance with serious, candid eyes. "You're a born comrade," he said sincerely. "Loyal, clever, reticent and daring. You know, we often visualize people in another age, with different lives, in other rôles, so to speak. When I visualize you, it is always a thousand years ago, in the days of the knights and minnesingers. Then I see you in an esquire's costume, following your chosen loved one. There are such figures in the old songs and sagas, and even in my boyhood they always stirred my emotion and admiration. A heroic maiden, without personal ambition, but all for love, enduring all hardships, sharing all doughty deeds, chided and praised, but never receiving the wages of passion until some time in the tumult of battle she receives a blow or a thrust, and the knight himself carries his faithful esquire into the tent in his arms. Then as he peels off the boy's doublet a woman's body lies exposed."

"Don't you think he has talent?" teased Gwen. "He should run more with poets. And what am I? Utter yourself, Mr. Wietinghoff, in what rôle do you prefer to visualize me?"

"You are an unmistakable child of the twentieth century," said Fred scornfully, "silly and precocious, spoiled and childish, fond of dress and arrogant...."

Gwen stamped her feet on the floor and opened her mouth for an unmannerly outcry, but Fred hastened to pacify her.

"But sweet," he said hastily, "quite charming into the bargain, irresistible, enthralling, entrancing, enchanting!"

"It seems so," laughed Gwen. "How did I ever enchant you that you're so frightfully silly? Drink, children, I find the wine glorious and life a wonderfully beautiful affair."

Myra drank to her. The wine made her nerves tingle warmly.

"Comrade," she thought, "a beautiful, a dear word. Comrade! I would like to be that, and I can be. Comradeship. That is my strength. But nobody has ever required it of me yet. I can be a comrade to this little girl and a comrade to this man. Whether they have other relations with one another or not, makes no difference to me, doesn't affect me. Strange, nobody has ever yet wanted me for a comrade, not even Olga. And yet I feel as if a key to my inner nature has been given me in those words. I feel as if I could see into and recognize what is within me. I will always be grateful to Fred for giving me that clue."

They all remained in a good mood. Sometimes Gwen laughed so wantonly that Fred or Myra had to quiet her. Sometimes there was a humorous allusion which Myra did not understand. But she was no longer hurt by it. A good comrade must be trusting and patient in all matters. Must be able to overhear what he does not understand. And must be forever alert, must listen with ears peeled for a cry of need addressed to him.

At the entrance to their room Fred said good night. He lingered over both their hands as he kissed them, though not a fraction of a second longer over one than over the other. But he carried Gwen's fingers to his lips and gazed piercingly into her eyes. He bowed his head low over Myra's hand.

"Tomorrow we'll go to the sea!" Gwen danced exuberantly across the room. "Myra, sweet Myra, isn't life beautiful? And isn't it marvellous to go on a spree with Fred? Aren't you fascinated by him? Well, something like that, you don't have to be afraid of telling me, I'm not

jealous! Only I won't let myself be put out of business.... But otherwise.... You are a little in love with him, you don't have to be afraid to tell me."

"I think you're rather tipsy, little mouse," said Myra, smiling. "It's high time that you crept into your bed."

"Yes, high time—high time," Gwen hummed softly. She undressed while she danced around the room, strewing her things on tables and chairs. "But I'm not tired. Are you tired, Myra? I hope not."

"Why not? What have you got up your sleeve?"

"Oh, I'm going to the ball with you tonight, to the 'feather ball.' Didn't you use to say that when you were a child? It's silly, isn't it? All children have the same stupid expressions and always think they're wonderfully witty, and can repeat them a thousand times over. But when you grow older you don't want to hear the best joke or eat the most beautiful dish twice. Really sad, isn't it? Or as Fred would say, 'The eternal hunger for what is new drives us on.' Otherwise we'd swing around in a circle like horses on a merry-go-round. Therefore, long live the urge to change! What's taking you so everlastingly long, Myra? I'm getting into bed already."

But she did not get into bed at once. She ran about the room in her undershirt, putting this and that in order and looking for something here, and wasted time chattering and loitering.

Myra was already in bed. "You'll catch cold," she said, shaking her head. "How can you dawdle around that way? You were ready a half hour ago. Turn out the unnecessary lights and creep into bed."

Gwen stretched her bare arms over her head.

"I am so restless," she complained, "can't you understand. Ah, Myra, you always act as if you were made of ice and snow. Really don't you feel the wine going through your veins and thudding up against your heart, again and again." She struck her breast regularly

with her clenched fist. “And can’t you feel that it’s spring outside? Have you no longer any roots in the earth so that you can’t feel how the sap is fermenting in you—in you, as in every tree and bush.”

She stopped beside the bureau and laid her arms and her forehead against the smooth wood.

“Sometimes I think that a poor mistreated, sawed up, polished piece of a tree like this still has a spark of life in it. And in spring, when the great orgy is preparing, it begins to feel a pulse and twitching in its poor polished wood. Feel it, there’s a throb like the soft beating of a heart in it. Then I think that the furniture is pleased with me. It feels my life frothing over, and that fulfills its desire and gives it rest, Myra!” With a bound she was on the edge of the bed, and was shaking Myra by the shoulders. “Are you more lifeless than that dead wood? It isn’t true and I don’t believe you are like that!”

She threw her arms around Myra, burrowing with her head among the pillows.

“Why don’t you like me, Myra?” she whispered in her ear. “Tell me, is it because you are in love with Fred? It isn’t true that you’ve never been in love with a woman. And it isn’t true that you could not love me....”

“Love?” said Myra in a toneless voice. “What do you call love?”

“I call love making someone happy—and making myself happy by doing so. I call everything else friendship or idolizing or infatuation, infatuation at most. I want to know what you have against me!”

She knelt on the edge of the bed, tearing the night-gown from her shoulders like a mad woman.

“You must look at me! You must look at me! Where have I any defect that could repel you?”

“You are very beautiful,” said Myra with a painful smile.

“Oh, but you are more!” Gwen threw herself upon

Myra, and kissed her mouth and eyelids, her neck and cheeks.

"I don't want her," thought Myra. "She has opened her heart to me and I have not urged her on. I am his comrade, I am his comrade...."

Rosy red waves surged up. They swept from her heart, over her throat up to her eyes. The room seemed to reel, as if the walls were struggling for breath, as if their heart were palpitating by fits and starts.

Suddenly everything went still and bright. Like a dazzling light, like the blare of a trumpet.

Perhaps a board had creaked in the floor very softly.

Myra started up, alert, sober.

Something was in the room that had not been there before.

A violet blotch. And topping it, Fred's face.

Fred's eyes. Burning. Greedy. Completely unveiled like the eyes of rutting animals. Perfectly naked eyes.

Myra did not cry out.

She threw off the soft body that lay choking her.

A catch-phrase flashed through her mind which she could not forget again. It was the only thing she could think of, and her mind kept repeating it over and over.

"A put up job. All a put up job!"

She sat up and reached for her clothes.

At that moment Fred sprang at her.

"Myra," he stammered, "my sweetest one!"

She slapped his face with the palm of her hand.

He had been prepared for resistance, for kicking, scratching and biting—he would have vanquished her laughingly. But the blow made him stagger back.

Myra slipped into her clothes.

"A put up job," she thought, "a put up job!"

Her hands did not shake in spite of her frantic haste. Not until she was dressed did she cast a quick glance at Fred.

The mark of her hand on his pale face burned like a fiery brand. The wide lids were quivering over his eyes.

A strange feeling took possession of Myra. A furious joy, “I caught him a good one.” And then a dawning realization, “This is the first time that I have ever touched that handsome face—that handsome face.”

She had never formulated it before in thought, it was as if her hands had always longed to stroke that face.

An unutterable sorrow filled her heart. As if she had possessed something beautiful and precious and was first aware of it when it lay ruthlessly shattered and broken at her feet.

She walked quietly to and fro in the room, collecting her things. When she had to pass Fred she walked around him. He did not look at her, but he felt it and shuddered.

Gwen had crept out of her bed. She sat pink and naked on the big feather comforter. She had hunched up her shoulders and was playing rather embarrassedly with her toes.

The door to the adjoining room stood open. It was the door through which Fred had entered.

“A put up job,” thought Myra, “a put up job!”

She went with her hat and coat on to that door. With her hand on the latch, she stopped.

“I am going into the next room,” she said quietly. “I have no desire to leave the hotel in the middle of the night. I will go at seven and leave the door into the hall open.”

Fred turned.

“Miss Rudloff,” he said hoarsely, “Miss Rudloff!”

His two dark eyes in his pale face were like two open wounds.

Myra closed the door behind her and threw the bolt with a creak.

She did not turn on the light.

She knew, she sensed—there were things everywhere,

strange things, his things.

After quite a long while she heard voices from the adjoining room, high and low, muffled and suppressed, but audible.

"Dear God, what won't I have to hear," she thought. "Dear God, give me strength, give me strength. Let me die, if you can, but don't let me go insane, so that I will do something—something perfectly terrible...."

But the worst thing was the odor in the room. The smell of cigarettes, the delicate scent of Russian leather, of soap, of vinegar.

Myra threw the window wide open and moved a chair up to it. The night was cold. Myra trembled no matter how snugly she wrapped herself in her coat.

She thought of the city which she would leave. Where would she go now—whither?

Should she let herself be driven on, homeless, restless, the quarry of passionate desire?

Or die?

Yes, if she could but have believed in sleep.

But stronger at this moment than ever before she felt undeniably, inviolably, that there was in her something indestructible.

She was quite humble before that which she felt within her, with the humility of a mother who feels a strange life stir in her womb.

"My poor soul," she said softly, "what have I done to you? Why have I never thought of taking care of and helping you? Why did I always want to set you wandering in the cold space between the stars? Poor soul, why do I have you, if you merely suffer on my account and I on yours? Sometime I shall know, sometime I shall learn all. I would not like to die, no, I would not like to die before I know why I have lived."

The memory of Eccarius crossed her mind—"No one ought to die before he has learned to love death."

“No, I do not love death. I do not fear him, but I do not love him. I will learn to love him. I will live in order to learn to love death. Perhaps that is why we have to live. And perhaps that is why we have to suffer.”

The voices in the next room hushed. The strange familiar odor had disappeared from the room.

In the sky the stars were paling before the first feeble light of a dawning March morning.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes

This text was transcribed from the unchanged reprint edition in the collection *HOMOSEXUALITY. Lesbians and Gay Men in Society, History and Literature*, Arno Press: New York, 1975. Materials from a later date than the original publication year 1948, such as series title, editorial information, or publisher advertisements, have been omitted.

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The original spelling was mostly preserved. A few obvious typographical and punctuation errors were silently amended. All other changes are shown here (before/after):

- ... held the little flame for her asked in a casual tone, "You are a ...
  ... held the little flame for her he asked in a casual tone, "You are a ...
- ... up on the cushion of a chair and lit the gas-jet. I was evidently ...
  ... up on the cushion of a chair and lit the gas-jet. It was evidently ...
- ... is, if Gisela with allow me." ...
  ... is, if Gisela will allow me." ...

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