The Frog

WILLIAM
DUDLEY
PELLEY

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THE FOG

By William Dudley Pelley

THE GREATER GLORY

THE FOG



THE FOG

A NOVEL

BY

WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY



BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1925

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TO MY OWN BOY AT EIGHTEEN

"DANDELION FARM,"
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CONTENTS

BOOK ONE

DRIZZLE AND MURK

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THIS FRECKLED WORLD	3
II	THE DRESDEN DOLL	12
III	MORE PARENTS	21
IV	THE FAIRY FOUNDLING	31
V	IMPRESSIONS	38

VI THE ODD STICK 43

VII EXQUISITE THINGS 51

VIII PRAYER 58

IX BENDING THE TWIG 76

X THE SEX 89

XI POET IN HOMESPUN 102

XII FIRST COMPLICATIONS 120

XIII GOD AND THINGS 131

XIV CONSIDER THE WORM 141

XV VALLEY LAMPS 160

XVI More Romancing 167

XVII Valleys of Avalon 187

XVIII Another Case 203

XIX Tact and Discretion 213

XX Sidetracked 227

BOOK TWO

SUNSHINE GLORIOUS

CHAPTER PAGE

I Too Easy Money 245

II Groping Horribly 267

III Good Resolutions 291

IV Poor Sow's Ear 297

V Always Justified 306

VI Infinite Patience 316

VII Fine Feathers 326

VIII Drifting 347

IX The Last Straw 353

X First Light 367

XI Man's World 391

XII Until When? 401

XIII Interlude 410

XIV Sunshine Glorious 419

XV The Amethyst Moment 439

XVI Sympathy 447

XVII Entangling Alliances 458

XVIII East is West 474

XIX Via Lohengrin 484

XX Hill Tops 495

BOOK ONE

DRIZZLE AND MURK

THE FOG

CHAPTER I

THIS FRECKLED WORLD

I

I straddled, precariously balanced, atop a seven-foot fence marking the northern boundary of the little Vermont school yard. As this was the opening morning for the September term, I had left home painfully dressed in the full armor of country-village scholarship. Already the puckering-string of my blouse was broken and my new dollar-and-a-quarter boots were hot upon my feet. No matter! Noisily on the philosophical old boards I whacked a barrel stave. I had aspirations toward making the lower world of pinafored humanity remark nervously of my valor and horrible propensities for breaking an arm. But I did not address that pinafored world directly. No such aplomb is possessed by a youngster of eight.

A new boy edged his way into the yard twenty minutes before the bell rang and moved along my fence. He concentrated upon tallying its knotholes. I noted that he was a stranger and immediately took his measure.

"'Lo!" I greeted him.

"'Lo, yourself!" he responded.

"What's yer name?" I demanded, piqued.

"Name, name, Puddin' Tame; ask me again and I'll tell yer the same!"

"Aw, don't get fresh!" I advised him. "I could 'do' you with one hand tied behind me—if I wanted."

"My ma licks me if I fight—when I'm dressed up. If it wasn't for that, you couldn't." And the new boy looked at me gladiatorially, expecting me to believe this bravado without a question.

Incipient hostilities were halted by the appearance —or condition—of the new boy's face. Twenty-four years have passed since that morning. I have beheld many boys. Yet never since a freshly molded clay Adam was pronounced a reasonably passable job and stood against the nearest rock to dry has one human being looked into the features of another, regardless of age, and beheld such freckles.

I once knew a boy who had thirty-one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four freckles, not counting those behind his ears or a few odd thousand remaining, sprinkled across the back of his neck. The average boy manages to worry along with eighteen or twenty thousand. But the infinity of freckles upon that new boy's face was beyond all computation. The Lord might have known the number of hairs in his head, but there He stopped. It would have been hopeless even to try to separate those freckles so to compute them, anyhow.

"Aw, you don't need to tell me your old name," I condescended. "You're one o' them Forges that's moved up to Brown's."

“Howja guess?”

“I know by your freckles. I heard Lawyer Campbell call your folks ‘them freckled Forges.’ Your ma’s got ’em and so’s your pa. You’ve all got ’em—like measles ’n itch.”

Instead of growing more bellicose, the new boy became apologetic.

“Yeah, but they ain’t got so many as me—Ma and Pa ain’t. Anyhow, I can’t help it. I got a torpedoed liver.”

“You gotta *what*?”

“A torpedoed liver!”

“What’s a torpedoed liver?”

He tried to explain. In the light of a maturer understanding, I assume he meant a torpid liver. But I was little wiser than he that morning, so one liver was as good as another.

“Year, but they ain’t got so many as me—Ma and Pa leaves. Ma says all us Forges has got too much iron in our blood and it makes us rust all over, outside.”

“Iron in yer blood!” I looked at the Forge boy incredulously. Was he spoofing me?

“Howja know?” I demanded. “Can yer hear it clank together?”

I had a mental suggestion of sundry billets and bars of cold steel, wagon springs, old horseshoes, machine castings circulating through the new boy’s system and wondered how he managed it.

“Naw,” he went on. “’Tain’t that kind of iron. It’s all melted or ground up to powder or sumpin’. I ain’t

never heard it make no noise, anyway."

"Maybe we ain't got no floatin' iron in our family," I defended, "but my Aunt Lucy's got sumpin' just as good and horrible. She's got floatin' ribs, three of 'em. Betcha you ain't got nobody in your old family with floatin' ribs."

It was now the small Forge boy's turn to show incredulity. And momentarily I exulted.

"But ribs don't float," he contradicted. "They're hitched to yer backbone and run around yer stomach like hoops. I seen a pitcher of a man with his skin off, once. If they was loose and floated, you'd be all flat and hollow and sort of pushed in across your chest."

"Is that so?" I demanded hotly. "Maybe you know my Aunt Lucy's shape better'n me!" This stranger asked me to believe he had iron circulating in his system and yet doubted that mere bones could follow suit.

It was true that Aunt Lucy's irresponsible ribs had given me much perplexity as to just where they floated, or where they would go if they suddenly lost their buoyancy and sank. Still, I knew my claim had a basis in fact. I had overheard too many first-hand testimonials of her abstruse condition from the fearfully and wonderfully unjointed lady herself.

Before I could conjure up more human freaks, however, related to me by facetious Nature, with a diplomacy which has always been charming, young Nathan Forge introduced a new subject.

"We just moved to Brown's place last month from Gilberts Mills," he declared. "And we got five bedrooms and a vegetable cellar and cockroaches an'

everything. An' I got a dog named Ned that don't get sick when he catches skunks. He caught seven one autumn and brung 'em to me. But one wasn't shook quite dead yet, and I had to stay in bed a week while they buried my clothes. Pa wanted to bury me, too, but Ma wouldn't stand for it!"

"That's nothin'," I countered. "We gotta cat at our house named Apron-strings 'cause she's always behind you when you turn 'round. An' all you gotta do to make her have kittens is *watch her*! My father says, 'Look twice at that dratted little beast and she has young all over the place' He's goin' to dig a special well to drown 'em in when he gets time. He said so."

"We got two wells over to our house already," Nat retorted,—"one to drink from and one to fish things out of. Campbell's pants is down the last one."

"Campbell's pants!"

"My father said so. Lawyer Campbell come over the day we moved in, to see about the hay. He'd bought some new pants to the Center and had 'em in a bundle. On the way home he missed 'em. When Pa heard, he says to Ma: 'He might look down that well in the south lot! I've fished everything out of it but money!' he says. 'Bet I could find Campbell's pants if I fished long enough.'"

Evidently the Forges occupied exceptionally interesting premises. I congratulated myself that I had been discreet about punching Nat's jaw. I would cultivate this new boy.

Not once during all this, however, had we looked each other straight in the eye. That is another unethical thing between boys of eight. We went through gyrations with hands, legs, elastic torsos. We

kicked at stones in the sand. We pried them loose and threw them. But our faces were always averted.

“Got any brothers or sisters?” I finally demanded.

“Yeah. I gotta sister.”

“Pshaw! How old?”

“Four. But she ain’t no good—only to tag ’round and squeal to Ma when I skip my chores.”

“Sure. I know. Girls always spoil everything. Ain’t it awful?”

“Awful’s no name for it,” agreed Nathan.

II

I learned other things of Nathan regarding his family that morning and in the day and week ensuing.

The Forges had a cow, a grievance against the selectmen, a hard time to get along and a mortgage. Nathan’s mother was five years older than his father. The latter had once aspired to be a minister. A premature marriage, however, had sent him to the humbler calling of tapping and heeling shoes. Along with farming in a small way to help out with domestic expenses, Johnathan Forge now proposed to cobble shoes at his new residence in East Foxboro.

On his father’s side the boy’s ancestry was English, —that bigoted, Quilpish English which contends that a man’s wife and children are his personal chattels and foot-scrapers. A neurasthenic Yankee wife resented the absurdity but was too weak-charactered to do much more than scream about it. It puzzled me in those days to hear him orate to my father about “every man’s house being his castle.” I could never

discern evidences of a “castle” about the flat-roofed, drab-colored, hillside home for which Johnathan had paid the Browns five hundred dollars. Nevertheless, he ran his castle as he pleased, and all the neighbors could do was shrug their individual and collective shoulders and mind their own business.

Johnathan was a short man with watery blue eyes. And his mouth never for a moment failed to register that the world “had it in” for him. His antidote for this mundane conspiracy was Religion. Religion completely strangled his sense of humor—if he ever possessed a sense of humor—and kept it strangled. As his children approached maturity, he went to and fro in the earth and moved up and down in it with a stuffed club in his clothes always loaded to the point of explosion, fearing that some one was treading on his authority. He took his religion seriously, Johnathan did, and it gave him a sickening amount of trouble.

Nathan’s mother also took life and religion seriously. There was no other way to take it, with Johnathan for a husband. As Johnathan aged, he became stout. As Anna Forge aged, she became thin. But as I first recall her in those East Foxboro days, she was a fairly well-rounded woman with terribly work-reddened hands. She too had weak eyes,—greenish, pin-pointed eyes. Her neurasthenia and hard work ultimately “wore the flesh all off her”, and soon she had contracted the nervous affliction of a twitching face. She did her work in the hardest manner possible and was always tired. She had a sallow, jaundiced complexion and it flavored her days and nights.

Nat’s little sister Edith was hardly more than a baby. Yet even at four years she had her father’s

petulant mouth and her mother's whine.

Nathan bore no resemblance to either parent. He was just a freckle-faced, snub-nosed, wonder-eyed, good-natured, little country boy. Quickly I found myself attached to him and he became my chum.

With all due respect to ninety-nine per cent. of that specific sect who are emphatically all that the Forges were not, the latter were Methodists. They were more. The village had it they were "shouting Methodists."

I knew well enough what a regular Methodist was. My own father and mother were Methodists. But a "shoutin' Methodist" was a novelty and a mystery. I flew wildly from the Forge shop one Saturday morning when, after watching Johnathan at work on a pair of child's shoes for a time, I summoned the nerve to ask:

"Say, Mr. Forge, tell me sumpin', will you? I'm a brother Methodist and all like that, you know, but not a 'shoutin' Methodist', like all the village calls you, and, well, I'd like to know what a 'shoutin' Methodist' is. Would you mind shoutin' for me a coupla times so's I can see how you do it—and why?"

Johnathan not only shouted for me but he threw something at me for good measure. I believe it was the nearest old shoe. Both of which had nothing to do with religion. I stopped running only when I had crossed the lower village. I hid the balance of that forenoon under Artemus Wright's blacksmith shop, lamenting that probably I would never be allowed to play with my chum again.

It was in 1897 that the Forges bought the Brown place. Rumors of war filled the land. If war came, my

father was going. My mother cried a lot about it.

III

The girlish young teacher gave Nat and me opposite aisle seats in school that autumn morning, though quickly Nathan went above me. His grandmother had taught him to read; he was already familiar with Æsop's "Fables" and Grimm's "Fairy Tales."

Late that afternoon, Nat and I walked home together,—down the hill, through East Foxboro village, past the Methodist and Baptist churches, off on the Center road toward Brown's hill. The distance was only a mile, yet it took us three hours.

Scuffing up the dust, stopping to throw stones at trees or skipping them across the surface of the Causeway—the great sheet of water reaching on both sides of the road just before we started to climb Brown's hill—day after day during that autumn we covered that distance together.

The Causeway does not look so "great" now. Nathan and I drove over there the other day. The place was only a depressing mud flat, rank with stagnant water, grotesque stumps and tall rushes, where town loafers were trying to hook discouraged hornpout.

But to make slow progress homeward—to our "chores" perhaps, but also to fathers and mothers and faces and scenes which come now only in dreams, scaring out chipmunks, sighting an occasional sand rabbit or woodchuck, sensing the country air sensuous with ripened blackberry, goldenrod, milkweed, or the roadside pines in

Hadley's pasture—for that privilege again, dear God, Nathan and I would give of our lives many years!

For this is the first sorrow in the heart of a man, that he should have known boyhood and never been able to appreciate its heritage until the clocks of time are all run down and the chambers of his heart are peopled with ghosts!

IV

In February of the year following, the *Maine* was mined in Havana harbor. I remember my father coming home through a storm of raw, wet sleet and leaving his horse unharnessed while he entered the kitchen to read the headlines of the Boston paper to my mother. In great block letters on the front page was the grim word—"WAR!"

Neighbors came in after supper. Opinion had it that fighting would follow at once. They conversed as though death were in the house. While they talked, I tried to listen. I fell asleep under the sofa, and when I awoke I was in bed with mother.

I could not understand why she hugged me to her heart so fiercely and sobbed in the winter darkness.

Spring came quickly after that. It seems only yesterday that Nat and I attended the "flag-raisings" and public gatherings down on the village Common, with the boys in blue getting ready for Chickamauga. I can hear again the martial band music; I can see the flash of the drillmaster's sword and hear the thumps of the rifle butts in the open door of the town engine house where "Captain" Jack Halloway was drilling the Foxboro boys. I watched them with throttled heart and dry, hot throat.

My father was among them!

Never shall I forget that last breakfast at home, how smart he looked in his stiff blue uniform and how heavy his rifle felt when I tried to lift it and point it at a target. I remember too that he and mother avoided each other's eyes during that breakfast. Mother did not go to the station. She could not trust herself. I tried to see dad as the train pulled out but the crowd engulfed me.

All my life since he has been but a picture in a plush album on the center table in mother's parlor—an erect little man with a fierce mustache, his slouch hat with crossed-muskets showing plainly.

Nathan's father did not go to war. He said war "stood condemned by Religion." He quit cobbling to move down to the Center and open a store.

Micah Baker's eldest son Sela came home on a furlough the following autumn. I remember his rumpled soldiering clothes, the rakish angle of his hat, how he stood with his back to the kitchen range, warming himself. He had been ill with fever and wore an overcoat, roughly tied at the neck with a piece of rope. My mother's face was ashen as she waited for him to speak. As he was about to leave, he remarked quietly:

"Herb wanted I should tell you his last thoughts was of you and the boy. And ... he didn't suffer no more'n could be expected. He said especially to tell the boy his dad's sorry he can't be on hand to help him as he grows to manhood."

That summer we sold the farm, mother being unable to work it with father never coming back. We also moved down to the Center. Mother happened to get a house near the Forges. So Nathan and I set our

little feet upon the long journey that begins in vales of opal mystery and the wondertime of early childhood, winds pathetically through twenty years of fog while growing boys are groping to find themselves and hew their niche and accomplish their task, ... knows perhaps a few golden hours of life's philosophic, sunlit afternoon, then ends in an afterglow of still greater mystery out behind the farthest star.

CHAPTER II

THE DRESDEN DOLL

I

Caleb Gridley, the girl's father, ran the tannery in the larger town of Paris, twenty miles west of the Foxboros. He was a big-bodied, small headed man, with iron fists, a paving-block jaw and legs like telephone poles. Some of his words weigh seven to the pound and he did not secure them from his Bible, either, if he ever read his Bible.

Mrs. Clementina Gridley, the girl's mother, claimed she was related on her mother's side to a duchess. Then to double rivet the exclusive ancestry, on her father's side she had vague claims to a relative who had crossed on a certain well-known occasion to this stern and rock-bound coast, landing at Plymouth and marking the commencement of the antique furniture business. Mrs. Gridley was short and in upper contour resembled a barrel. She clothed herself and little daughter in purple and fine linen, and both of them toiled not, neither did they spin. She brought the first lorgnette to Paris, hung its first pair of sunfast overdrapes, called old Bill Chew, the

colored man-of-all-work, the “coachman”, affected to be shocked when old Caleb blew his tea in a saucer and tried unsuccessfully to start a local aristocracy.

These two—a mother with an ingrowing consciousness of her own grandeur and a father who endured it because he was too engrossed in making money to give his family much attention—were the little Gridley girl’s mental, moral and spiritual handicaps. More than one good woman’s fingers itched to paddle her; more than one good man would have counted it a special dispensation from Providence if he could have spent five minutes alone with her and thoroughly boxed her ears. But Bernie’s extremities were never paddled and Bernie’s ears were never boxed.

At four, little Bernice was told she was made of better clay than the ordinary run of Eve’s daughters and at six she was sure of it. At eight she frequently mentioned the family “blood.” At ten she had queried Mrs. Joseph Fodder if “common children were not terribly coarse and mortifying” and “why did the Creator ever make the lower classes so disgustingly prolific?”

Yet the little snob was pretty, pretty as a Dresden doll. And the Duchess kept her starched and ironed and curled and furbelowed until the tired mothers of the disgustingly prolific lower classes gave up all competition in despair.

For the opposite and lower end of the social seesaw the Forges as a family would have answered as well as any caste exhibit to the county. Living in Foxboro Center was enough. Could any social good come out of Foxboro Center? Certainly not! Mute, inglorious Miltons might infest the place, but the Gridleys—at least, the female Gridleys—aspired to

nothing in common with mute, inglorious Miltons.

II

It was a pleasant July afternoon, after we had moved to the Center, that the head of the House of Gridley hitched his sleek black mare to a neat piano-box buggy and drove twenty miles eastward to call upon the House of Forge. It was not a social call. The head of the House of Gridley left all such nonsense to his Duchess. John Forge owed old Caleb three lapsed payments for harness leather and old Caleb intended "to get his money or bust hell wide open."

When he drove forth from the Gridley gates to "bust hell wide open" that afternoon beside him was the Dresden doll. She was ironed and starched and curled and furbelowed—as usual—and she kept the sun from her peach-bloom complexion by a tiny, beribboned parasol. They had not ridden a block before old Caleb referred to this parasol. He said, "Keep that trick umbrella away from my hat or I'll smash it!" Old Caleb was not at all aristocratic like his Duchess.

The Gridleys reached Foxboro Center. John Forge was at home, "getting in" his hay. Arrived there, old Caleb descended, backed the mare around and unhooked her check-rein. He trusted her to remain without hitching, so long as her nose was in the clover growing outside the Forge front fence. Thereupon Caleb went down into the fragrant hayfields in search of Johnathan. The mare spread her front legs and began to enjoy herself.

Little Bernice-Theresa's first maneuver was to unwind the reins from the whip. Holding them in one hand and the foolish little parasol in the other,

she greatly hoped sundry persons would appear and remark upon what a marvelous child was this, who could assume jurisdiction of an untied mare while her elders were flagrantly absent.

It may be recorded that some one did appear; Nathan Forge “materialized” beside the picket fence and the drama, old as the hills eternal, was commenced.

Nathan Forge, living in Foxboro Center, was naturally of the earth, earthy. He was likewise of the soil, soily, very much soiled in comparison with the starched and beribboned daintiness of little Bernice-Theresa. His hair needed cutting; his eyes were vague. His face had grown a few odd-thousand additional freckles with the summer vacation and one great toe was wrapped in a horribly unsanitary rag.

This product of the disgustingly prolific lower classes beheld the smart rig halted before the house and was seized with an exasperating interest.

Now every one who has been a boy, or who owns a boy, appreciates that while sisters are, generally speaking, of no earthly consequence or account whatsoever, there are girls and *girls*! This is better explained by studying the behavior of such a boy in propinquity with a feminine stranger who had first been properly starched and ironed and curled and furbelowed, though not conventionally introduced.

The boy does not place his feet upon the surface of the world in a methodical, orderly manner, maintaining himself in a status of physical poise and bodily rectitude. He demonstrates the difference between girls and *girls* by the knots in which he proceeds to tie his spine. No boy ties his spine into

knots for his sister. So Nat made his first concessions to The Sex by starting to wind himself in and out through the holes where pickets were missing in his father's fence.

I forego a record of the twistings and turnings, the writhings and contortions, which ensued to attract the attention of the Fayre Ladye and bind her to his chariot forever. He did not neglect to rub his backbone on the gatepost four times, whirl about without upsetting himself three, hit the trunk of an adjacent tree with stones twice, and balance a stick on his nose once. Then he climbed the gate and swung head downward in horrible danger of dashing out his brains.

"Lo!" he greeted. And he grinned.

The crass effrontery, the *lèse-majesté*, of daring to address Her Royal Highness was bad enough. But that grin!

Bernice-Theresa Gridley sat stunned. She could conjure up no phase of etiquette for meeting the situation but a posture of frigid silence and staring stiffly ahead. He was less than the dust beneath her carriage wheel. True, he wasn't yet beneath her carriage wheel but he might land there in a moment if he didn't stop trying to twist himself into a human interrogation point. Why didn't her father come? Oh, the mortification of it!

"Say, what's yer name?" persisted this awful progeny of the lower classes.

A numbing silence.

Then, though embarrassed with his daring, Nathan announced:

"That ain't the way to drive a horse. Girls don't

know nothin' bout animals, anyhow. I know how to drive a horse better'n that! I'll climb up there and show yer!"

Bernice-Theresa jumped.

"You horrid boy!" she shrieked. "If you as much as touch one of these buggy wheels, I'll have my father put you in jail where the rats will run *right over your face*!" It was the most hideous fate that Bernice-Theresa's nine years could conceive.

"Huh! I ain't afraid o' rats! We caught a big one in our trap last night. You stay here and I'll fetch him! You could take him home and stuff him and trim up a room with him."

Acting on this generous impulse, Nathan quitted the gate and ran to get the rigor-mortis exhibit. And in the ensuing moments, confronted by the horror of his return, little Bernice-Theresa suffered all the tortures of the damned. A filthy, intimate boy from the disgustingly productive lower classes had gone to bring her a rat! Dead! He would handle it. He might even drop it in the buggy. She must fly while flying was possible.

But she could not climb down from the vehicle and fly with legs. That would be common and crude; beside, where in the vicinity would she fly? No, it was far more consistent for the daughter of a Duchess to fly with a horse and buggy. Therefore, ere the unspeakable vulgarian could return, Bernice-Theresa got into action.

She shut her parasol and separated the reins. She nearly pulled herself from the slippery seat, straining to raise the mare's unwilling head from the clover. The animal's flank was slapped sharply. When Nathan returned to the gate, the road in front of the

house was empty.

Nathan headed for the lower mowing. He approached old Caleb without introduction.

“You gotta walk home, mister!” was his way of announcing the news. “Or else you better chase your buggy. Yer horse has runned off with it hitched behind him!”

Old Caleb came up through the Forge yard in four-foot jumps. He stopped for a speechless instant at the gate.

“If you’re goin’ right home, you might tell her I didn’t mean to scare her,” explained Nathan. “We caught this rat yesterday and I was going to let her have it——”

“You little blatherskite! Scared her, did you? So she took the lines and drove off home!” Caleb shook his knotty fist under John Forge’s nose. “If my girl’s hurt, I’ll sue you for this! I’ll sue you anyhow, for the leather.”

Thereupon old Caleb started after the rig in ludicrous hops.

Hours later he reached Paris. His paving-block jaw was still adamant but he had discovered no traces of buggy, daughter or wreckage en route. By a miracle Bernice-Theresa had reached home without mishap. The tragedy was this: Finding at length that she had arrived at her destination in safety, all parental solicitude vanished. Caleb Gridley took the progeny of a Duchess across his knee *and spanked her*!

As a result of that spanking, his wife made his life so miserable that he sued Johnathan Forge at law. He had to vent his spleen somewhere. And a week later, being served with papers by the sheriff,

Johnathan Forge also had to vent his spleen somewhere and went in search of a freckled-faced little boy.

Without explanation, simply desiring something weak on which to wreak his temper, stifling his conscience with the argument that the boy's misbehavior had frightened the Dresden doll and precipitated the whole calamity, "Brother" Forge of the local church belabored a contorting little body with a harness tug until screams and howls brought his mother.

Nat left his father and his mother "having it out." He limped painfully, still sobbing, up the road to my house. We climbed to our haymow together and Nathan finished his weeping down beside me in the hay.

III

That was the first time Nathan and I seriously discussed The Sex,—when the boy's grief was spent and in its wake came philosophy.

"Gee, but she was pretty, Billy," he confided. "She was different, too, than girls here 'round Foxboro. I sort of felt funny in my insides when I seen her. Mabel Turner now—she's fat and red-faced and her clothes is always coming apart somewheres. Mary Anderson, she's always laughin' and makin' fun of my freckles, and Alice Blake's got freckles worse'n me, and warts besides. But this girl—gee, Billy, she was swell. I wonder why was it I felt so funny about her right off as soon as I seen her. I never felt that way about no girl before. Most girls is—well, just girls!—you know!—no good!"

“That’s love!” I declared largely.

“Love?” Nathan was awed. “Then love’s swell, ain’t it?”

“Depends how you look at it. Sometimes it is. Then again it ain’t.”

Nat pondered this. It was deep. Finally in a whisper he asked:

“Billy, why is it that girls is different from boys, and women from men?”

“It’s on account of babies,” I expatiated. “Benny Mayo said so. A man told him once.”

“How, on account o’ babies, Billy?”

Thereupon I recounted boyhood’s version of the intricacies of obstetrics, as viewed by boys who are not wholly fools.

I hold no brief for myself. The parent who will not concede that mere children do not seek light on life’s greatest mystery—where do people come from?—and ultimately discuss it, is an ass. Only there was no perverted mischief on my part about it. Nathan wanted to know something. I possessed the information. It was no more than as if he had asked me how to make a willow whistle or bait a chuck-trap.

“Gee!” exclaimed Nathan frightenedly, “suppose it’s so, Billy?”

“There’s sumpin to it,” I averred. “We’re all here, ain’t we? I’m gonna ask my Ma.”

“So’m I,” declared my chum.

Nathan finally started homeward. That night he sought elucidation for the mystery exactly where it

was normal he should seek it,—from his mother. But instead of supplying his need in a healthy, kindly fashion fitted to his years, Anna Forge did a narrow, vicious thing.

She whirled on her small son with an alacrity which startled the senses out of him. And she administered a shock to the sensitive boy whose effects did not entirely vanish with manhood.

“Who put such ideas into your head?” she demanded hysterically.

“Nobody ‘specially, Ma. I was just thinkin’, that’s all.”

“No! Some one put the idea into your head. Who was it?”

Nathan began to cry.

“B-B-Billy and me was talkin’ about it in the haymow this afternoon.”

“So Billy did it! I shall see Billy’s mother in the morning and have him horsewhipped for what he told you.”

Nathan began to cry harder.

“Why, Ma?” he demanded in panic.

“Because all such things are vile and dirty and filthy and horrible! Little boys who think them don’t go to heaven and have angels love them. They go to the Bad Place and are burned in fire forever and ever. You know how it hurt when you burnt your finger on my flatiron yesterday? Imagine you were burnt all over your body like that—and there was no way to stop it and you just had to suffer terribly with never a moment to sleep or forget. That’s what happens to bad little boys who say such things or

even think them!"

"But why is it bad, Ma? Billy didn't mean to be bad. We just wondered, that's all. I can't help thinking about 'em, can I?"

"Oh, what a wicked, wicked little boy! Your dear mother will be up in heaven and she won't have any little son with her. Her little son will be down in the fires of hell—burning for always and always!"

The Forge woman pictured eternal torment so vividly that Nathan grew hysterical. When the woman had the boy worked into such a state that he was too terrified to stay alone in the dark because of the devils waiting to grab him, she made him promise never to think about girls or women or babies again. Sniveling, the little shaver promised.

His mother went to her bedroom and narrated the affair to her husband. Johnathan was for thrashing the boy soundly at once.

"No—you've given him one whipping to-day and one whipping a day is enough. I think I've scared him so badly that he won't think of the subject again. And to-morrow I shall certainly see Billy's mother. If she doesn't chastise her dirty-minded young one, I shan't let Nathan go on playing with him."

Grumbling, John Forge was persuaded. Next day Mrs. Forge went into indignant session with my mother.

"Yes, Billy catechised me in the same way," the latter responded. "I told him what I thought it sane and reasonable to tell a lad of his years. He'll learn it outside, anyway. Probably he'll get a sordid, vulgar, perverted version. I don't believe you can scare these things from the minds of live-wire children, nor stifle

the most normal impulses of growing boyhood. I for one shan't try. As my boy grows I want him to feel that he can come to his mother at any time with his problems, especially his girl problems, without having the immortal daylights scared out of him or made to feel that he's a criminal. It ain't natural, Anna Forge, and so it ain't common sense."

"My boy shall not go on playing with yours, if that's the sort of thing they're talking."

"Suit yourself, Anna Forge. I believe your philosophy's wrong and you'll live to rue it."

"I don't have to be told what's decent for my own young one!"

"Maybe you do and maybe you don't. That's yet to be proven."

Anna Forge stalked homeward. The two women did not speak for a month. But Nat's mother had done a malicious thing that day. She had only turned the barb of my friend's curiosity inward and prodded that worst enemy of the human race to attack her small son viciously: *Repression*.

CHAPTER III

MORE PARENTS

I

Over the meadows and far away in the dreamy hush of summer days; lying amid scented haycocks and watching the castling clouds drift away like floating fairy isles in a sea of turquoise; listening to the church bells of a quiet Sunday morning; hearing the clear, distant note of a trombone across the valley from some farmhouse in the afterglow; watching the log sleds toil up the hill past our homes into the cold, carmine glory of winter sunsets. Boyhood's Memory Book is an anthology of little things—sweet, sad, haunting, all vital, ever poignant with heart-hunger—calling us back to live in their atmosphere again, if only for a single blessed day.

Somehow Nat and I fail to remember the ending of the Spanish war as we recall the beginning. Occasionally we would be loitering about the station when trains pulled in and sun-bronzed men in rumpled blue would swing off in pairs, with blanket rolls around their bodies, thump their rifles down in the corner of the nearest lunchroom and appear too

ravenously hungry even to flirt with the girl who presided behind the sandwiches and wedges of leathery pie beneath glass globes.

The war did not stop. It petered out. I will not say I did not cry many times in the night when my mother cried, because both of us missed father. But the war was not for Nathan and me,—not for our generation to bear. *Our* war was coming later. We found food of some kind available when we hungered and boys are not epicures. So long as that food was forthcoming, and we had a place to sleep at night, wars or endings of wars affected us not We were too occupied with things that were close to us and close to the soil.

One afternoon in the spring of 1917, before we went to war, Nathan and I were walking together when we came upon a crowd of deadly serious youngsters playing in a vacant lot. One boy, tied securely, was arousing the neighborhood with his shrieking.

“We’re playin’ he’s a German interned for perdition,” one of the lads explained.

“*Per*dition?” exclaimed Nathan.

“Yeah! Oratin’ against the government and tryin’ to stop the war fer them that wanner fight. Intern fer perdition, doncher understand? Interned for perdition!”

“Kids don’t change much, Bill,” commented Nat, with a sad smile, as we resumed our way. “Remember the day we played ‘Hang the Spy’ and almost succeeded?”

“I remember it, Nat,” I said. “But not because it has anything to do with the sameness of boyhood in

different generations. I remember it for what happened to you afterward—what you got for it."

Nathan sighed. We paced a long way in silence. It was not hard to recall the rear-tragic events of that afternoon and their aftermath.

II

We caught Nathan duly as the Castilian spy, and made him "surrender his papers." A court-martial passed fatal judgment upon him. He was led out beneath one of the trees in Mrs. Fairbank's orchard and ordered to mount "the scaffold", a dilapidated barrel. Around a high limb I succeeded in tying one end of a rope. It had a slip noose at its dangling end about eight feet from the ground. After much perspiration I got this noose over Nathan's head.

"There's too much slack in it," the condemned man suggested, anxious that there should be no bungle in the ceremony to spoil the grandeur. "When I'm hung, my feet'll touch the ground and then I won't be! You better slip it further down, Billy—under my arms or round my waist."

Rather than reclimb the tree and retie the rope, I conceded.

A little French boy named Beauchamp was commissioned to kick away the barrel and "send the miserable felon to the wrath of a jealous God." We had somewhere heard it phrased so.

Rolland Beauchamp played his part perfectly. In fact, the whole execution was a bit too perfect. On a frenzied run our mothers started for that orchard when from under the biggest, highest tree began the wildest and most horrible howling that ever

disturbed the quiet of pastoral Vermont.

The spy, on being hung, had thought better of his fate. It wasn't a bit of fun to be hung. Yet one could not altogether blame him. Never was a spy hung as our spy was hung.

I had slipped the noose too far down Nathan's body. When the barrel went out, the upper half of his torso outweighed his legs. He was whipped upside down in a twinkling and hung there ignominiously, kicking wildly 'twixt terra firma and the stars.

This in itself wouldn't have been so distressing if he had not been suspended in a slipnoose. The more he kicked and bellowed the sharper it tightened.

"We tried to hang him!" cried the terrified little French boy.

"Tried!" wailed a wrathful mother when she beheld her offspring suspended upside down, just out of reach.

"We could get him down with a ladder, if we only had one!" volunteered the small Mayo boy who had been responsible for all this brilliant business. "Mr. Simpson's got one, a mile down the river. I tell you what!" he suggested enthusiastically to Mrs. Forge, "you come and ask my mother if I can hitch up our horse and I'll go after it! I could make it in less'n an hour an' not half try!"

"And leave this boy to be squeezed to death? I never saw a Mayo around Foxboro yet that wasn't a fool!" Mrs. Forge wrung her hands. "Oh, oh, oh! Somebody's got to climb that tree and cut this boy down and do it quickly, or he'll die o' pinched vitals! Oh! oh! oh!"

"But if he's cut down sudden, he'll land on his

head and break his neck," groaned Mrs. Harper. "Why on earth should they hang him upside down?"

Nat's unpremeditated inversion had complicated matters. And all this time the spy was kicking and struggling and bellowing until it was a mystery why he wasn't heard down in the business part of the town. Moreover, the prospects were that if he were left there much longer, any attempts to cut him down would be superfluous; he was coming down himself—in halves!

But the Providence that looks after children, drunken men and fools was proverbially kind that afternoon. It sent old Amos Winch riding past atop a load of oats. Amos took note of a kicking, shrieking boy suspended from an apple bough above a group of distraught women and children and came down through that orchard in jumps. As he ran, he unclasped a big pocketknife. Out on the limb, he wound a taut rope twice about his mighty hand. Then he hacked and cut above it. Hand over hand he hauled the little Forge boy up, caught him firmly by the collar and straightened him out.

Immediately that he was down and manifestly unhurt, Mrs. Forge walked over to a lower apple bough and pulled off a "sucker." She stripped the switch clean of leaves and grasped her youngster firmly by the collar.

"But Ma!—I didn't mean to do it! Please, Ma, don't whip me. I didn't mean to do it!"

"I suppose you got hung upside down like that accidentally."

"We was only just playing 'Hang the Spy'!"

"And scaring your good, dear mother in

consequence so she's nearly a nervous wreck. I'm going to see you remember never to do such a thing again."

"Anna!" interposed my mother, "don't be a fool!"

"You keep out of this!" snapped Mrs. Forge. "I can run my own young ones without assistance from the neighbors."

And there, before that distressed audience, Nathan "got it good."

III

I have not narrated this episode especially to excoriate Anna Forge. I mention it because—horror of horrors!—among the teams to be blocked in the road by Amos Winch's cart was the neat piano-box buggy and mare of Caleb Gridley. The Duchess was out for a drive with the Dresden Doll.

Nathan knew that the princess of his dreams was beholding him "catching it." And the welts of that switch did not manufacture half as much pain as the hurts which resulted to his dignity. For a boy has dignity. It is usually a hard, honest, legitimate dignity in sharp contrast to mere self-elation too often masquerading under that name among older people. And that boyish dignity is a heritage. In after years it is the genesis of that invaluable attribute, Self-respect.

IV

The hanging episode was scarcely history before Nat and I got into another scrape, illustrating the brilliant Forge method of shaping childhood.

The execution of martial enemies being a bit too strenuous, the fertile little Mayo boy hit on “Slave in the Dismal Swamp.” He assured all witnesses that it was capital sport playing “Slave in the Dismal Swamp.”

In all our town, however, there was no colored boy, let alone a small colored boy, available as the slave to escape and be hunted. But that did not hamper the Mayo boy’s ingenuity.

“One of us can black himself and be the slave,” he suggested.

“What with?” I demanded. “Ma won’t let us have any matches to burn cork. Besides, we couldn’t get cork enough anyhow.”

“I know what’s good and black that we can get a lot of,” Benny Mayo promised. “You all come with me and I’ll show you.”

He led us down behind the Mayo barn. Several old carts, hayracks and farm implements were stored there.

“Now then, Nathan, you take off all your clothes and we’ll black you,” Benny directed. “This ain’t goin’ to hurt you. How can it?”

“I won’t do it unless Billy will!” Nathan objected stoutly.

I submitted.

We disrobed, *au naturel*. The little Mayo boy and the others set to work on us.

From the inside of the wagon hubs was scooped the blackest, deadliest grease the malignity of man has ever invented. The axles of the vehicles, especially one old dump cart, were rich with it.

Over the sunburned pelts of our little bodies the stuff was smeared in handfuls. It smelled frightfully but we remembered how it must feel to be a real slave, and stood it as stoically as possible.

From head to foot we were covered with the green-black “goo.” Our handlers took especial care to rub it well into our hair and ears. When that smearing “was called a job”, we were Africans with a vengeance. And the odor shrieked to heaven.

“But we can’t put on our clothes with this stuff all over us!” wailed Nat suddenly.

“Slaves in a dismal swamp don’t need no clothes,” the Mayo boy contended. “Start off just like you are and it’ll make it harder to hunt you.”

“But somebody might see us without any clothes and arrest us!”

“That’s why it’s goin’ to make it harder to hunt you; you’ll keep out of sight better without clothes.”

The dismal swamp was a cat-tail bog over on the Hastings farm. Thither by back lanes we were escorted, the “ferocious bloodhounds” being the Mayo boy’s sky terrier, Pink, and Nat’s shepherd dog, Ned, with the aforesaid immunity from the depredations of skunks.

Nat and I were turned loose like two justly celebrated gold-dust twins, minus all concessions to civilization. And in the next two hours we became relieved that there had been an Emancipation Proclamation.

As the afternoon waned, the mosquitoes were bad enough. But Nat’s little sister, Edith, had beheld our “making-up” from afar, and about the time we entered the Dismal Swamp, she reached our mothers

and told her story. Two highly exasperated, grim-lipped women ultimately joined the “bloodhounds” and outdid them. For our mothers found us and the dogs did not.

Splashed with mud and slime on top of our coating of axle grease, scratched by brambles and bruised by limbs of dead trees which protruded from the most unexpected places, the slaves in the dismal swamp finally found a soft spot to sit down and weep with a great lamentation. We had a disturbing hunch from our experience in the bog water that our Ethiopian camouflage was not going to be removed with any such dexterity as the Mayo boy had assured us so glibly.

The posse finally surrounded us. There was no escaping through that cordon. Our mothers’ skirts were bedraggled.

Their shoes squeegeed water at every step. But they bagged us. And the expression on their faces when they held us at arm’s length was sickening. Somehow we felt that again the Mayo boy had “spoofed” us. The Mayo boy was not among those present when we were taken into custody, by the way.

“We’re slaves in a Dismal Swamp,” explained Nathan, when his mother had firmly entwined her fingers around a slippery ear.

“Well, in mighty short order you’re going to be two sorrowful boys in a darned dismal wash-dish!” prophesied that wrathful lady. And she looked at my mother, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry.

“Anna,” gasped my horrified mother, “—suppose—suppose—it won’t wash off!”

“Then I’ll set fire to my young one and burn it off!” avowed Mrs. Forge grimly. Whereupon Nathan began caterwauling and his asseverations that he didn’t mean to do it became as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.

Through the ups and downs of thirty years I have made many strange journeys over many rough pathways. Not one of them has equaled the awfulness of traversing those two miles of oozy bog that summer afternoon, dragged wrathfully by a grim woman whose concentration was glued on the impending ordeal of separating me from that unspeakable coating of slime and grease.

“When I catch that Mayo young one,” announced my mother, “I’ll skin him alive!”

“Amen!” affirmed Anna Forge. She gave Nathan a yank that pulled him over a boghole as though he were greased. Which he was. Greased thoroughly, adequately, irrevocably.

We got as far as the Forge homestead, and my mother decided to stop there and cleanse her offspring in company with her neighbor, rather to lighten the labor—to say nothing of the color of her boy—by sharing it.

They tried rain water and they tried soap. They tried cold water and they tried hot. None of it made any more impression than as if they’d been trying to wash a duck. They tried scraping it off with a paddle, as one scrapes butter from a slice of bread. In certain localities this last went so far as to disclose that deep down under the mass we were young humans of the Aryan persuasion. In our babyhood we might even have been pink. But at present we were anything but pink. We were a sort of blue-mauve-green.

“My God!” cried the nearly hysterical Mrs. Forge. “There’s going to be no getting this off successfully short of boiling ’em!” Thereat, the woman’s neurasthenia got the better of her and she wept.

“Anna, stop your blubbering! I’m going to try kerosene,” my mother announced. “Billy may go round the rest of his life smelling like the dirty end of a grocery store, but I’ll have the satisfaction of knowing I ‘seen my duty and I done it.’” And she whacked a little French boy for meddling with her washcloths.

The two women pooled all the kerosene they could find in the neighborhood. It wasn’t the fairly cleanly product that may be purchased in 1921. It is debatable which was rankest in taste, feeling or smell —that yellowish coal oil or the devilish massage-muck which now ran down our shivering bodies in streaks. Filling a tub with it, mother started in, determined, like Grant, to fight it out along that line if it took all summer. The prospects were that it would take all summer.

I forget in how many “waters” of oil, hot steam and soapsuds they washed us. Somewhere around thirty-seven. There is no reason to doubt the figure. So much concentrated washing had never happened to either of us before. Thank God, it has never been needed since.

Nat and I were two sick boys—physically as well as spiritually—long before those ablutions were completed. A sizable number of persons of color, sold into servitude, have undoubtedly been lost in swamps. But Nathan Forge and his biographer were the first in history who were captured, dragged out and washed in thirty-seven “waters” before being slated for additional chastisement.

Vividly I recollect little Nathan's plaintive plea at about the thirty-fifth "water", when he gradually began to exhibit evidences of Caucasian extraction.

"Ma, are you goin' to lick me?" he demanded, gazing timorously up into his mother's twitching countenance. It was the fearful, pitiful interrogatory of a naked, shivering, thoroughly chastened little boy who had taken the word of a fellow man at its face value and discovered, like the psalmist of old, that all men are liars.

"I'm too done up to lick you! I'm going to let your father lick you!" his mother assured him.

"Anna Forge, are you crazy?" my mother exploded.

"No, but I'm going to see that some discretion is put in his make-up if I have to brand it in with an iron!"

"You may brand in more than discretion, Anna."

"I'll take my chances!"

V

I was sobbing—mainly for Nathan's sake—when my mother led me home. She wrapped my red, flaccid little body in warm flannels and put me to bed. I heard no censure for my part in the day's foolishness. Only she said wearily before she took out the light:

"Please, laddie, never play 'Slave in the Dismal Swamp' again. You see what mother had to do, how tired she is?"

"Yes, Ma!"

"Then always remember, when a fellow does something wrong—sooner or later—somehow or other—it's his mother that pays the price."

I could not see her haggard face for my tears.

She laughed,—a queer, tired, tender laugh. Then she kissed me again and was gone. My grief was mercifully merged in slumber.

VI

It was a week before Nathan left his bed. His father threw an ax handle at me when I went around to the rear of the Forge premises to see if Nathan could come out to play.

I think Johnathan was a bit ashamed of himself and likewise afraid. He took this gentle method of suggesting that the neighbors, particularly the neighbors' offspring, keep out of his family affairs. Because Nathan had dropped unconscious during his subsequent chastisement and remained unconscious all night. Next day a doctor was summoned. The doctor was told that Nathan must have eaten something which had failed to agree with him.

I finally figured out, in a boyish way, what was amiss in Nathan's relation to his parents, particularly his father.

Obedience, to Johnathan, consisted in a child instinctively knowing beforehand the thing to which the parental mind objected and avoiding consummation of that thing like a pestilence. Then, too, floggings and thrashings were uniformly good for a youngster. They gave him character and made him love and respect his dear parents when he had grown to manhood and looked back on what an

exasperating little devil he had been and how much he had “tried” those who had done the most for him.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAIRY FOUNDLING

I

In the heart of a man there are many chambers. Some of these chambers have locked doors and behind them the world may not penetrate. Dusty, discarded shrines are there with the idols chipped and broken; coffers rotted with money may lie scattered about; brittle bouquets of faded flowers; a coffin plate or two, or perhaps the more grisly husks of dead romances that arise during slumber and break out wailing, haunting the long, barren corridors of the subconscious mind and only laid by sunlight. But among these chambers somewhere is one sweet, clandestine room only unlocked with a golden key on a diamond ring, where warm and ruddy light floods out when the door is opened. Luxury awaits him within, but greater than luxury: the mistress of his soul, soft-armed, starry-eyed, radiant with love. Back over far years or few, when that mistress entered that heart-chamber and consented to remain imprisoned there forever, then was Everyman's Amethyst Moment.

Man, like the caliphs of old, may possess a thousand wives. But his heart has one mistress only —forever.

There is another phase of this narrative which it is expedient to begin in order to make long preparation for Nathan's Amethyst Moment. It starts in the city of Springfield, Massachusetts, on a September afternoon twenty years in the past. Upon an iron settee at the edge of a Forest Park lily pond a woman sank to rest and to watch a group of shrieking children playing with the swans.

She was a middle-aged woman, tall, comely, deep-chested, one of those well-favored, high-caste matrons vaguely associated with sweeping, trailing, draping house gowns, with strings of jet and jade licking against her knees and an exotic perfume clinging about her personality like old rose or lavender.

This afternoon she was clothed in black, black walking dress, large black hat, black fur neckpiece, smooth black gloves. She was the widow of a high army officer, killed seven months before in the Philippines. Her name was Gracia Theddon and she lived—somehow—on the income from half a million dollars.

This woman's face grew wistful as she watched the children. She wanted to call them about her. Then she realized that seven of the ten were clothed alike. The types were too varied to make them brothers and sisters. She was puzzled.

As she watched, one of the smallest youngsters poised on the edge of the water and almost fell forward. In that instant a little girl flashed from a near-by summer house and pulled the baby back

from danger.

The child whose watchful eye and quick coördination of mind and body had effected this tiny rescue seized and held Gracia Theddon's attention. She was slender and dark, the most delicately wrought little girl that had ever moved into Mrs. Theddon's scheme of things. Her features were cut with the clearness of a cameo. She had strangely calm eyes, extraordinary eyes, even for a child.

The woman finally summoned a youngster, a precocious youngster of few illusions.

"Who's that little girl, boy?" she asked. "The one with the pretty face and long black curls."

"Whatcher wanner knowfer?"

Mrs. Theddon found a dime in the tiny bead bag at her girdle.

"Now tell me the little girl's name and what you know about her."

"Name's Leggy—it's short for sumpin'—Leeg—Leeg—sumpin' like Leegar."

"You mean Allegra?"

"Uh-huh!"

"And what's her last name?"

"Ain't got none. She didn't have no fadder nor mudder like the rest of us. The fairies brought her. Leggy says so! Say, there ain't no fairies, are there?"

"So that's why you're all dressed alike. You're orphans." Mrs. Theddon's eyes went back to the little girl. "And who's looking out for you?"

"Leggy is. We couldn't come to the Park at all if it warn't fer her. She's a cuckoo, Leggy is. She says she

saw Santa Claus once. Say, there ain't no Santa Claus, is there?"

"I used to think so, little boy."

"I arst Miss Howlan' once. But she got mad and tol' me to get the hell out and stop askin' foolish questions, or she'd slap my mouth——"

"Who's Miss Howland?"

"She runs the dump we live at. She's a quince and can't get married. Say, you're rich, aincher? Is that a real bird on your hat?"

"And does this Miss Howland swear so before you children?"

"Huh, hell ain't swearin'. I know lots o' words worse'n hell. So's Miss Howland. Gee, you oughta hear her rip when she gets mad. She says goddam an'——"

"Stop, boy, stop! I merely wish to know about that little girl. What's the name of the Orphanage where you live?"

"The Corpses is Christened—or sumpin' sounds like it."

"You mean Corpus-Christi?"

"Uh-huh! Guess so!"

"And how long has that little girl been at the Corpus-Christi Orphanage?"

"Since 'fore the world was made, I guess—a nawful long time. She b'longs to Miss Howlan'."

"Belongs to her!"

"Yeah! Miss Howlan's fixed it so Leggy can't be adopted. When people come and wanner kid, the

first they allus grab is Leggy. So Miss Howlan's hooked her up, and Leggy'll have to stay to the place and be a orphan till she's old and got grand-chillun. Miss Howlan' said she done a good job when she hooked Leggy. I heard her tell Bridget; she cooks the stuff we eat and then eats it herself."

"And you're sure you never heard the little girl's last name?"

"Say, wasser matter wicher? I said she ain't got none, din't I? She warn't born like the rest of us. They found her sleepin' on a haycock in a field. It was near some woods where the fairies stole out and left her. Say, what's a haycock?"

"And how long ago was it they found her?"

"Gee, you're thick, aincher? I said it was a nawful long time back, 'fore my fadder busted my mudder open, and then skipped so he wouldn't have to go to jail, and they shoved me in the Corpses is Christened dump to be a orphan——"

The boy's worldly wisdom disturbed Mrs. Theddon so painfully that she finally dismissed him in relief.

Then she called the Fairy Foundling.

The child approached with a dainty deference that won the rich woman instantly—if she had not been won from the first.

This was no laborer's offspring.

Mrs. Theddon was almost minded to believe in fairies after all.

II

The following day a pair of handsome grays

stopped before the Corpus-Christi Orphanage. Mrs. Theddon alighted from her carriage, instructed her coachman to wait and went up the broken steps to the grim front door.

The Orphanage was a mediocre double house in the poorer quarter of the city; only a battered sign tacked to the greenish clapboards indicated its character. Mrs. Theddon's ring was answered by an angular female who believed in infant damnation, the prohibition issue and the curse of the idle rich. Her hair was drawn tightly from her square, sallow forehead, her shoulders were sharp, her face on a man would have created a perfect butler for the lower class motion pictures.

"I am Mrs. Gracia Theddon," announced the first, "and I have called to see you about a certain child you have here—a little Allegra Something-or-other."

"You mean you want to adopt her?"

"If it's possible."

"It isn't possible! Allegra's my own."

"So I understand. But I want little Miss Allegra myself and I'm—well—I'm prepared to make it worth while to be reasonable."

Thereat the Howland person thawed somewhat,—not much.

"Come in," she conceded.

She led the way into a bare cheerless "office." Mrs. Theddon sat down and raised her black veil.

"I saw the child in the Park yesterday. I talked with her. And when I got home last night—in bed—I realized—how very much I should like to have such a little girl. I have no children. My husband was

killed last year in the Philippines."

Miss Howland, it developed, was a "toe-tapper" and a Competent Person. Moreover, she had dealt with finicky patronesses of the Orphanage for years. She tapped her toe now, though her face maintained its wooden expression.

"So I understand, Mrs. Theddon. But you see—I also love Allegra—she is such a help to me about the place——"

"You don't make that delicate little girl work!"

"No, no! Not work! Merely a few chores to give her a sense of responsibility—looking after the younger children and all that. They are an awful care at times, Mrs. Theddon—an awful care."

Mrs. Theddon was duly solicitous. She knew the Howland type and how to "handle" it. Ten minutes were spent ingratiating herself into the superintendent's sympathies and the Howland woman thawed.

"But what do you know about the child?" Mrs. Theddon asked.

"They found her in a hayfield over toward Ludlow ten years ago last summer. But no one reported a lost child. When the papers advertised her, no one came forward to identify or claim her. So they brought her here."

"And you don't know her last name?"

"Nothing about her whatever. I gave her the name Allegra, and of course when I adopted her, she got my own——"

"Then you have legally adopted her?"

"Well, all the red tape isn't finished yet. I just say

I've adopted her when people come here for babies because they always pick the prettiest first. And Leggy's turned out so clever I could better afford to lose some of the older, homelier ones——"

Mrs. Theddon saw the psychological moment had arrived.

"Miss Howland," she announced firmly, "I want that child badly. But I don't want her badly enough to haggle over her. I'll write you a check this moment for a thousand dollars—and not another cent more. But it's on the understanding that all the legalities are settled by you with the trustees and the girl is delivered at my home before the coming Saturday!"

If Mrs. Theddon had drawn a revolver and shot the Howland person, the latter could not have sat more totally and adequately stunned.

"A—thou—sand—dol—lars!"

"Exactly. A thousand dollars!" Mrs. Theddon's patronage had gone. She had the crisp poise she used when bargaining with servants or tradesmen.

It took several moments for Miss Howland to recover. A hundred dollars would have been a great persuader. But a *thousand*!

Then her narrow, crafty nature roused from the mental stupor which the offer had produced. If the Theddon woman would pay a thousand dollars, she must want the child very much indeed. Miss Howland flattered herself she knew these pampered, petulant women. She gave facial indications of thrust-and-parry.

"I couldn't——"

"Very well," announced Mrs. Theddon. "I withdraw my offer and bid you good-day. But I shall use my influence in certain quarters to secure the child without the payment of a cent. I made you a fair offer to avoid legal procedure and undesirable publicity. But now I withdraw it!"

Mrs. Theddon lowered her veil and prepared to depart—which she had not the least intention of doing.

"Wait a moment!" cried Miss Howland weakly. At once she abandoned any attempt to dicker. It was too risky. "I was about to say I couldn't desire anything better than to think of little Allegra being adopted by a nice lady like yourself——"

Mrs. Theddon produced her check book.

III

A little, misery-eyed, wood thrush of a girl in a drab-blue pinafore crept out from her hiding place under a corner desk. She fled across the "office", up the back stairs and into her "room", a cot under an alcove, before the Howland person returned from the gate where she had enviously watched the grays drive away.

The little girl had overheard. Parentless, nameless, she had been sold by one person and bought by another,—for a thousand dollars!

The intuitive horror of her nonentity, of that sale and purchase, never left the little girl,—not even twenty years later in womanhood.

She crouched—a tiny mite in blue gingham—on the cot and failed to answer Miss Howland when the

latter went through the house, calling for her angrily.

CHAPTER V

IMPRESSIONS

I

Looking back on those days in Foxboro Center now, Nathan and I think of them as Nuggets of Time from the Golden Mine of Boyhood, unalloyed. I would like to transcribe whole pages from the Memory Book, all of which has contributed to the great mass of experience influencing the most vital parts of our lives. Yet the subject matter is too trivial and the type too fine to ask a busy world to read.

There are no woods now like those Nathan and I explored in those days. There are no valleys so peaceful, no afternoons so long, no twilights so soft, no stars so high.

Thrushes and peewees sang in the leafy silences of those woodlands. Cloistered glades would be suddenly desecrated by the shrill screeches of jays. Brooks babbled unexpectedly across marshy pathways, to be forded on mossy stones. Jack-in-the-Pulpits and Lady's Slippers grew among the smooth brown needles of hemlock-roofed hillsides.

Occasionally, when lying in the forest quiet, we would hear the tread of a lone partridge on last autumn's brittle leaves as sharp and loud as the tread of a man.

But alas and alack! Nathan's little sister often "tagged after us," demanding petulantly to be helped over stone walls, around bramble patches and across ditches, getting her feet wet in bogs and squealing hideously if we traveled too fast or gave the slightest indication of abandoning her to forest terrors.

There is only one thing more tragic to a small boy than having a little sister to bother him. That is having an elder sister to "boss" him.

There were rainy days, too, when we explored old attics, playing among heirlooms and relics that today would be worth much money. There were days when we invented weird pastimes in the fantastic nooks, crannies and haylofts of two fragrant country barns.

Sometimes in the spring, when the winter is breaking up and the soil is coming through in patches, sweet and wet, I catch a breath of fragrance from those Foxboro play-times. I smell again the clear, cool, pungent dampness of woodland ravines where we poked noisy leaves aside to find the first mayflowers. The odor of summer pastures in the sunset comes to me and the sweet scent of ripening huckleberries, briarbloom and fern. Autumn brings its scents and odors, too—crimson sumach and bursting milkweed; the acrid sweetness of loaded apple trees with windfallen fruit knobbing the ground beneath; old goldenrod; the sharp nip of frost-bitten air blowing fitfully across the hills on afternoons when the earth shivered in the nakedness of fall and the sky was a museum of cloud. Then

winter came with gray days—soft-muffled, snow-heavy—moist mornings, dripping noons, melancholy twilights when even the carmine of the sinking sun was freezing cold; then the piercing stab of blue crystal nights when the stars were very high and the panes of windows in empty rooms were weirdly padded with frost.

Who can fathom the heart of a boy? I recall these items especially here, because there were times when I would find my friend indisposed to play. Often in these seasons and settings, he would stop and grow strangely silent. “It’s so pretty, Billy, it hurts,” he would tell me. “It makes me—afraid!”

One summer evening we sat on the Forge front steps under the stars. The crickets were cheeping about us. Now and then we saw ghostly petals of syringa blossoms flutter down in the shadows beneath, the world voluptuous with summer scents about us.

“I feel as if I’d like to write and tell somebody all about it, Billy,” he said to me.

“Tell ’em what?”

“How it hurts!”

“How what hurts?”

“Oh—the world—and starry nights—just livin’ in it all. It’s holy somehow—like church.”

Faint piano music floated up the valley. Somewhere below a sweet soprano voice was singing “The Blue and the Gray.”

I choose to think of that night as the first time the poet-soul of my friend was disclosed to me. Yet I would have pooh-poohed poetry—then. It was stagy

stuff to be recited hectically in school on Friday afternoons, beginning, “I am dying, Egypt, dying!” and the demise complete before a dozen lines had been rendered.

“Billy, do you s’pose all men when they was boys felt like you and me?”

“Aw, I guess so.”

“Wish I knew for sure, Billy.”

“What for?”

“I dunno. Maybe it’d make things easier to stand.”

II

As Nathan’s sister Edith grew older, her petulancy of mouth became more pronounced. Like most small sisters her recreational specialty was ferreting out breaches of deportment on the part of us boys and carrying dirty little tales to our parents. Johnathan and his wife indirectly encouraged this sort of thing. They thought it “cute.”

One afternoon Edith broke a barn window. She declared at once that Nathan did it. The brother’s protestations of innocence availed him nothing. He was punished on Edith’s unconfirmed say-so. Thereupon Edith discovered she held a power over Nathan. She could blackmail him into doing almost anything whim dictated by committing petty damage herself and accusing the boy as the miscreant.

This went on for the better part of the autumn. Finally Edith overdid it. One evening she accused Nathan of having let the horse out of the boxstall. She swore she saw him. She gave a convincing and vivid account as an eye-witness. Only it happened

Nathan had been with his father down in the village all the afternoon, unknown to Edith.

Caught in a bald-faced lie, Edith snickered. Then she slapped her brother's face as being somehow responsible.

Edith was not chastised for falsehood, but Nathan got his ears boxed soundly for "daring to lay a finger on his little sister" when he defended himself.

In fact, Mrs. Forge thought the escape of the horse and Edith's discomfiture a rather good joke. If there was wrong in it, Edith would "grow out of it." Of course! She was a girl!

That night Mrs. Forge read Nathan a homily on chivalry. There were many things boys could not do without punishment that were perfectly permissible for little girls.

III

Johnathan Forge "failed" at his store in the Center, as he appeared to fail at everything everywhere. He became convinced he "could do better in a larger place." Thus came a certain day when Nathan raced up to my house bursting with excitement.

"We're going to move to Paris! We're going to move to Paris!" he cried. "Dad's got a job in the newspaper office and we're going as soon's we can pack our things."

Going to Paris, Vermont, at that age, was like going to Paris, France, in these later years. It was not something to be negotiated. It was something to be attained.

The day the family left town I hung about the

Forge house all the forenoon, divided between doing the work of two men gratis, or getting in the way so skillfully that Johnathan Forge was moved to profanity. But the goods were loaded at last and after dinner Nat came over in his “best clothes” to bid me good-by.

We spoke as two who are going different ways into far countries. We made light of the situation and the play-times we had enjoyed together, though God knows the tears were close to our eyelids.

“I left a swell pair of baby-carriage wheels up in the wigwam in the woods. But you can have ’em for a peach of a cart,” he said generously. A pair of “swell baby-carriage wheels” was a treasure beyond price among boys in those days. Yet I was thinking with an awful heart-pinch that Nathan and I would never play in that wigwam of leaves and brush again.

“I suppose you’ll always stay here in Foxboro,” he went on, with the condescension of the city mouse for the country cousin. “But if you ever come to Paris, I’ll expect you to visit me. I’ll probably always live in Paris. It’s a big place. There’s more advantages and op-op-opportunities.”

We spoke stiffly and indifferently as the parting grew nearer.

“Well, guess I’ll have to be going,” he said. “Good-by.”

“Good-by,” I said. “Maybe some day when we grow up we’ll meet again.”

“Yes, good-by.”

“Good-by.”

John Forge was driving his family over the road in a democrat wagon. I came to the gate to wave to them as they passed down the road and around the turn. Then the vehicle turned the corner and the road was empty.

The road? The world was empty. For the first time in my life I knew loneliness—horrible, unbearable, numbing loneliness—worse than the loss of my father!

My mother came up to put me to bed that night. She understood my tight silence. I was trying hard to keep my nerve, but the thought of coming days, weeks, months, years without Nat was dawning upon me in all its hideous emptiness.

That night I was very glad I had a mother and that she was not twitching-faced and pin-pointed of eye like Nathan's.

CHAPTER VI

THE ODD STICK

I

My mother's savings were exhausted in the spring of 1900. The payments on her pension were delayed. The good woman was almost alone in the world with a seam-ripping, button-bursting, small boy who demanded to be clothed, fed, educated. Rather than submit to the slavery of keeping house for some widowed farmer, she decided to move to Paris also and try to find work in a store.

Thus I ultimately rejoined Nathan.

He did not greet me as effusively as I had expected. His indifference hurt. But I soon made allowance. Nathan was in love. The object of his affections was Bernie Gridley.

"Come over to my house and tell me all about her," I invited that first noontime.

"After school? I can't. I work."

"You work! Where?"

"I peddle papers every night—*Telegraphs*."

"You mean you make real money? Gee, that's swell."

Nat shut his lips.

"Aw, I don't get nothin'. Pa makes me do it. He takes it and uses it to help out at home."

"But you do the work and so the money belongs to you!"

"Yeah! But pa figgers he's supportin' me and he had to work when he was a boy—and turn over the money to his father. So he makes me do the same."

"I'd like to see *my*self——"

"Aw, you're talkin' through your hat! Whatter you know about havin' a father? Your father died! Hang it all, some guys have all the luck!"

II

Nathan was "goin' on fourteen" now. He had grown older, somehow, older than the twenty months which had intervened since I had last seen him warranted.

These three—Nathan, the Dresden Doll and a shocky-headed young troglodyte who had just arrived from the wilds of Foxboro Center—were seated near one another during that year in the seventh grade of the old Academy on the hill.

The American public school being the great common denominator for juvenile humanity, it had developed after several months' scholastic propinquity between Nathan and Bernie that he was not quite so impossible as the Dresden Doll had at first assumed. And Bernie's teachers had rather

caustic ideas about the Gridley “blood.” The Dresden Doll became a little more human.

“What are you going to give me for my birthday, boy?” she demanded of Nathan one day, accosting him on the edge of the school yard. “I’m going to have a party, you know. Everybody’s coming and must bring me something.”

The abruptness of meeting and question left Nathan speechless. With his temperament and home training—or lack of it—it was only natural he should have been awkward in her presence.

But he finally rallied.

“Well, I’ll try to give you something bigger ’n better than you’ll get from anybody else. You can bet on that!”

His declaration implied a promise. Moreover, after the nature of such youthful indiscretions, it grew plain he would have to make that promise good or be forever discredited and go through the rest of life a celibant.

What could he give her that would be greater and finer and better than any other person—chiefly boy—might offer? It became an awful quandary. Though only “goin’ on fourteen”, it came to him he had thrust a foot into one of life’s traps. In his little cot-bed up under the eaves of the cottage John Forge had taken for his family in Spring Street, he pondered feverishly far into each night. And with sickening speed the date of the affair approached and found him still debating.

The underlying cause of his predicament was financial. He hadn’t a cent, was never allowed money and would have to steal and lie to get any. If he had

millions he could of course present her with a diamond ring or a Maltese cat or something like that. But not a cent! It was humiliating.

The solution finally came via the unwitting agency of the Duchess. She called on Mrs. Forge to purchase some geranium slips and remained to discuss the precocity of Bernice-Theresa.

“I am convinced she will be literary,” the Duchess declared. “She has already finished the Bible, ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ and ‘Rollo’s Travels in Switzerland.’ I think I shall start her next on the poets.”

Nathan’s mother asked which poets. And the Duchess answered: “I understand ‘Dauntless Inferno’ by John Milton is being read these days by all the best people. After that I shall try Shakespeare. He’s so romantic!”

Nathan lay in bed that night, turning this sudden literary proclivity of the Gridley girl over in his mind. Then, by the strange and wonderful convolutions of a boy’s brain, he had it! He could scarcely wait until morning to get to Weathersbee & Hawkins’ Second-hand Furniture Store. There, after much mysterious maneuvering, he contracted for the article he sought, agreeing to saw wood for Mr. Hawkins Saturdays to pay for it. He carried it home the night before the memorable birthday party and hid it in the loft of the Forge woodshed.

The affair began at two-thirty the next day. Twenty-seven boys and girls, painfully starched and ironed, gathered awkwardly upon the Gridley lawn. A table had been placed beside the veranda steps and upon it the birthday gifts were deposited. Article by article the pile grew, some of them pathetically

inexpensive, a few indicating want of taste far more than worldly goods.

When the Forge boy looked upon the daintiness and delicacy of most of the gifts, an awful qualm smote him. He wondered if he might not have overdone the present business in his anxiety to make an impression? But Bernice was demanding impatiently to know how he had fulfilled his promise. There was no time to reconsider now—certainly not to go back and buy another present. He went to a secret place in the hedge and brought his gift from its hiding.

Across the lawn he carried it with difficulty, for it was nearly as large as himself. To the gift-altar he brought it, small heart palpitating painfully.

“My goodness!” exclaimed the little patrician. “Whatever can it be?”

The children, patronized by a few mothers, gathered around to learn what the Forge boy had brought his dainty little hostess which should leave all present speechless by its cleverness and elegance. Nathan, badly scared, unwound copious quantities of newspaper and cast them aside. Then, using all his thirteen-year strength, up onto the table amid the lesser gifts, its weight causing that table to rock rather groggily for a moment, Nathan added—a life-sized bust of Julius Cæsar. Cæsar. In chalk!

The Duchess raised her lorgnette. She and Cæsar exchanged mutual glances of stupefaction for an instant.

“But who is it?” she demanded.

“It must be a new kind of a big doll!” exclaimed a little girl with violent pigtails.

"Why—why—it's a—it's a——" Nathan wanted all present to understand that it was sculpture of most poetic motif having to do with the literary ramifications of one W. Shakespeare. But he could not recall the words "sculpture", "statue" or "bust."

"It's a monument!" he choked. "For Julius Cæsar—I mean *of* Julius Cæsar. He divided Gaul into three parts and they stabbed him!"

"A monument!" cried the Duchess. "Stabbed him! And do you think he's buried hereabouts, that Bernice-Theresa should be edified with his tombstone for a plaything?"

"You told Ma that Bernie was goin' to read the best poets. I thought o' this mon-mon-monument I s-s-seen in Weatherbee's store. He's got an ear gone and his nose is bunged and maybe he needs washin'. But as far's the missin' ear goes, you could stand it in a corner somewheres so's his head would be against the wall——"

"My God!" choked the Duchess. "William! William! Where's William?"

William Chew, the elderly person of color, came forward.

"William," cried the Duchess, "remove this nightmare. God love us! It looks as if this unspeakable boy had brought Bernice-Theresa the upper half of somebody's whitewashed corpse!"

"Yes, ma'am!" assented William. "What yo' want ah should do with it, ma'am?"

"Do with it?" gasped the Duchess. "Take it home to your family! Set it up on your front lawn! Hand it down to your children! Only get the hideous thing off these premises and never bring it back!"

William obediently toted off the bust. Then the Duchess looked about for the giver of this good and perfect gift. But Nathan had reached the gate and was fleeing down the walk. For him there was no party.

William took the “monument” home. The last seen of it was atop a post in the center of the Chew cornfield. The colored man had draped a coat around the classic bust, hung trousers beneath it, put an old straw hat on the brow that produced the Commentaries, and relegated it to the job of scaring off the crows. Its end came when old Webster Nelson wandered into the field one night under the influence of liquor, beheld the chalky features beneath the hat, and reduced it to fragments under the crazed obsession that he was being confronted by the supernatural.

III

A little girl makes love to a boy in school by the simple expedient of allowing him to discover her eyes upon him steadily when he raises his head from his studies and looks in her direction. Nathan dragged himself to school next day. But the topaz eyes of Bernice-Theresa were not upon him,—once! Thereupon did life become a delusion and a snare and sorrow sit heavily upon him.

The Dresden Doll came out of the Academy at four o’clock and started homeward. By some mysterious levitation, she had not progressed three blocks before the street held a party of the opposite sex employed in touching every other picket in the fence, withal moving in her own direction.

“Say!” this person demanded plaintively, having

somehow crossed the thoroughfare by the time she reached the Baptist Church. “Are you mad at me, Bernie?”

“Of course I’m mad! Why shouldn’t I be mad? You tried to spoil my party.”

“I didn’t mean to spoil your party.”

“Perhaps you didn’t. But you’re such a fool at times!”

“A fool!”

“Why do you do such perfectly silly things?”

“I—I—only tried to give you somethin’ different, Bernie. I—only—tried—to make you like me.”

“Then you don’t know much about girls! For instance—your clothes! Why, you came to my party looking like a—a—tramp!”

“They were my best clothes, Bernie—the best I got.”

“Then why on earth doesn’t your father buy you some new?”

“He says it’s puttin’ on style—and foolish.”

“But you look so! Can’t he see it?”

“I guess, Bernie, he don’t much care—or understand.”

“Then I’d work—and buy my own.”

“I do work. But he makes me give him all I earn.”

“Then I’d run away—or shoot him!”

She tossed her long mass of straw-colored curls haughtily and walked from sight.

John Forge had not been able to hold his job in the

newspaper office. He “didn’t get along with people.” He had opened a small shop on Main Street and gone back to cobbling shoes. Next day Ben Williams, the clothier, looked in at the Forge door and with half a laugh demanded:

“Can’t you dress that young one of yours so he won’t go around makin’ a nuisance of himself, John Forge? He was in my place this noon with a crazy plea for me to save all my bundles for Saturdays so he could deliver ’em and earn himself a suit to look respectable.”

John Forge went home with his weak jaw set grimly.

“I’ll break that boy’s foolish pride—or I’ll break his back!” he promised himself dourly.

IV

Nathan lay back in the hammock in the summer-evening depths of the front piazza and dreamed dreams with his eyes open. Down the street old man Bailey’s phonograph was grinding out a squeaky program of popular ballads. The moths were clustering around the sputtering arc lamps. On the near-by corner the Allen girl was shamelessly “flirting with a feller” who sat on his bicycle alongside the curb, one foot upon it to steady himself. Occasionally the girl tested the bell on the handle bars, and it ding-donged a high and low musical note interspersed with low laughter. The flirtation hurt Nathan. He was jealous of the older fellow’s freedom from “careful” parents.

“On’y seven years more—just seven years!—then I can marry her,” the poor young colt told himself.

“Marry her whether Pa’ll let me or not. Oh, Bernie, Bernie, I love you. I love you more than anything else in the world! You’ll never understand!”

It was only half-past seven o’clock and yet his father appeared and ordered him in to bed.

“Look here, you young pup,” the man intercepted as Nat drearily obeyed, “—what’s this nonsense I’m hearing about you traipsin’ around behind some girl? Do you?”

“N-N-No, sir!”

“I don’t believe you!—Else folks around town wouldn’t be talking. If you lie to me I’ll lay on the strap. Now who is the girl and what about her? Answer me quick, or it’ll be worse for you!”

“I don’t know what you mean!”

A shrill cry of pain followed as the man twisted the boy’s ear.

“Answer me!” he thundered.

“B-B-Bernice Gridley,” Nat confessed.

“Well—you let me lay down a law right here and now! No son of mine is going to make a young jackass of himself—or ruin his life—by getting mixed up with any girl before he’s old enough to know his own mind! You put girls out of your mind once and for all, the same as when we lived over in Foxboro you were told to put the baby business out of your mind! You hear me? Don’t you ever be seen on the street with a girl. Don’t you ever speak to one excepting when you’re absolutely obliged to—on strictly business! Don’t you ever let me hear of you goin’ to any party where there’s girls—while as for loving or kissing ’em—my God, I’ll skin you alive if I

find you up to any such looseness and wickedness. You promise that here and now—before me and before God—and may God damn your disobedient young soul if you go back on your promise."

Nathan was aghast. Johnathan tortured the boy until he got his promise out.

This was a Thursday evening. The church bells were droning idly in the soft summer dusk. Having heard young Nathan climb sobbing into his creaking bed (while other boys were still playing "Duck on the Rock" out under the Adams Street arc light) Johnathan Forge went to prayer meeting. There he made his ten-minute weekly testimony about how precious Jesus had been to his soul since the previous Thursday and how he—Johnathan—prayed in all things to be guided by the Father's loving care.

CHAPTER VII

EXQUISITE THINGS

I

Mrs. Gracia Theddon, writing in her upstairs library the Saturday morning after her visit to the Orphanage, was disturbed by one Murfins, her butler. Murfins merely thrust in his head, being florid and coatless from directing the cleaning of near-by rooms.

“The small girl you spoke of Tuesday is here, ma’am,” was his simple way of announcing news to transcend all future events in Gracia Theddon’s life.

The woman arose, gripping her chair-back with one hand, the other quieting her heart.

“Bring her up, Murfins,” she directed huskily.

It was a new rôle for Mrs. Theddon, that of mother. Capable of directing as brilliant a social galaxy as the annual Charity Ball, she waited unnerved for the advent of a tiny, dark-eyed stranger.

Three minutes later the foster-mother beheld her

new child come down the room.

The Fairy Foundling had removed her twenty-cent hat of brown straw and shaken free her dusky, ribbonless tresses. She wore a drab Orphanage frock which only reached her knees, her stockings were thick and shapeless and her shoes had emphatically been selected for service and not for style. Yet the child in either sackcloth or satin would have divulged equal quality. There was no cheap sniggering bashfulness, no clodhopper shyness in her demeanor. But there was reserve and painful anxiety not unmixed with a little dread. Her cameo features were pale. Her delicate rosebud lips disclosed teeth like chips of porcelain. Her deep brown eyes—almost black—held that same queer calmness, but those eyes could easily turn starry, as Mrs. Theddon discovered in the next few moments.

“Makes me think she’s always on the point of wanting to weep with happiness, yet smilin’ through tears that don’t quite come,” was old Murfins’ way of describing those eyes to Stebbins, the second man. To which sentiments Stebbins subscribed avidly,—though with picturesque variations.

Six feet from Mrs. Theddon the little girl halted.

“So you’ve come,” was all that perturbed woman could call up at the moment. She meant it kindly yet she realized it was the wrong thing—not at all cordial and maternal. And she greatly longed to be cordial and maternal and set riotously free the tenderness aching in her soul for expression.

“Yes’m,” returned the Fairy Foundling, with a tight swallow,”—I’ve come.”

“And you’d like to be my little girl?”

“I’d like to be anybody’s little girl that” (swallow) “wanted me.”

Mrs. Theddon sank sideways upon her chair. She could feel every throb of her heart, count its ragged beatings.

Suddenly, as the wistful figure stood there, never so parentless, her frailness and smallness accentuated by the great room above her, the rich woman held out her arms.

“Baby!” she cried brokenly. “Come!”

Murfins went back to his cleaning.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” he cried. “Didn’t know the old girl had it in her. Just goes to prove that folks don’t always match their outsides! Yes, I’ll be damned! I’ll be damned a couple of times—maybe three!”

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted a little girl and never knew what it was I wanted?” Mrs. Theddon asked when her emotions permitted.

“No, ma’am,” the princess answered.

“It’s been a long, long time! God never sent me a little girl of my own—excepting my Dream Girl, dear.”

“Your Dream Girl?”

“Sometimes in dark nights I dreamed a little girl—somebody very like yourself, came to me—and——”

“Please don’t cry, Mrs. Theddon!”

“We’re going to be so happy, you and I! You must forget the Orphanage or that you ever knew it. You must try to believe you’ve lived with me always. You’re going to have pretty dresses and a beautiful

room. You're going to have all sorts of nice people to teach you and help you. And good times!—we're going to have all sorts of parties and walks and travels together, you and I—and then some day—all I own will be yours—because you're all I'll have, all —I—have—now!"

"That will be awfully fine," the little girl replied joyously.

Most children would have been abashed or thoughtlessly ecstatic. The Fairy Foundling was not unappreciative, yet a fine reserve seemed bred in her blood and fiber. This environment of culture and refinement, instead of distressing her, placed her vaguely at ease.

"And please, dear—please don't call me 'Mrs. Theddon.' I'm Mrs. Theddon to every one but you. You are to be different from the rest. Call me—if you can—call me mother! Would you call me mother, little girl?"

"I'd love to call you mother!"

The child smiled up sweetly into the woman's aching eyes. And something caught in Mrs. Theddon's throat. Only for an instant. Then another great wave of maternity swept through her tightened breast and long-repressed motherhood welled up gloriously,—fine and overwhelming and golden and true.

II

Mrs. Theddon led the child down the outer hallway into a small room which opened from her own. White and blue was the color scheme in an atmosphere of silken daintiness. Two windows

opened upon a wide panorama of the Connecticut Valley and the river, far-flung from north to south below.

Little frocks were laid upon the counterpane. The dressing table was as complete as the boudoir appointments of feminine royalty. Beyond the chamber opened a diminutive, white-tiled bath.

“The workmen finished it yesterday afternoon, dear. I made them rush to complete it in time for you to-day. Now I’m going to bathe and dress you—myself. I want to do it! Marie, your maid, will not arrive until Monday. But that was arranged on purpose. For the first two days—I wanted—to accustom you to it, myself. I want us to get acquainted. You don’t mind, do you, dear?” She asked it anxiously, as though the child were a guest as old as herself.

“Oh, mother—dear—I’m—so happy! It’s a dream come true.”

“A dream come true?” Mrs. Theddon repeated the words dazedly. “And have you ever dreamed of things like these, little girl?”

“Lots and lots of times. Somehow the Orphanage seemed a place where I was staying for just a little while—until somebody I belonged to came after me.”

“I’m so glad you’re not—like—the other Orphanage children, dear. I thought in some ways you might be. But—you don’t know—how pleased—I am!”

“I’m just me,” the princess affirmed. “And it seems like—coming home!”

The mother bathed and dressed the child, calling a servant to carry away the Orphanage clothes. But if

Mrs. Theddon had been pleasantly surprised thus far, it was nothing to her overpowering satisfaction when she beheld her little ward clothed in the habilaments better befitting her character.

“You’re wonderful, girlie mine!” the woman whispered, as she surveyed the transformation.

“And I think you’re wonderful, too,” the child answered.

And yet, twenty-four hours later, a gray Sunday twilight, Mrs. Theddon entered her chamber to discover the child huddled in a window-chair, sobbing convulsively.

“What’s the matter, darling?” cried the shocked woman. “Aren’t you happy?”

The princess sought frantically to hide her tears.

“Yes’m—I’m happy—so happy it hurts. Yet—well, I guess I miss the orphans already!”

“Miss them! You mean you’d rather be at the Orphanage than here with me?”

“It isn’t the nice things—it isn’t you—it’s—it’s ____”

“Yes, yes! What is it?”

“I guess it’s just the orphans—’specially the babies. I miss havin’ to do things for ’em. For they needed an awful lot done for ’em, and—I was happy because it was me that could do it.”

“But they have some one else to look after them now. They’re no worse off because you’ve gone.”

“No’m. Perhaps not. I wasn’t ‘specially thinking of their side of it. I was thinking of mine. They liked to have things done for ’em. They told me so. Miss

Howland got awful cross sometimes. And I felt happy because I was 'preciated. That's an awful nice word, 'preciated, isn't it? I so want folks to 'preciate me, Mrs. Thed—mother dear. I guess everybody does, don't they?—want to be 'preciated?"

Every one wants to be appreciated? Dear God in heaven!

"Child, what does put such mature thoughts into your little head?"

"If you'd wondered and wondered who you were, and never found out, maybe you'd know how sad you could feel, thinking it was because nobody wanted you and you wasn't 'preciated."

"You poor, maternal, romantic little lamb! You talk like a woman grown, already."

"Do grown-up ladies feel like that, Mrs. Thed—mother dear?"

Mrs. Theddon did not answer at once. Her voice was handicapped when she responded:

"Real women do, I fancy, my darling. But maybe there are a lot who have a cruel time showing it. Come, baby! Tell me—did any one ever pick you up and rock you to sleep in their arms? Did any one ever try to sing you a lullaby, child?"

"Not much, Mrs. Thed—mother. I always tried to do it to those littler than me. But I loved to do it!" the princess cried suddenly.

"Let's sit down in the rocker, child. And don't weep any more. Because you'll never know how much you are appreciated here."

The woman took the distraught, moist-eyed little girl in her arms. She tried to soothe her by singing a

lullaby. She had a rich contralto voice, “trained” by a great Parisian master—for this!—to sing a little, parentless girl to sleep. Yet she had to stop half way. She found that her training had gone for naught. Her voice was cracked and jagged and uneven and broken.

In that mellow pause, the child snuggled closer. She whispered in the dusk:

“You’re just like a real mother, Mrs. Theddon. I guess I know now why some of the babies at the Home stopped crying when I began to rock them to sleep.”

The future opened radiantly for Mrs. Gracia Theddon then. And the past dropped away, colorless and shallow and tinseled and wasted.

“Listen, dear,” she said finally. “I’m going to ask if you’ll do something for me.”

“I’ll do anything in the world for you—that I can.”

“When Miss Howland took you into the Home, she called you Allegra. When she partly adopted you, she gave you her own name—Howland. So while you were at the Orphanage your name was Allegra Howland. But now that you’ve left that life behind you, your last name is Theddon, like my own.”

“Yes’m.”

“I don’t like the name Allegra. I want you to let me change that too. I’ve picked out a name I’d planned to call a little girl of my own, if one ever came.”

“What is it, mother dear? I’m sure I’ll like it if you picked it out.”

“It’s—Madelaine!”

“It’s an awful pretty name,” said the child, after a

moment's silence. "It's so soft-sounding and pleasant, like all the rooms here in your house—and your eyes and your voice—since I've been here and you started to love me."

"God help me!" whispered the rich woman. "Maybe You knew best, dear God. It's worth the dreary wait, after all!"

And so Madelaine Theddon came into existence. So she too started her journey—a daintier, softer journey—toward Life's Hilltop and the lambent stars and the Amethyst Moment.

III

In the butler's pantry old Murfins was straightening out the tradesmen's orders for a dinner party. Stebbins, near-by, was polishing liqueur glasses with a flannel cloth.

"But I'm thinking there's going to be family fireworks, Steb, when the Ruggleses come home and hear what she's done. They got an awful good opinion of themselves—those Ruggleses. Amos's wife threw an awful fit, I heard, when her brother married the Missus which up to that time had been practically a Nobody. Now there's a child from an orphanage come to get a look-see at the moneybags. Can you see 'em standing for it, Steb?"

"The Missus is too smart to have any will drawed that them Ruggleses can break."

"You never can tell, Steb. There's lawyers and lawyers. Some of 'em could drive a coach unscorched through hell."

"Well, I hope young Gordon don't get any of it—

his aunt's money, I mean. He's a bad one, Gordon is! Remember how he almost killed the roan colt last time he was here? Murphy wasn't goin' to stand by and have no horse abused like that. I seen it all. When he interfered, Gord went for him with his quirt. If the Missus hadn't showed up when she did, Mike'd busted the young roughneck wide open." Murphy was the Theddon coachman.

"She's provin' she's a bit of an angel," observed Murfins. "I'd hate to see her get the short end of it." He meant Madelaine.

They worked in silence for a few minutes. Then Stebbins remarked:

"Wonder how Gord'll behave next time he comes to visit here and finds the princess his aunt's got out of an asylum."

"Not an asylum, Steb. An asylum's a crazy house where they store insane lunatics that ain't quite right in their heads!"

CHAPTER VIII

PRAYER

I

Bernie Gridley soon acquired a girl chum, a boy-baiting little blond with a profile like the face on an old-style quarter-dollar. Her name was Elinore Carver.

As I was Nathan Forge's squire, Elinore became my Heart's Desire. Which may read like "peanut" poetry but which really did possess so much poetry at the time that I am allowing the euphony to remain.

Thus did our quartette facilitate the course of true love, conspire to make it run smoothly and hoodwink our parents considered as being meddlesome outsiders on general principle. Family catechisms in the evening as to our associations during the day probed in vain for any milk-and-water assignations so long as the parties on all sides could swear truthfully that they had traveled during the shining hours with those of their own sex and any propinquity came about in pairs and purely by accident.

Although Bernie's mother did her worst to keep her offspring an exasperating little prig, still in her heart the Dresden Doll was a daughter of Eve. And ere long it was accepted in school that she and Nathan had been called and by one another chosen.

Peter Taro, the school's bad boy, had individualistic ideas about it, however. Peter was too crude, too far down in the social scale, to acquire a sweetheart. Therefore he had a propensity to make light of the tenderest sentiments of others. He would walk on the opposite side of any Lover's Lane—meaning any village street whereon boy and maid could woo without the horrible possibility of being met by parents or those who would carry tales to parents—and make of himself a general nuisance. On picket fences with a stick he would beat a tom-tom. Or he would carry on loud-voiced conversation with the Romeo in the case on subjects of which the Juliet was ignorant. Being snubbed or rebuked, he sought vengeance in rhyme. His lines apropos of Nathan's affair ran:

"Get your fiddle and feel quite fiddley;
—Nathan Forge and Bernice Gridley!"

This sort of thing he shouted at the top of his lungs to the perplexity of the neighborhood and the edification of the grown-up world in general. Bernice affected to be furious. So ultimately Nathan had to fight the Taro boy. Which he did—adequately.

It was the first fight of Nathan's career—a "kid-fight" perchance—but no less virile or significant on that account. For like many quiet, peaceable men, when aroused the boy became a fury. Lithe as a cat, nimble as a bantam-weight, he pounded Peter Taro until the blood-smeared youngster fled.

Those were days of bliss and nights of heartburn. Vividly the hours come back that we spent before kitchen mirrors, steam-misty with boiling cabbage or wash-water of our homes, tying and retying our “cravats”, plastering down our hair with pilfered bay rum. If we had the front of our hair parted and well pasted down, and the toes of our shoes reasonably shined, we were groomed satisfactorily for hymeneal campaigning.

That each of us possessed a hat-lifting cowlick in the rear like the business paraphernalia of a small porcupine and that our heels were eternally yellow with mud were among the happy paradoxes of boyhood. We were as we were when we looked in our mirrors—when we posed for phrenological inventory and profile analysis. And besides, a good soldier in either war or love never looks behind anyhow.

II

We had followed the two little girls homeward one afternoon, chaffing and mauling each other as we would never have done if they had not been somewhere about to see, when we returned along the Green River in the afterglow. Eventually we threw ourselves down on a knoll. While we idled there, the valley grew hushed and the stars came out.

“Say, Nat,” I demanded, “whatcher goin’ to be when you grow up?”

“A writer and a poet,” he answered without hesitation.

I pondered this. We were emerging from the period when manhood meant freedom to turn pirate

or Indian fighter. If Nathan had declared his intention of becoming a locomotive engineer or a clown in a circus, I should not have hesitated to take him at his word. But a writer—a poet!

“Aw, go on!” I retorted. “Poets don’t make no money!”

“I dunno’s I wanner make money.”

I looked at him. His face—growing a bit less freckled now—was held between his hands as he lay on his chest and looked vaguely off across the smooth river where the trout were jumping. But before I could comment caustically on this he asked, “Whatter you gonna be, Billy?”

“I dunno. I’ll be a business man, I guess, and make barrels of money—as much as Mr. Gridley.”

“What kind of business?”

“Oh, I dunno. I’ll own a factory, I guess—and be president of a bank afterwards, so when I want money all I gotta do is go into my bank and help myself.”

We lay in silence for several minutes. Then I persisted:

“If you’re gonna be a writer, whatcher gonna write?”

“Oh, books and poems and things—that hurt me so much sometimes when I look at ’em.”

“Huh! That ain’t a regular business. That’s a lazy man’s job. Judge Prescott says so. His daughter, Annie, married somebody who writes poetry and the Judge has to support both of ’em. I heard him say so. Betcha your pa don’t letcher, anyhow!”

“Betcher he will! Betcher he won’t have anything

to say about it—damn him!"

Nathan's lips tightened. It was not petulancy; it was the bitterness of mistreated childhood.

"You ought not to swear about your father, Nat," I told him, horrified.

"Why not? Is it worse to say what I think than to go around with it makin' me mad inside?"

"No, but it's wicked to swear about your folks. You won't live long. The Ten Commandments says so."

"Aw, whatter I care for the old Ten Commandments? All the Bible and the church and things is made for anyhow is to back up grown folks when they wanner work off their hell on us kids!"

"Don't you believe there's a God?"

"Well, somebody probably made all the stars and trees and flowers—all the pretty things. But it spoils it to think it's the same person that dad says is so precious to his soul every week in prayer meetin'. See that evenin' star now, Billy, hangin' low over Haystack. Ain't it pretty? S'pose anybody that made such a shinin' star would be in partnership with a growed-up person who's so tight he won't buy his kid a pair o' pants? Billy, whatter we got all this God-business and church-business crammed down our throats for? Why can't we just drink it in by comin' out to a place like this, where it's all quiet, and watchin' an evenin' star?"

"But we gotta love our parents, Nat. The Bible says so!"

"Yeah—and the same Bible says we oughta be clean and peaceful and good inside. And when a feller hates anybody like I hate my father, how can

he turn around and say he loves him and act like he loves him, when he don't?"

"All the same," I reiterated, "the Bible says we gotta, and we have!"

"Well, I'll do it till I'm twenty-one," assented Nathan, "'cause I can't help myself. Then I'll go to hell and roast, if it's wicked—but I'll stop lovin' him and do as I honest please. Between the time I'm twenty-one and the time I go to hell, I'll feel peaceful and satisfied for a while, anyhow."

I felt my friend was damning himself irrevocably, sinning against the Holy Ghost. I had to get away from those sulphur fumes, so I went back to poetry.

"Howja know you can write poetry to make your livin' at it? Have you tried?"

"Yeah! Lots of times. It's a cinch!"

"You mean you've got some poems writ already?"

"Sure, slathers of 'em."

"Where are they?"

"Home—locked up so Pa won't get 'em—along with Bernie's letters."

"What's your Ma think about you bein' a poet?"

"Oh, she don't think nothin', only what a hard time she has with Pa and that Edith will marry money."

"Ain't you ever talked with her about it?"

"I see myself!"

"Thunder! Can't you go to your Ma and talk about —things—when you wanna?"

"No! 'Stead o' that, I have to listen to Ma's

troubles. And if I don't happen to agree with her, she gets to twitchin' all over her face and goes off to rock in the dark by herself. She tells me, 'Oh, you're growin' up into a small-sized edition of your father!' Damn her, too!"

"But if you can't talk with your Ma about things, and what you're gonna be when you're growed up, who can you talk 'em with?"

"Don't talk 'em with nobody—exceptin' you sometimes. Keep 'em to myself. That's why I wanner marry Bernie just as quick as I can. I gotta feelin' way down inside that she'll listen when she's my wife, and help."

He spoke the word wife with difficulty.

III

"I have always understood my children perfectly," declared Anna Forge years later, when the Forge domestic structure went down in wreckage, as it was bound to go down in wreckage. "Edith would have been all right if it hadn't been for her brother's example always before her. And Nathan, he took after his father—bigoted, stubborn, cold-blooded, hard-hearted, indifferent to those who have thanklessly tried to do their utmost to help him."

"I have always understood my children perfectly," contended Johnathan Forge to old Archibald Cuttner, when five years later Johnathan was having a hysterical time to keep Nathan from marrying his granddaughter. "Edith takes after her mother—fizzle-headed, irresponsible, neurotic, always thinking of herself and her troubles, inconsistent, a woman in every sense of the word. As for Nathan, God only

knows who he takes after. I'm almost ready to believe him sent to me as my cross. I trained the boy by example and precept to walk uprightly, flee evil, honor and respect his parents, worship God. But he is determined to go his own way, regardless of my counsel. It's partly the age in which we live that's to blame. Disrespect and profanation is in the very air the rising generation breathes."

"I am persuaded," wrote a popular clergyman recently, "that what this age needs more than all else is abstersion from the follies and 'broad-mindedness' of this blatant day; we need to return to the 'good old time,' the fundamental things,—unconditional respect for parents, rigorous observance of the Sabbath, the replacement of woman back in the home where Nature intended her to function; less frivolous nonsense and 'isms' in our educational systems and more reading-writing-and-arithmetic, good, old-fashioned fear of fire and brimstone thundered from our pulpits and a wholesome terror of the wrath of God injected into the hearts of a shallow and mocking generation who bow down and worship the Golden Calf."

"I hope," remarked Uncle Joe Fodder, the town philosopher, one night when he and I discussed the Forges—"I hope the Lord's got a sense o' humor! How could He remain the Almighty without it?"

IV

The Forges, on coming to Paris, had taken a small gray cottage on Spring Street. This cottage stood on a corner with a short width of yard between the Adams Street sidewalk and the windows of the Forge dining room. And on summer nights when the heat

required opened windows, neighbors and pedestrians overheard the full barrage of vocal artillery that husband and wife laid down over trivial family matters or the scion who was “bringing their gray hairs down in sorrow to the grave.”

From the day he was born until the day he married, the boy seemed a bone of contention between his parents. For the most part these altercations had to do with his mother’s animosity toward the father’s method of raising his family. But always, when the man’s brutality got the better of hysterical argument, the affair ended with the wife’s contention, voiced in no very refined terms, that she “was going home to her mother.”

I forget how many times Anna Forge “went home to her mother”, if I ever knew. She threatened to do it a couple of times a week. About twice a year she made the threat good. On these occasions she packed all her personal clothes and possessions in several bags and telescope valises, took a half day to “wash and iron the children”; called Uncle Joe Fodder’s depot hack and “left her husband in style”, as Uncle Joe put it.

She returned to a grass-widowed mother who lived in a small manufacturing city out in York State. This mother sympathized with her the first day; listened in silence to her troubles the second; was indifferent to them the third; tolerated them the fourth; endured them the fifth; “had words” with her daughter the sixth; quarreled with her openly on the seventh and ordered her out of the house on the eighth. Then back Anna Forge returned to John, entered her own home haughtily, failed to speak to him until the third day, then started around the six-month cycle all over.

These semiannual trips were gala days in the lives

of Nathan and his sister,—until he began to realize the tragedy that sponsored them.

One night he came running over to my house in great distress. He “whistled me out” and I found him sobbing distraughtly.

“Pa an’ Ma have had an awful fight, Billy!” he told me. “Pa wouldn’t give her no money for a dress today. But when he came home from downtown he fetched one he’d bought himself. Ma looked at it and said she wouldn’t be seen in the thing. Pa says she could wear it or go naked. They got to havin’ words, Billy, and pretty soon Ma picked up the butcher knife and says by the White Christ she’d cut Pa’s throat. And Pa chucked a blue-glass pitcher at her all full o’ milk and said she was full o’ high-flown Yankee notions and he’d take ’em out of her. Ma says she’d go back to her mother and Pa says, ‘Yes, that’d be a good scheme, only in a few days she’d have a fight with her mother and be right back again.’ Then Ma says she’d chuck herself in the river. And Pa says she didn’t have the guts, And Ma says oh, she didn’t have, did she, and started right out of the house. She’s off toward the river now, Billy, and I’m scared stiff she’ll do it.”

“You mean she’s went to commit suicide?” I demanded aghast.

“Yeah!—And her forehead was all bloody where the pitcher struck her.”

“How long’s she been gone?”

“She just started. I came right over. Pa sent me up to bed and I skipped out over the woodshed roof.”

“Can she swim?”

“No! Anyhow, people that’s committing suicide

don’t care whether they can swim! Most of ’em don’t!”

“Gosh, she may really kill herself. Whatcher want me to do?”

“Come with me, Billy. Maybe we can stop her!”

We reached the river but found no woman. Nathan felt for a certainty his mother had cast herself into the water and would not be consoled. He knelt upon the close-cropped grass and with face on his hands he sobbed distressingly.

“Why can’t I have a Pa and Ma that don’t fight all the time?” he cried hysterically. “Other fellows do! Why can’t I? Oh, Ma! Ma! Ma!”

I tried to console him but I was rather ill myself. Somehow I felt responsible for Mrs. Forge’s death, not having reached the stream in time to intercept and dissuade her. My own face was awash with tears as I tried to persuade my friend to go home and tell his dad.

“I climbed out on the shed roof and skun away,” cried Nathan. “I’m scared stiff to go home again—ever! He’ll whale the daylights out o’ me fer tellin’ anybody about it, even you!”

“We better go somewheres,” I argued. “We can’t save her now. And we can’t stay out here all night. You better come home with me, and I’ll tell my Ma and she’ll see what you better do. She ain’t afraid of your Pa! She’ll tell him what she thinks of him. My Ma’s great at tellin’ your folks what she thinks of ’em!”

I persuaded Nat to come home with me. It was a tragic return.

My mother gathered us against her ample bosom, an arm about each of us, while she listened to the horror of the thing we blurted out. Then she smiled sadly and kissed us.

“Bless your hearts! Nathan’s mother has been here with me, telling me about it,” mother said. “She must have turned back through Pine Street while you were on the way to the river. She wouldn’t kill herself. She loves Nathan too much to do that. She said so!”

V

Nathan’s mother went home that night and when she reentered the house, John Forge looked up from his paper and said:

“Huh! Back, are you? I thought so!”

The mother passed up to bed with some hot retort about “her life belonging to her children”.

But she cried all that night and John Forge slept on the downstairs sofa.

“I heard him say it was a hell of a home,” Nathan told me afterward.

VI

Outside of parental incompatibility, the other bane of Nat’s life in those years was the manner in which his father compelled him to dress. A high-strung, sensitive lad, naturally fastidious, he could not have suffered a worse handicap in the matter of polish and poise in later years than resulted from Johnathan’s policy of dressing his family.

The boy was the butt of the school for his oddities

of raiment. Johnathan's idea of clothing was merely something to cover primeval nakedness. The first new suit the boy possessed he purchased with money he had made running errands. Invariably he wore coats and trousers cut down from those his father had discarded. This would not have been so bad if his mother had been any sort of tailoress. But she was slovenly with needle and scissors and the jests of his school companions were Chinese cruelty. "The Scarecrow" they called him.

Openly he was twitted that he was not invited to parties because of his freakish appearance. Johnathan Forge was small in stature and at seventeen Nathan was almost of a size with his father. After that the lad was compelled to wear Johnathan's suits without remodeling. When Johnathan thus relegated a cast-off suit to his son, while he bought himself a new one, he made the boy pay something from his savings, whether he wanted to purchase the clothes or not. John's philosophy was "making a man of Nat" and "teaching him to take care of his clothes because they cost money." But it took years of hard, deliberate self-training to make Nat forego a painful self-consciousness of clothes and personal appearance.

Often in prayer meeting, which Nathan was forced to attend religiously after fourteen, as I listened to John Forge giving intimate details of the spiritual partnership between himself and the Savior, I heard Nathan snarl under his breath:

"Then I wish Jesus would put it into his head to get me a new pair o' pants! I hope the Lord goes around lookin' decent in His clothes but I doubt it or He'd have some pity on me!"

VII

Outside of school, our lives were tied up intimately with the Methodist Church. We had no movies or theaters to speak of in those days, few sports, certainly no parties or dances,—at least for Nathan. The only party he ever attended, with parental sanction, up to the time of his majority, was little Bernice-Theresa's of previous record and that largely because it fell within the scope of a school affair.

We went to church morning and evening on Sunday and to Junior League at four o'clock. We went to Tuesday-night class meeting and were scared nearly out of our wits at being called to stand up and testify how much we loved God when we didn't know whether we loved Him or not. And on Thursday nights we sat through those long, distressing silences between testimonies when forty people waited for the spirit to move the brethren and lips whispered silently, committing sentiments to memory which were uttered parrot-like once the whisperers were on their feet. We knew before we started in who was going to pray the longest and for what he was going to pray; who was going to sing the loudest and what he was going to "call for" in the matter of hymns; who was going to testify the hardest and what his remarks were going to include. My only comment on these weekly spiritual gatherings, in so far as two growing boys were made to attend under pressure, was that they did us no lasting harm.

The red-letter days in our lives, however, were the Friday-night "sociables" and bean suppers, or the concerts given for Easter, Harvest and Christmas.

Absolutely forbidden company or contact with the

other sex by narrow parental decree, the boy Nathan, being a normal, healthy youngster, had either to repress natural maturing emotions until they found outlet in clandestine, perverted channels, or he had to gain worldly knowledge and sex-poise by the hard, raw route of searing experience when John was no longer able to make his decree effective.

John Forge's argument was that sex, as well as money, being a basic root of all human evil, the way to keep a boy from disaster was to prohibit him the company of sex altogether.

John Forge had married unhappily, therefore all marriages were unhappy. Nat should not duplicate his father's mistake if John had to kill him to save him from it.

If Nathan attended any school or neighborhood gathering and his father heard of it afterward, the man had two questions ready for his son: (1) "Were there any girls present?" and (2) "Did you kiss 'em?"

John Forge had a crazed obsession about his boy kissing a girl.

In the school yard and even at church "sociables" we often played asinine childish games, "Ring Around the Rosy", "Copenhagen" and "Drop the Pillow." But Nathan, fearing his father's wrath, was ever the wallflower. And he was deeply in love with Bernice-Theresa, or thought he was. Other boys kissed their "girls." Why shouldn't he?

"I've got to kiss her! I've just simply got to kiss her!" he consequently affirmed to me; no emperor ever planned the ravishing of a rival kingdom with the sangfroid with which Nathan deliberated upon the necessity for osculatory assault on the Dresden Doll.

“The thing to do,” I advised gravely, “is to get her alone where she can’t scream or bring help. And it’s got to be done in such a way that she don’t tell her folks! Because then they’ll tell your folks and your dad will just simply kill you!”

This might seem impossible, but to fourteen nothing is impossible.

We thought of intriguing Bernice into the woods at the edge of town, into the haunted dwelling next to the tannery, into all sorts of lonely, lugubrious places. But the difficulty lay in enticing her to the rendezvous and operating on her rosebud lips without scaring the Dresden Doll half out of her senses and bringing a boomerang back upon ourselves. Ultimately we resolved upon a bold maneuver: *We would kiss Bernice Gridley in church*!

“We could send her and Elinore a note,” I planned, “asking ’em to wait after the Easter concert. I could keep Elinore and send Bernie out into the vestibule. Just as she comes through the door you could grab her and do it! Then run like the devil!”

This was bold. It was terribly bold! Yet it was feasible. We had yet to learn that the ecstasy of osculation consists largely in the warmth and passion of reciprocity. We were midget cavemen, Nathan and I. Bernice-Theresa had to be kissed if our lives were forfeit.

I blush now when I consider the terms of endearment in which our letters of those days were penned. Hours we spent writing them. The most indiscreet scion of Pittsburgh aristocracy never committed himself more idiotically (to repent subsequently in curses and coin) than Nathan and I described our holiest, hottest feelings for the

edification of those little snobs. So the intriguing epistles were indited and delivered. The kissing of Bernice-Theresa was on!

Nathan and I sensed little of that concert. We were too much occupied visioning the epochal thing to ensue as its aftermath.

The concert began, ran its course and ended. And the Dresden Doll never appeared more bewitching than she did upon that platform. Two small boys caught each other's eyes and wiped perspiration from youthful brows. The fatal day and hour had come. Did we have the nerve to go through with it? Only the fear of each thinking the other cowardly held us from fleeing that church when the organist began the postlude.

It had been a beautiful spring afternoon and during the concert a thunderstorm played above the village. But later the sun broke through upon a sweet and dripping world, and the weather gave our elders no cause to tarry. The two girls, silly and giggling, held converse with other little girls up near the altar rail. They had signified by signs and semaphoring to which grown folk have no code-book, that they would wait and consider the momentous things we had to propound. And the church continued to empty and the janitor to close the windows.

Nathan and I stood waiting in the vestry. It was shadowed out there. I occupied a doorway at one side. I saw the two little girls finally coming down the center aisle, and made a sign to Nat. He nodded. His limbs were turning to tallow; he was hoping he would not faint at the peak of the conspiracy when nerve alone was required to see it through.

At the next to the last pew the two girls parted.

Elinore sidled off between the seats to make her way to my door. Bernie kept on and stepped into the vestry.

The instant she appeared, all the pent-up intrigue of weeks galvanized in Nathan.

I am not certain where he kissed her, but at the shock of a small boy hurtling himself dramatically from the shadows, the Dresden Doll recoiled and shrieked and wilted.

Nathan exploded his kiss, trusting it to hit its mark. He sensed much talcum powder and cologne in his nostrils, contact with adolescent flesh, sweet and soft and warm. Then, at the instant of glorious success, the wrath of God broke from the heavens and consumed him as the fire that blasted Sodom. From the skies above, from the earth, from the waters beneath the earth, from somewhere came a Voice, a terrible, blasting, annihilating Voice:

“Here! Here! Here! What the devil’s comin’ off here, anyhow?”

Nat snapped up into the air. Then he assumed a Direction. Luckily the open church door was ahead. Into the soft spring dusk he shot and began to tread the world beneath him crazily. His not to reason why, his but to flee or die; Nathan cleared the doorstep into thin air and zoomed for the horizon. I was close behind him.

We negotiated the walk, the curb and the street. We made the opposite walk and kept on going. We went through Pat Larkin’s side yard and Mrs. Larkin’s choicest roses. A lot of sweet-pea vines came next, with most of them trailing behind us. Nat stepped on a cucumber frame and I plowed through a couple of yards of hen wire. Thereupon we got through the

Alderman property into Adams Street. But we did not stop there.

We went through Adams Street, through Pine and Walnut. Then out of town by the pumping station. We covered two miles that night before we finally plunged into Bancroft's Woods far down the river. There we crawled into the underbrush and squatted on our haunches.

Said Nathan, "Who was it?"

Said I, "It was Mr. Gridley!"

Sickening silence!

"Where'd he come from?" Nathan finally found strength to ask.

"He came down the belfry stairs! I remember now there was something the matter with the bell-rope this morning. He must have gone up with John Chase to fix it."

"Her father!" groaned Nathan. "Billy—this is the end!"

"Not on your tintype it ain't! It's only the beginning!" I retorted.

"Billy—what are we going to do?"

So Guy Fawkes must have queried his lieutenants when the well-known Gunpowder Plot went slightly awry.

"I dunno, Nathan. It's a cinch we can't go home! We can't ever go home again!"

"That's right," agreed Nathan. "Maybe Mr. Gridley is at my house right this minute, tellin' it all to dad!"

"It looks, Nathan, as if we'd have to leave this place for good and all. Have you got any money?"

“Twenty cents,” said my friend, totaling his pockets.

“I’ve got a dollar-seventy in my bank at home, if I could sneak in and get it out.”

“That’d be a dollar-ninety. We could live a long time on a dollar-ninety.”

“Where’d we go?” I asked.

“West, I guess. Everybody goes west. Nap Taro went west and come back rich. Maybe down the future years, if we could come back rich, they’d forgive us.”

“But how’d we get there? It costs more’n a dollar-ninety to get west. And we gotta eat in the meantime.”

“We’d have to hop freight trains like the tramps. It’s a cinch we gotta get outa here or the police’ll catch us.”

“Oh, dear, I wisht we hadn’t done it!” I groaned.

“So do I,” lamented Nathan feverishly. “But it’s done now and can’t be undone.”

“That’s right. I don’t know as I ever heard of anybody unkissing a girl. And we won’t be able to grow up and marry Elinore and Bernie at all——”

“Maybe if we wrote a letter to ’em after we got west, they’d wait for us. Women do that sort of thing sometimes—till death.”

“But they’re probably mad at us by now.”

Nathan laid over on the rain-wet grass and hid his face in his hands. After a time he sat up and asked as men ask after drifting for weeks on an open sea:

“Billy, do you suppose it would do any good to

pray?"

I considered this.

"Yes," I said devoutly, relievedly; "let's pray about it!"

"Who'll pray, Billy, you or me? You pray!"

"No—you!" I argued. "You did the kissin'!"

"All right," said Nathan brokenly. "But what'll I say?"

"I'd ask God first to forgive the sin of it. Then I'd beseech Him to show us a way out—because we're sorry—terribly sorry—and a way out is what we need most."

Again Nathan considered, ashen-faced, biting his nails until the blood came. Then two distraught boys, hatless, their clothing bedaubed and briar-torn, facing the most hideous dilemma thus far in their lives, knelt in the shower-washed alders. Earnestly they besought aid from the giver of every good and perfect gift.

"Oh, God," prayed Nathan, "we have sinned—we have sinned—against heaven and against Thee. Lord, we have kissed—we have kissed—no, *I* have kissed—a g-g-girl—and her father, Mr. Caleb M. Gridley, who runs the tannery here in Paris—he caught us!"

Nathan paused. He was very near sobbing. His voice broke several times in attempts to continue, striving to remember orthodox forms of divine supplication which might be appropriate for the present situation.

"He—he—he caught us, oh, God!" went on Nathan. "Oh, God, we beseech Thee—we beseech Thee—not to wreak Thy anger upon us, nor visit us

with Thy displeasure—displeasure. Hear our prayers, we pray Thee—we pray Thee—and have compassion upon us—upon us. Mr. C. M. Gridley is mad at my father anyhow, over a suit for some leather that ain't never been settled up, and now that he knows I've kissed his daughter, he'll probably get action on collection. Mr. John H. Forge, my father, will wreck his displeasure on me, his son. Oh, God, we didn't mean to do it, God,—that is, we meant to do it but didn't mean to get caught. Therefore shield and protect us in Thy infinite mercy, oh, God, and turn not Thine ear from us—Thine ear from us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil; for Thine is the power and the glory forever. Amen!"

Nathan turned quickly, anxiously.

"Did I say enough?" he demanded. "I suppose I might have laid it on stronger."

I held some such idea, but it was unethical and inappropriate now to return and reopen the prayer. I said God was assumed to know everything and inferred that undoubtedly He realized the exigency of the present circumstances anyhow.

"What'll we do now?" Nathan next asked. "Had we better go west?"

"No," I finally decided. "Let's wait and see how the prayer takes hold. The Bible says 'Knock and ye shall find; seek and it shall be opened unto you'. I say we trust Him."

"You mean go home?"

"Well, we can sort of sneak up and see what's happened. And if the prayer don't do nothin' then we can think about going west afterward."

This possessed sound points and as the stars were

coming out and the frogs were piping shrilly in the boglands, we arrived by back roads and streets at the Forge cottage.

“Pa and Ma are at it again!” groaned Nat in a sick whisper. “Probably old Gridley’s been here and told’ em. Listen!”

I heard epithets applied to a woman which made my mother’s face whiten when I suggested them at bedtime.

“Nat and I heard ’em through the kitchen window,” I declared. “We was lyin’ underneath it, listenin.”

“Well, sonny, don’t you ever remember those words or think of them again. They mean horrible, vile, foul, wicked things. That’s all I can tell you that you can understand—now!”

“But Nathan’s father said ’em!”

“Then Nathan’s father is a wicked man, even if he does get up in prayer meeting and tell how precious the Lord is to his soul. And did Nathan get into the house?”

“Yeah, he sneaked up to bed the front way. The door was open.”

“Well, you see, dear, your prayer was answered, wasn’t it?”

“It looks so, Ma!”

“Always remember it, laddie. You’re going to get in tighter situations than you got into to-night. Don’t ever be ashamed to pray, laddie. It never harms and always helps.”

“Do you think God really heard it, Ma?”

"Your prayer was answered, wasn't it, laddie?"

"Yeah, Ma!"

"Then isn't that answer enough? What more need mother say?"

It developed that Mr. Gridley had not recognized the identity of his daughter's demonstrative friend. In fact, he had forgotten the incident within ten seconds after Nathan had taken unto himself wings and flown. He was far more interested in finding a short ladder to fix that bell-rope.

Thus for the first time in a great vicissitude Nathan and I learned that the worst enemy a man can have is often his own imagination.

VIII

The battle royal between Nathan's father and mother had been caused by something of graver import to my friend than any mere family adjustment between Forge and Gridley over osculatory assault upon a little girl. It had been caused by a decision voiced earlier that Sunday evening by Johnathan that he was determined to take Nat from school and put him to work.

Nathan was now past fourteen and legally entitled to his "papers" and educational "freedom." John had been compelled to work ten hours a day at fourteen, turning his money over to his father. Nathan should do the same. And Mrs. Forge had objected, not so much for Nathan's sake, as because it was Johnathan's proposition.

Old Caleb Gridley, although holding a seventy-dollar court judgment over Johnathan, had never

been able to collect his money. He had made John's life a burden. So John had it in mind to suggest that Nathan be given a job in the tannery and work out his father's debt.

Nathan, conceded the smartest boy who attended the Academy, was ultimately set to work at four dollars a week. Johnathan bought his peace with his conscience by generously returning his son twenty-five cents a week to be "squandered" in any way the boy chose.

CHAPTER IX

BENDING THE TWIG

I

The girl Madelaine had been within three weeks of her eleventh birthday when Mrs. Theddon adopted her from the Corpus-Christi Orphanage.

If the child were precocious in a queer, matronly way, her clouded parentage and life at the Home were mainly responsible. She was intensely feminine and affectionate, fiercely maternal, all of which at first made for a certain distress when thrust out into the coëducational environment of the Springfield public schools with children of equal age.

Like some unmarried women, Mrs. Theddon was full of theories as to how a child should be reared. Yet the woman was neither bigoted nor maudlin. She had brains and common sense. If she held theories on child culture and child psychology, it was because she had evolved them from a shrewdness of observation when in contact with the offspring of affluent parents with whom she associated. There was no “private school nonsense” for her child

therefore, until Madelaine was old enough to know the meaning and worth of exclusiveness. Beside, for a few years, Gracia Theddon wanted the little girl about her home and private tutors could never supply that academic atmosphere and class *camaraderie* which should be made chief among the heritages of adolescence.

So Madelaine went to the Forest Park school, and while the locality and its offspring were above normal, she stood out in her classes like an orchid in a thistle bed. She did careful, neat, thorough work and made friends. But she had no giggly age. No boys wrote asinine notes to her or tried to flirt with her. She shrank from participation in adolescent pranks.

At home she quickly absorbed the atmosphere of the Theddon household. She became an avid reader of everything in the big Theddon library. For hours at a time she lay stretched face downward along the window seat in the southeast corner of that splendid room, absorbed in the classics. And three years passed like white magic.

During her term in the ninth grade Madelaine grew perceptibly. It was an awkward time but never wholly distressing. At fifteen she was almost as tall as her foster-mother. Then she began to grow willowy, lithe and graceful.

She had few companions even then, and did not seem to cultivate them.

“Honestly, I wish the child would laugh once in a while,” Mrs. Theddon told a friend, calling one afternoon. “But somehow it doesn’t occur to her to laugh. She acts as if the world were too big, wonderful and mystic to contain such a thing as

humor."

"Then you're satisfied with her?" the caller suggested.

"Satisfied? My dear woman, there are times when I'm afraid I'll be unable to satisfy her! That sounds strange, doesn't it? But the girl's faith in every one and everything is so absolute and her ideals so quaint that I almost fear to have her grow further. I try to tell her, to pave the way for disillusion, but I don't seem to get results. She looks at me so hurt and incredulous that I feel as though I were defiling Eden."

This incredulity of Madelaine's worried her mother far more than the latter cared to admit. Likewise the girl's instinctive estheticism and reserve. One summer evening, as they strolled the length of Sumner Avenue, Mrs. Theddon expounded her philosophy of life for the first time aggressively, to her daughter.

"Madelaine, dear," she declared, "I want you to think of this world and look upon life as a long, long, series of interesting and constructive experiences. All of them may not be pleasant. But always they must be constructive. Whether you make them interesting depends entirely upon yourself, your capacity for participation in them."

"Participation!" repeated the girl. "What do you mean by participation?"

"I mean plunging in and enjoying them for all they're worth, taking part in everything—your own accorded part—to the utmost, regardless of how small that part may be. Don't shrink from anything. Never be that most distressing and unfinished product—a "wallflower" or spectator. Plunge in—

taste, feel, enjoy, laugh and love. Be in the center of things, never on the edge. Of course, I don't meant perverted things, activities or pursuits that offend decency or violate self-respect. And there is never excuse for stirring a sewer, in order to prove it's foul."

"I understand, mother dear."

"What I want to impress upon you, and the greatest heritage a parent can pass on to any child, is this: It's *your* world, yours to enjoy, yours to live in, play in, work in, get the most from. Every healthy activity exists to be experienced and not to be watched while others experience. Every social accomplishment, every art, every science, every hobby, has come about and is enjoyed because normal, healthy people in the past have found pleasure, enjoyment and improvement in them. If they have done so—you may likewise. Life has been given to you to get your portion. But Life can't seize you by the shoulders and drag you in. You must go in for yourself. The deepest wrong I can conceive a grown person doing to a younger is implanting within his or her subconscious mind that horrible 'You mustn't!' It's the blackest handicap a child can acquire. My creed is 'Do!' Never doubt yourself. Never believe you're any different from any girl or woman who has ever lived on earth. Because you're not. Yet you're not commonplace, either! The greatest self-crime is self-depreciation. Remember that all people believe in you unless you doubt yourself. They take you not at somebody else's appraisal but solely at the estimate you place upon yourself. Timid people are only those with half-developed souls. I don't mean by not being timid that you should be noisy or obstreperous. A child's home

influences should curb or counteract hoydenism. But hold up your head, be positive, never fear to look at life courageously, to see it clearly and see it whole. The world is yours, my dear, and all the men and women in it—for your enjoyment and boon companions."

"You make me afraid when you talk to me like that—and yet you make me glad!" the girl responded wonderingly.

"I've learned it by bitter experience, dear—my philosophy. I've told you something of my story: how I started life a poor girl in a village up in Vermont. My father and mother were never able to see beyond the village sky line. Life and the outside world terrified them. Forever they were telling me 'You can't!' Doubting themselves, of course they doubted their daughter. From 'You can't!' it was a step to 'You mustn't!' I loved a man at eighteen as dearly as I ever loved anybody. He was a smart young man, with many excellent qualities. In those days he was considered so smart I doubted that I could be his wife. It sounds strange. But I did. I thought he needed a cleverer woman than myself to be that wife successfully. I told him so. It broke his heart. Then my father and mother died suddenly—within a year of each other. I had to make my way alone; earn my living. I went to Boston. Always I found myself a wallflower, a spectator, while others played and enjoyed. I wanted to play and enjoy also. But I'd been taught to believe that 'nice girls' didn't do anything but sit and fold their hands. Then, praise God, a man came and took me up into an exceeding high mountain."

"Captain Theddon?"

"No. Not Captain Theddon! He was a man from

Virginia. He loved me dearly. For a year I was almost too happy to move. It seemed the world about me was made of frail glass—pink glass. If I moved it would crash. This man took me in hand, I say. In a year he undid most of my vicious training. He opened a new heaven and a new earth by getting me to accept exactly what I told you a moment ago—to be a participant in everything instead of a spectator. He taught me the simple truth that shyness is only the fear of ridicule—but that people who ridicule are either deficient themselves or coarsely conceited. Therefore they are not deserving of attention at all. And under his tutelage, for two short years I was deliriously happy!"

"Why didn't you marry him, mother dear?"

"He had to go to California—because of tuberculosis. He died out there."

The girl was shocked. Then she observed softly:

"I should have thought it would have broken you too, mother dear."

"It would have broken me, Madelaine, if Hugh hadn't taught me, along with the rest, to consider every experience that came to me as sent for some grand and constructive purpose. I think he knew he was going to die before he left me. Just a few moments before he boarded his train he said, 'The greatest experience of your life, dear girl, lies just ahead. If you fail to apply it constructively, you're not worthy of it at all.' Poor me! I thought he meant our marriage if he recovered. He meant his own death—my loss of him. It came to me—his last message—after he was only a memory. It was hard to see anything constructive in that horrible disappointment. But I did. I plunged into life, making

it give me something to outweigh my grief. I don't mean I became frivolous—I simply refused to be morbid—for Hugh's sake at first—then for the sake of Life itself. I saw that my loss had been sent to deepen my life, to make me sensitive to others who had suffered. I found out how richly one may live, whether it be in sunshine or in mist. And that philosophy now I want to pass along to you. To live, dear girl, just to live—for its own sweet sake—is a blessed, blessed privilege. But alas, so few know how to live. They go on the 'I mustn't' policy, never stopping to reason out why. They merely *exist*—even in the simplest of life's rôles. And I don't want you to merely exist, Madelaine. I want you to get from beautiful Life every last fleck of sunshine and shadow. There's no sorrow that can come to you, dear, that you can't make beautiful. There's no joy or happiness that you can't make injurious and vicious. Never mind what your rôle in life is to be, dear, whether you become a great artist or the unsung wife of an unsung man, whatever your hands find to do, don't only 'do it with all your might' but find some way to make it interesting. A sod hut on a prairie can be made as interesting as a gallery of Italian art—if you only look at it in the right light, making the utmost of yourself and materials. But to do that, you must be a part of those materials yourself—always a participant, sure of yourself, positive, constructive, analytical, intense, living each day to every one of the eighty-six thousand, four hundred seconds it contains."

Gracia Theddon not only preached this sort of thing; she lived it—every one of the day's eighty-six thousand, four hundred seconds—herself. Her home, her social life, her dress, her face,—she had paid a price for everything that she was and owned. And

having paid the price, she saw that she had her "Value Received."

II

During these years, Madelaine had met very few of Gracia Theddon's relatives. But the July after her graduation from grammar school, young Gordon Ruggles, son of Captain Theddon's sister, alighted from the Albany train, gave a red-cap a half-dollar to carry his portmanteau two hundred feet, had a taxi convey him where a street car would have served at one-twentieth the expense and entered his aunt's home without ringing the bell.

Young Ruggles was past sixteen, hard as nails, tough as a young owl and twice as wise, could lick his weight in wounded wildcats and circle the globe alone. One front tooth grew over another on his upper jaw, and he had a vicious right eye. When he wanted a thing, he went and took it. If his father didn't care to pay the bill, the bill simply went unpaid. Most spoiled rich boys are weaklings and cowards. Gordon loved a fight as a girl loves silk.

Through the Theddon household he went therefore, opening doors and slamming them, throwing his cap on a table so carelessly it toppled and smashed a fancy vase, mounting the stairs with a curse and banging into his aunt's room like a motion-picture villain looking for the escaped heroine.

On the north side of his aunt's chamber he beheld the door into the maid's room,—at least it had been the maid's room when last he had visited the house. Gordon crossed over, yanked open the door, thrust in his head and shoulders and cried hoarsely:

“Suffering Arabella!”

Facing him was a girl at her toilet—twelve, fourteen, sixteen years—how old was she? Like a startled fawn, rigid with alarm, she backed against the foot of her bed and stopped the young Goth with her eyes.

Frock and pumps had yet to be negotiated. The former she caught up now and crumpled against her alabaster throat. So held, it only reached her knees. Her perfect legs were classic in silken hosiery, so slender it appeared a mystery how those ankles supported the weight.

It was her head and her face, however, that had halted the intruder so abruptly. Her dark hair fluffed back from her forehead in a wavy pompadour. It was gathered with a small jeweled barrette at the back and long curls fell over an undraped shoulder, only accentuating the perfection of flesh. Her eyes blazed with the indignity of this intrusion. Her nostrils quivered.

“Gawd, what a filly!” was all the young worldly wiseman could articulate.

“Who are you? And how dare you come in here now?”

“And who are you?” returned Gordon.

“I’m Madelaine Theddon—Mrs. Theddon’s daughter!”

The lid of the boy’s bad eye flopped twice.

“You’re who?” he cried, amazed.

“I’m Mrs. Theddon’s daughter, I told you——”

“Tell that to the Marines! Aunt Gracia hasn’t got a daughter. Unless——” Being naturally low-minded,

the alternative occurred to him promptly.

"But I am, I tell you! She adopted me—four years ago. And please go out till I'm dressed."

Gordon laughed coarsely and licked his lips.

"Adopted you, did she? That's a good one. She never told us about it."

"That's her business, isn't it? I don't know as there was any reason why she was required to do so, whoever you are. But if you possess any traits of a gentleman you'll leave my room until I'm dressed."

"Oh, don't be catty. I'm her nephew, Gord, and you aren't the first dame I've ever seen half-dressed."

"I might gather as much from your conduct!"

"Been knocking me, has she? Well, just for that, I'll get out when I please."

"I shall call the servants!"

"Go ahead; I can lick any darned fathead Aunt Gracia's got around here. But I hope you have better luck than I did. I hunted all over the place."

The girl was close to tears. She looked around desperately. Then with a flash of white she was gone —into the bathroom. The intervening door was fastened swiftly.

"A peach!" whistled the boy. He moved back into the larger chamber. "Now I wonder where did Gracia pick her up? She's a pippin! A dream! A cuckoo! A lulu—*Whew!*"

III

Gracia Theddon came into the room,—trailed in, a

long string of jade beads clicking against her knees. She stopped.

“Where did you come from?” she blazed.

“Johnsville! They kicked me out!”

“You mean you’ve been expelled?”

“Call it that if you want.”

“What for?”

“Oh, a bunch of us took Dutch leave one night and the girl that was with us squealed. They said I was responsible.”

“Which you probably were!”

“Well, what of it? They kicked me out, anyhow. I might as well be blamed as not.”

“But why have you come here?”

“Haven’t got any other place to go, have I?—with the mater and governor across.”

“Meaning you’ve spent all your money?”

“I guess so.”

“Take your feet off that polished chair! What do you think I’m going to do about it?”

“Make me financial once more——or lemme stay here till the governor gets back. I’d just as soon stay,” he grinned with a glance at Madelaine’s door.

“Oh, you had? Well, I’d as soon you had not!”

“Yeah—on account of what you got in the bathroom, what?”

“You unspeakable young vulgarian! How do you know——”

“Oh, I busted in there, looking for your maid. But

you don't need to be sore! She's all right, leave it to me! Great taste you got, Aunt Grace. I couldn't 'a' picked a prettier one myself!"

If Gracia Theddon had been less a lady she would have flown into a rage. Instead she returned calmly:

"Young man, your insinuations are an insult. And whether Madelaine happens to be here or not, I don't want you around my house."

"All right, give me some kale and I'll blow."

"I'll give you nothing."

"But look it, Aunt Gracia, I've got to have a place to sleep and eat, haven't I? And the governor'll be sore if he comes back and knows I asked you for dough and you gave me the icy stare."

Biting her lip, the woman trailed across the room and stood by the window, looking out. After all, the boy's father would reimburse her and it was better than having him remain under the same roof with Madelaine.

"How much do you want?" she demanded.

"Oh, a thousand will do! Till I need more." And the youngster laughed.

"A thousand dollars! Are you crazy?"

"No, but if I set the figure lower you'd fork it across. And I'd rather stick around."

Gracia sat down at her desk, wrote a check and ripped it from the check book.

"Now get out!" she ordered.

The boy's bad eyelid flopped again.

"Until it's gone, Aunt Grace," he chaffed. "Happy

days!”

“If I had my way, young man, you’d land in reform school. Get out!”

Gracia Theddon whirled, however, at sound of a voice from the door.

“You’re not sending him away on my account, are you, mother dear? I’m sure he didn’t mean anything. He couldn’t find you and was looking for the maid. And besides, I should have locked my door.”

“You should have done nothing of the sort,” Mrs. Theddon replied angrily. “He had no right to enter a girl’s room——”

“Introduce us, Aunt Grace. I thought I’d met the family.”

Gracia Theddon waged a quick battle with her temper.

She introduced the two,—stiffly.

“I’m sorry I was rude,” the boy said awkwardly a moment later. “But, you see, everybody goes on the idea that I’m a roughneck and a low-brow and I—I—well, I’ve got to live up to my reputation.” He shot a challenge at his aunt.

“I won’t think you a roughneck or low-brow—whatever those things mean,” Madelaine returned. “And I’m sure we can be friends. You’re not sending him away, mother dear, before I’ve even a chance to get acquainted with the only cousin I have?”

“He’s not your cousin——” Gracia began angrily. She meant to infer that Gordon and Madelaine had nothing in common in the matter of breeding or character. If she had not paused, she could have covered the break and it might not have been

noticed. But she did pause and the Fairy Foundling flamed scarlet. For it taunted her with the old, old ache that after all she was a nobody, living on the Theddon generosity—a child from an orphanage—or one who had been bought like a pretty slave for a thousand dollars to ameliorate an affluent woman's loneliness.

"Then we'll try to play the game that we are cousins," Madelaine contended. "I'm sure you've been mistaken about Gordon. It isn't fair to believe people are some things until there's nothing left for them to do but become those things—is it?"

Gordon and his aunt both sensed the defense in the girl's argument. Gordon thought he had won in spite of his aunt, already. The girl's fine grain was lost on him entirely. But not on the woman. She felt that the Fairy Foundling would champion and mother the most foul-souled criminal that ever drew breath. It was her heritage and her danger.

"Gordon," the woman propounded in an iron voice, "my daughter is of different caliber than the girls you've been meeting, whether you've been in military school or not. So you keep in mind that you're a young gentleman or—or—God help you!"

The boy pulled a daffodil from a near-by bowl and tore it to pieces angrily.

"I guess I know class when I see it," he grumbled.

This was so raw and rude that even Madelaine paled. But she recovered herself and laughed.

"You know what I said about some of the children when they first came to the Home, mother dear? Well—let's all try—to get—better acquainted."

IV

At five o'clock the following afternoon, while Madelaine was dressing for dinner, Gracia entered her room and passed through to her daughter's. She dismissed the maid and closed the door.

"I've just had an answer to my cable," she announced. "Amos and Margaret are not coming back until spring. Amos is asking as a special favor that I keep Gordon here and look after him until he gets back and can deal with him."

"But what of that, mother? I'm sure——"

"I'm sure that young barbarian will succeed in ingratiating himself into your sympathies, Madelaine. Make you believe he's not the thing he emphatically is. I can't very well deny Margaret's boy the shelter of my home. But I can and shall deny him propinquity with my daughter. Madelaine, please take it kindly and believe it hurts me far more than it does yourself. But I'm going to send you away—to school."

It was the girl's turn to struggle with self for a moment. Then in even voice she replied quietly:

"Of course, I'll do whatever pleases you, mother dear. For after all, you know, I'm indebted to you more than I can ever repay."

Mrs. Theddon uttered a little cry.

"No, no! Madelaine! Don't take it that way! You're not a helpless mercenary—you weren't bought——"

She stopped. The misery on the girl's face was unmistakable.

"Wasn't I, mother dear? I thought I was—for a thousand dollars——"

“Madelaine! How did you know? Who told you ——?”

“I happened to be hiding, unintentionally, in Miss Howland’s office that day. I heard everything. And there’s not been one day since, when I’ve heard you tear a check from your check book, but what I’ve remembered why and how I’m—here! Why did you do it? Oh, mother dear? Why did you?”

“My God!” cried the woman. “Madelaine, I never dreamed you knew! Or if you did, I thought you too little for it to make any difference. Sometimes I’ve wondered if you’re not really a woman even older and wiser than myself—merely using a young girl’s body.”

“Why did you, mother dear? You really didn’t have to do it!”

“And has that been bothering you, dear?”

“Ever since the day I came!”

The woman’s face and posture remained wooden for a moment. Then she relaxed.

“You poor dear, parentless lamb! Don’t you know—don’t you understand—can’t you see why? I did it because of my love!”

“Your love!”

“Exactly. Maybe I’ve been trained and molded these last few years, Madelaine, to think of value as money. I can’t help that. A thousand people would have termed my payment to the Howland woman absurd and ridiculous. Of course it was. And yet I had a purpose in it. Dear heart—I wanted to feel you had cost me something. Something I had paid for so I had the right to bona fide ownership!”

The girl's calm eyes searched the woman's face. They read the truth.

"Cost you something?" she exclaimed.

"I couldn't go through the pain of giving you birth, dear girl. Yet I felt myself cheapening you and cheapening myself to get you for nothing. I wanted to pay—pay something ridiculous—and I did!" The woman's voice cracked. "It wasn't the Howland person getting money to which she had no right—it was my parting with it that counted! Can't you understand?"

"You might have given it to the Orphanage, instead of Miss Howland who really didn't——"

"Child, child! You'll never know how much I have given to the Orphanage since you arrived to make my life worth while!"

V

"Mother," said the girl after a time, "tell me why you really want me to go away? Why is it you don't want me around where Gordon is? What's the matter with him?"

"I said he was a 'rotter.' That's enough!"

"But what do you mean by a 'rotter'? What especially could he do by just remaining here?"

Gracia Theddon bit her lip.

"Don't you know how a bad boy could compromise a girl or woman if he took it into his head to do it?"

"Compromise her? Just what do you mean?"

Mrs. Theddon stood looking out of the window for a time.

"Sit down, Madge," she directed, after decision showed grimly on her strong face. "I'm going to tell you a lot of things I wish that my mother had told me, even when I was as young as yourself."

The room grew dark as they sat there. The girl had drawn a chair to the window and as the mother finished, she remained for a long time with her elbows on the sill, her hands cupped about her face, staring down at the river and the serried lights across the South End Bridge.

"I'm glad you've told me," she said at last. "I've always wanted to know but never dared ask."

Gracia Theddon arose and snapped on the lights.

VI

A week later Gordon Ruggles accosted his aunt in the garden.

"Look here, Aunt Gracie, what have you done with our little Bird of Paradise?" he demanded angrily.

"Bird of Paradise! Madelaine left here night before last for boarding-school. But what school it is, or where it is, you'll never learn—if I can help it!"

"Hid her away from me, eh?"

"Speaking bluntly, precisely that! For a time at least."

"All right, Aunt Gracia! If you want to make it personal, I accept the challenge. We'll see who gets Madelaine in the end—you or I. Only be a good sport if you lose, Aunt Grace. Be a good sport if you lose!"

He vaulted the hedge and was gone.

CHAPTER X

THE SEX

I

In the summer of 1904, the Methodist Sunday school held a picnic six miles up the river. It was a popular place for picnics,—a glen sloping down to a bathing beach, roofed with tall hemlocks and cut off from the road by a level meadow that made an excellent ball field.

Nathan's father had no grudge against picnics, at least Sunday-school picnics. But he did resent the dangerous mingling and flagrant propinquity of the sexes which such affairs occasioned. So Johnathan, not being able to attend the picnic himself and "keep an eye" on the boy, prohibited him the outing altogether. Girls—slathers of girls—would attend and lead Nat's feet into paths of wickedness and byways that were vile. Johnathan had to go to Williams Falls and "see about a position" which had been "offered" him at more money than he was making in the cobbler shop. But Nathan's mother, half in pique at John and half in distressed mother-love at the bitterness of her boy's disappointment, told him to

go ahead and enjoy the picnic and if his father said anything on his return, she would pay the piper.

Bernie Gridley's father cared nothing about picnics, even though he was a deacon in the church. The Duchess expected to attend merely to chaperone Bernice. But at the last moment the 8:10 train pulled into the Paris station with Gridley relatives. So the Duchess had to consign Bernice-Theresa to the watchful care of a much harassed and overworked Sunday-school teacher who later had a beau herself. Nathan and the little Gridley girl became babes in the wood. They needed no encouragement to make the most of their opportunity.

It was one of those perfect August days of which young men write sonnets and older men compose symphonies. The sky gave no suggestion of the thunderstorm which was to come at three o'clock, interrupt the ball game, send the picnickers scurrying to cover and leave the world washed afterward in moist and golden glory.

There is small space here for a detailed account of that day's program, the sports or the luncheon or the minor mishaps or the shower or the return homeward afterward by moonlight. Only a brief record of a tryst which Nathan and I kept with two little girls off in leafy woods.

A path led from the grove over the hill to the northward. Knee-high with vagrant grass, bordered by white birches, poplars and brambles, it wound into the thickest, quietest part of that forest which once stretched from the Paris town line to Center Wickford. We had not been in the grove an hour before Nathan came dodging excitedly through the crowd. He caught my arm and drew me aside.

"I've seen Bernie and Elinore!" he cried feverishly, Bernie being about all the picnic meant for him, anyhow. "Her Ma couldn't come and she's all alone. She says let's go way off up the woods and eat our dinners together, just us four! Oh, gee, Billy, what a chance—what a chance!"

"Chance for what?" I demanded.

My friend was crestfallen.

"Why—why—to just be with 'em all day—and perhaps we can kiss 'em——!" He added this last in a whisper.

"Oh, hake! I got sumpin' on my mind besides always kissin' girls. I wanner see the sports and try for a prize!" But he persuaded me.

Nathan carried his luncheon under his arm in a paper. Already it was misshapen and greasy with handling. Some boys had pushed it from his grasp and used it as a football. It consisted of three very fatty doughnuts and some thick slices of soggy, indigestible oatmeal bread with equally indigestible chunks of hard cheese between them. This he proposed to open in front of Bernie. It made me nervous.

Shortly before twelve o'clock, therefore, we slipped away from the prosaic rabble and followed two bareheaded, beribboned coquettes up the woods road. And by processes and maneuvers which would only be recognizable by boys, Nathan ultimately found himself carrying Bernie's dainty lunch basket and I had become the personal knight and escort of the Carver girl.

Elinore and I loitered behind, of course with deliberation and premeditation, and Bernie and

Nathan disappeared over the top of the hill. And we saw not one another again until the day was far spent and we were forced by sunset to come forth from Avalon.

The Gridley girl affected to be “mad” a goodly portion of that setting-out and had to be coddled and entreated and coaxed persistently to tell the cause of her distemper. By the time it had been negotiated, restraint and bashfulness had disappeared. Thereupon the Gridley girl exercised the prerogatives of Eve’s daughters since the flood, called upon the Forge boy to fetch and carry, to suffer her idiosyncrasies and foibles, to become deliriously happy or excruciatingly miserable as she persisted in references to a future in which the Forge boy did or did not have a part. And so in due course they came to a far woodland brook that trickled musically over mossy stones. The pines grew silent and lofty here. The banks were strewn with needles. A trout pool milled with the sluggishness of deep water a few yards beyond an overhanging bowlder. The Gridley girl at once commented upon its excellence as a place in which to lunch. “It’s so awful private” was the way she put it. So they sat down. And the water babbled past them into eternity.

What mattered it that the Forge boy’s hair curled long and uncut behind his ears; that he wore a suit his father had shined by prior use to waxen smoothness; that his face still retained at least twelve thousand of the original thirty thousand freckles; that his collar was wrinkled and his shoes were dusty? The Poet lay at the feet of his Inspiration and all the world was fair.

What mattered it also that their talk was of silly nothings and what they spoke or did was forgotten

almost as soon as said or done? The boy had a girl of topaz eyes off alone in leafy woods and all the clocks of time ran down.

II

"I'm sorry I tried to kiss you that night in the vestry," the boy blurted out. He was lying on his chest, pegging his knife in the needles. "I felt awful when your father came down and caught me——"

The girl turned her face in amazement.

"Kiss me!" she said faintly. "Was that what you were up to?"

"Why, yes! Didn't you know?"

"I thought you were fooling—that you jumped out to scare me."

Each colored dully and looked away. The girl's hat was tossed carelessly at one side. She sat with her chubby arms clasped about her knees.

"Well, I was tryin'," confessed Nathan nervously.

"But for the land's sake, why make such an awful job of it? You almost knocked me over."

"There wasn't any other way I could do it. My folks never let me go to kissin' parties or things like that."

Silence ensued. Then the precocious, oversexed little lady, several years older in worldly wisdom, picked apart a near-by star-flower as she observed coyly:

"You must have wanted to kiss me awful bad to go to all that trouble to do it."

"I guess I did, Bernie."

"Then why don't you make a good job of it—now? There's no one here to stop you, is there?"

The world reeled. Nathan grew giddy.

"Aw, go on!" he cackled. "You're only foolin'!"

"You might try and see—if you weren't so awfully slow. That's mostly the trouble with you, Nathan—you're slow!"

"And you won't be mad——?"

"What if I am? A girl always loves the man who does things he wants, whether she gets mad or not." Bernie had secured this sort of thing undoubtedly from her mother's Pansy Series.

The boy's embarrassment was so great that Bernice reached her hand out to him, a soft, damp hand, though she looked in the opposite direction. He took the hand, timidly at first, and considered it as Adam considered the Apple.

He sat up beside her with a tremendous yawn, as though he had lain too long and would change his position. As for the girl, she was a bit frightened, white-faced. But an atavism in her blood was militant. She was afraid and yet she wasn't afraid. Any woman might explain it.

"Aw, can I really kiss you, Bernie?"

"I said so, didn't I? And if you're goin' to do it, for pity's sake, hurry up!"

He leaned over and kissed her on a peach-blown cheek, searing hot and zero cold by turns. And no more chaste kiss was ever given The Sex.

But Bernie responded in a way that Nathan never

forgot. She turned her face, her nostrils breathed into his own, she kissed him—once!—twice!—three times!—heavy, impulsive, lumberous kisses, squarely on his mouth.

The Forge boy wanted to flee or wanted to cry; he couldn't quite decide which. And because he couldn't decide he stayed where he was and waited for the rocking hysteria of reaction to pass.

"Let's—let's—do it again," the girl suggested, as the boy sat stiffly, vaguely remembering something about the eye of God being upon the sinner even in the wilderness.

They went through that ecstasy again and again. And astounding to record, the boy suddenly leaned over with his face on his arm.

"Natie Forge! What in the world is the matter?" cried the stupefied girl.

"Dunno," said the lad. "But somehow I feel we oughtn't."

"Well, I like that! Why oughtn't we?"

"Dunno. And besides—it hurts!"

"Hurts? What hurts?"

"Didn't you never have anything happen to you that felt so good it hurt?"

"Well, you are a queer one!"

"I know. That's what Pa's always sayin'! And—and—everybody. I wish I wasn't!"

"Here I let you kiss me as much as you want and you make me feel as if I was doin' sumpin' wicked. Nathan Forge—I'm mad! I never want to speak to you again!"

“Aw, don’t be mad, Bernie. I didn’t mean nothin’! Honest!”

“Mother always said you were a yokel. I don’t know what it means but you are one, all right.”

Under her exasperation the Dresden Doll was furious. She had lowered the lattice of her modesty and knew it perfectly. A crass boy was vaguely sounding a warning.

The quarrel was patched up somehow and they ate their lunch, at least they ate Bernie’s lunch. For when the Dresden Doll removed the cover from her dainty repast, an awful qualm smote Nathan at the coarseness of his own. With the subtlety of a boy, Nathan managed to push his package off the bank into the brook. When Bernie squealed a warning, the boy fell clumsily in his efforts to recover. So it floated away downstream, out of sight and certainly out of the possibility of humiliating mastication. Thereat Nathan affected to be both regretful and indifferent. He declared he could subsist till supper without luncheon. The Israelites fasted for forty days, didn’t they, and remained alive? But Bernie prevailed upon him that she had enough in her basket for half a dozen boys. So they ate their meal together, eyes averted.

It was early afternoon when the girl suddenly cried:

“Do you know what I’d like to do? For once in my life without Mother to say ‘Shocking! Shocking!’ I’d like to paddle in this brook as if I was common, and like vulgar children.”

“You might fall in and get your clothes wet and have to go home all drenched and slithery.”

"But you could take off your shoes and stockings and let me hold your hand!"

Nathan demurred. He could not have explained just why. But the girl was not to be denied. She laughed at his discomfiture, sat down near the water's edge, removed her pretty buckled slippers, peeled off her lisle stockings, rolled up her underclothing. Then she waded—timidly at first—out into the brook, squealing with delight. And she pulled her skirts higher and higher. Finally she had them above her dimpled knees.

From his place on the bank, Nathan watched her and yet tried not to watch her. Much of the real Bernice, down underneath her mother's affectation and snobbery, was revealed that day in the extravagance of her kisses and the bold display of her limbs.

Four short years later Bernice Gridley was a mother. So it was more than a child's sexless figure displayed to young Nathan that day. The boy's nerves began cutting strange capers. Across forehead and chest was a queer, constricted feeling.

The girl kicked and shrieked and played in the water. She called upon Nathan to follow. But the perturbed boy, discovering for the first time that his physical being was a thing apart from himself, tried to behave indifferently, interest himself in something else. For him the girl—all girls—changed again with that experience. Bernice was no longer a fellow human, a playmate, even some one to be kissed deliciously.

Bernice laughed when she beheld the perturbation she was causing. Secretly she exulted. It was the first time she had been privileged to thus test her physical

charm maliciously.

But more than the disclosure of the Gridley girl's limbs was in store for Nathan that afternoon. Bernice splashed in the water until she slipped and fell. With a wild scream and a tremendous plunge, she went down and for a sickening moment the water eddied over her.

Nathan was in the brook at once. He clutched at Bernie's dress before she could be carried out into the greater depth. Unmindful of himself, he got his arms beneath her. With the panic-stricken girl gasping and choking, he lifted her and carried her back to shore.

The water made her lacy clothing sinuous about her body.

"I'm wet—wet—wet to the s-s-skin!" she chattered, as she tried to pull her sloppy skirts about her limbs —velvety limbs, now ruddy with the shock of the water. "Oh, what will I do—whatever will I do?"

"Guess by the looks of the sky, both of us is goin' to get still wetter before we leave," Nathan managed. "We're goin' to have a nawful shower. Listen!"

In the high northwest the thunderheads had been piled up. A few moments later the storm broke. Boy and girl were immediately soaked to the last inch of their frightened, quivering bodies. That thunderstorm saved Bernice a bad piece of explanation when she finally entered the home of her parents that evening.

The thunder rattled and clacked furiously about the heavens. The great drops of rain pelted the forest foliage and surface of the brook like bullets. And huddled side by side under a tree, Nathan and Bernie

drew close together and covered their heads as best they could with Nathan's coat.

The girl gripped the boy hysterically when the thunder bowled loudest. The boy was badly frightened himself but he strove to comfort her. And through it all he sensed her soft, vibrant, rain-soaked body and the abyss of sex opened wider and wider.

III

The storm finally ended, the clouds parted, the thunder moved off muttering to the southwest. A radiant sun broke through. Bernice seated herself in its invigorating warmth. She removed the bedraggled ribbons and shook down her straw-colored hair. Barefooted and nude of limb still, she recovered her composure and began to make light of the incident. But Nathan was thoughtful.

"You act as if you were afraid of me," Bernice cried petulantly.

The boy sat apart, beating a stick intermittently on the leaves.

"Aw, I ain't afraid," he laughed nervously, there being few things less pitiful than a boy striving to affect the sophistication he knows he lacks.

"Then what's the matter with you? Have I done anything 'specially wicked?"

"No! You ain't done nothin' wrong, I guess."

But they stole forth, back down the woods road as Adam and Eve must have stolen from the Garden.

Just before they emerged into the clearing, Bernice turned. She clutched Nathan's coat.

“Don’t you ever tell I took off my shoes and stockings!” she commanded. “Promise me! And don’t you dare break your promise!”

The boy agreed readily enough.

“And now, Nathan Forge,” she said, with a subtle glance around, “kiss me! Just once more. For the last time! A good one!”

But when the boy complied, his face burned. In the kiss he sensed no ecstasy.

He went out to the picnic grounds to run directly into the clutches of his father.

“Where have you been?” Johnathan demanded ominously. The whipcords of his neck stood out in anger.

“Nowhere,” whimpered Nathan. “Just over in the woods.”

“I’m told you’ve been missing all day.”

The boy’s face held the story.

“Have you been alone?”

“N-N-No!”

“Who’s been with you?”

“Billy!”

“And who else?”

The boy hesitated. It was hard to lie. But his little sister piped up shrilly:

“Bernie Gridley and Elinore Carver’s been with ’em! I seen ’em go!”

“Is this so?” demanded Johnathan.

“Yes,” confessed the boy boldly.

“You’ve been—off in the woods—with a girl—all day?”

“Yes, sir!”

“In spite of all that I’ve warned you?”

“Yes, sir!”

Johnathan reached out and lifted his terror-paralyzed son in his wrath.

“You march home!” he commanded. “We’ll see about this! What are you doing here at the picnic, anyhow, when I said you couldn’t come?”

“Ma said I could.”

“But what did I say to you?”

“You said—I couldn’t.”

“Then you deliberately disobeyed there, also?”

“But Ma said——”

“Never mind what your mother said. You don’t do what your mother says. You do what I say! March!”

The worst part of that whole picnic-day episode wasn’t the humiliation before all the boys and girls and particularly Bernie, nor the thrashing that followed. It was that his mother had promised immunity, to defend him, to “pay the piper” and did not keep her word.

Johnathan Forge got his boy home, took him out in the woodshed and ordered him to strip to his pelt. Before the flogging began, he prolonged the terror by coddling the weapon of assault—a couple of feet of stiff harness tug—talking to it, explaining to it how he had told his boy to stay away from the picnic and “his boy” had disobeyed; how he had been told to always keep away from girls and had disobeyed

there also. Then he laid it on.

Sordid all this to recount? As well delineate Johnathan thrashing his boy around the calendar and be done with it. But it was a matter of principle with Johnathan. He was responsible for his boy's soul to God. The Bible said so.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

IV

Nathan lay on his bed that night with his arms behind his head and stared up into the dark.

Moment by moment he lived that galaxy of sylvan love over. Branded as with searing iron into his brain was the picture of Bernice Gridley knee-deep in the brook water, or as he had laid her down on the hemlock needles when he had subsequently rescued her.

"I've got to marry her! I've got to marry her right off," he told himself. "Grandfather Forge married at sixteen, he said so; and Grandma Forge was only fourteen. That's only two years older'n me, and what's two years? I'll ask her! I'll ask her to-morrow."

And the poor young ass did.

It was down along the path through the Haskell meadow,—the "short cut" from Matthews Court to Windsor Street. It was by accident he encountered the girl but he stopped her.

"Marry you! Marry you!" she choked. "I think you're raving crazy. I'm not old enough to marry anybody. Besides, I'm mad at you, anyhow!"

"What for, Bernie?"

"You broke your promise! You tattled about me going into the water."

"I did not!"

"You did!"

"You can't prove it!"

"Well, somebody did and it might as well been you! Besides, last night I dreamed you did—and that settles it."

"But I can't help what you dream!"

"Well, I'm mad, anyhow. You haven't the backbone of a fish! You let your father jaw you, right there in sight of everybody."

"Could I help it? He's bigger'n me. And besides, he's my father."

"If my father dared to jaw me like that in front of everybody I'd—I'd—I'd get a gun and I'd shoot him dead! I told you that before."

"I hate him as much as I love you, Bernie. At the same time, I can't kill him."

"Well, you wanted to know why I won't marry you and I'm telling you. Besides, who'd marry us?"

"We could run away, Bernie. I could tell some minister we're older than we are. You could get some of your mother's long dresses perhaps and I'm puttin' on long pants next week anyhow——"

"And who'd support us?"

"I've reached man's estate. I'm going to work next week, anyhow. If I've reached man's estate and am going to work and earn money, I've got a right to have the things a man has—a wife, for instance!"

"Where are you going to work?"

"In—in—your father's tannery. And if I've got a wife, maybe my father will let me have my own money for myself. He'll have to! The law'd make him ——"

"Well of all things! Nathan Forge! And do you think I'd marry a man who worked in a smelly tannery?"

"Your father does!"

"My father owns it. It's different. Now I know you're crazy! I bet your father hit you over the head and made you crazy! I've heard of such things. And if you don't get out of my way I'm going to scream!"

"Bernie—don't go off mad! I ain't crazy, Bernie ——"

"When I get married it's going to be a millionaire. And he's not going to dress like a tramp, or go around with freckles, or need a hair-cut, or be so slow when I let him kiss me he makes me feel I was doing something wicked."

"Bernie—you said in your letters you l-l-loved me! You said——"

"Oh, can't you take a joke? That was just for fun, and besides, we aren't grown up so it didn't mean anything, anyhow!"

"You were only foolin'?"

"Well, I didn't suppose you'd take it serious—in such a foolish way as this. Why, my father would horsewhip you if he even dreamed you'd asked such a thing."

"Bernie—you aren't—you aren't—playing fair."

"Well, a girl doesn't have to play fair—if she doesn't want. Anyhow, you're not the boy I'd marry even if we were grown up. You aren't handsome! You're nothing but an ordinary little freckle-faced frump."

"Then why—did you let—me kiss you——"

"Oh, just because I liked it. And even so, you didn't care enough to come with me into the water and save me from getting all wet. And—and—I hate you and I'm going to Rutland to spend the summer next week and then I'm going to private school down to Mt. Hadley in the fall. My mother said so. She heard about what happened at the picnic. She said I wasn't going to stay around Paris and get mixed up with the son of any village cobbler. I'm too high-class. Now you get out of my way or I'll yell for help!"

"You're goin' away and I'm never goin' to see you any more?"

"I am. And I'm tickled to death to forget you!"

When Nathan could see through his misery, the girl had vanished.

V

The following Sunday, tramping out on the Wickford road, Nathan beheld a two-seated Concord buggy drawn by a well-lathered horse climbing the hill toward him.

The Dresden Doll, never so dainty, or frilled or furbelowed, sat in the front seat beside a fellow whom Nathan had never seen. The Carver girl with another young stranger occupied the back seat.

Stopping aghast, Nathan looked directly into the Gridley girl's eye.

She did not see him. She looked through and beyond him. There was no recognition.

But after the rig had passed, leaving a leg-weary, dusty-shoed boy standing in his heart-hunger by the fragrant brambles, one of the quartette passed a remark, which he knew in his hot shame referred to himself.

A sneering little laugh drifted back to him. The rig reached the hilltop and passed over out of sight.

VI

That night Nathan took a bundle of big square envelopes tied with a red ribbon, Bernie's letters, and put them where the sight could no longer hurt him. He hid them on a beam close to the eaves out in the three-foot attic over the Forge ell. Then he crawled back over the studding and buttoned the low door that led to that windowless garret from his bedroom. That button also fastened a door on a chamber in his little heart. He had completed his first thumb-nail cycle with The Sex.

His cynical observations about "girls," delivered in the family circle, gladdened the heart of his father and made the latter feel that his precepts were at last bearing fruit, that he had a son who might not be quite so incorrigible as he had begun to fear.

That Christmas he gave Nathan five dollars and reminded the boy of his paternal generosity all through the balance of the year.

But the five dollars meant nothing to Nathan. He

was compelled to deposit it in the Paris Savings Bank. Johnathan “borrowed” it three years later to help pay a grocery bill.

CHAPTER XI

POET IN HOMESPUN

I

Great was the exasperation among the local school teachers when it became known that Nathan was not going on into high school in September.

Cora Hastings, Nathan's last teacher and the good woman, by the way, who did more than all others to encourage his literary fluency and poetical promise, took it upon her sparse, capable shoulders to wait upon the boy's father and "speak him a piece of her mind."

"Don't you know your boy has been the brightest English scholar in the whole eight grades?" she demanded scathingly.

"Well," retorted Johnathan, "just what is it your business"

"I've been his teacher and I know what's in him. Let alone to study and equip himself, Nathan will make his mark in the world. Take him from school now, and all you may have is a mere working man."

"I'm not ashamed of having him a working man. His folks were all working people. Look at me! No airs to us!"

"Do you want your boy to turn out a fool?"

"Better a working fool than an educated fool. But I'm not afraid of his bein' a fool. Work never made a fool out of nobody."

"Don't you want him to be a success?"

"If he's got it in him to be a success it'll come out anyhow, school or no school. If he hasn't, schoolin' 'll be wasted. But it isn't wholly that. I need his money. I don't make no bones about saying so. I'm a poor man, ma'am. It's about time the boy commenced paying me back for some of the trouble and expense he's been since he was born."

"Why should he? He didn't ask to be born!"

Johnathan dodged that. "I had to work at his age and pay back my father."

"And hasn't the memory of that injustice softened you toward you own son?"

"Injustice? What injustice? I always had to work. I never even had as much schoolin' as Nat has already. And look at me!"

"Yes, look at you!—A bigoted, psalm-singing, heart-hardened, petulant-mouthed, intolerable old hypocrite! There!"

"What? What's that you say?"

"You heard me! You're all of that and more. And the whole town knows it. You've got a boy as rare and fine and promising as you're common and coarse and vulgar. And you're deliberately wrecking his life by taking him away from his studies, setting him at

work in a horrid smelly tannery for a few easy dollars. Somebody ought to have the law on you!"

"And you're nothing but a fussy, homely, trouble-messin' old maid. You better go find a man and have a few young ones of your own before you come 'round tellin' other people how to raise theirs. If this is all you come to see me about, I guess you can hoof it!"

"Don't you know your boy is capable of writing poetry!" demanded the now hysterical teacher.

It was the worst thing she could have said.

"No, I don't. But if he is, all the more reason why he should go to the tannery and learn to skin cows! And the sooner the better!"

"Don't you want to see your own son famous?"

"I've got no guarantee he'll be famous. But I'm sure, darned sure, of the money he can earn between now and the time he's twenty-one. Anyhow, knowing how to work and earn money ain't goin' to stop him bein' famous, as a poet or anything else, if he's got it in him!"

"But these years of his life are the most valuable he'll ever have!"

"The more reason why he ought to learn to make money in 'em!"

"It's a mystery why God sends children to such as you!"

"Well, He sends 'em and I reckon He knows his business. He's been running this planet a darned long time."

Threat, appeal, argument did no good. Nathan went into Caleb Gridley's tannery, into the foul,

revolting, messy, nauseating part of the business, and for six days of working from 6:30 in the morning until 6:30 at night he received four dollars, not in cash but in credit on the old harness bill. In sixteen weeks the debt was paid. Then Johnathan “began realizing good hard cash” on Nathan’s earning abilities.

Nathan’s sister went on through the graded school and high school. It was Nathan’s money which bought her graduation dress.

It was a very pretty dress. It cost twenty-nine dollars.

II

Never did a boy change so completely or age so quickly as Nathan in the three years which followed. He was sick and broken the first two or three weeks at the sights he was compelled to witness and the smells which adhered to him like a plague wherever he moved. I tried to get him to come out on Sundays.

“I dunno, Bill,” he would answer, “I don’t seem to care much about fooling ’round. Seems as if I’m tired these days, tired all the while. I no more’n get home Saturday night than it’s Monday morning and I gotta go back to it all. Oh, Bill, it’ll kill me sure. You don’t know anything about it. It’s awful!”

The boy lost weight. He grew more and more listless—bitter, moody.

“I don’t care whether I live or die,” he wailed one day when I mentioned that after the Academy I was going on to college. “Sometimes I wish old ‘Cock-eye’ Richards’ knife would slip when he’s skinnin’ and take me right acrost the throat.”

The boy's life suddenly became a hopeless, hideous slavery. The horror of his work lay in his imagination. A lad of coarser fiber would have become inured to the tannery. Nathan never became inured to it. Yet he stuck it through. There was no alternative.

Sunday afternoons he would wander over the hills, lie on his back beside some peaceful meadow brook and dream his dreams. He began taking a pad and pencil on these solitary excursions, or a book. He cared little for Old Cap Collier or King Brady or the other penny-dreadfuls which were then in their heyday. His choice was poetry, fairy tales, Shakespeare.

"What's the use of reading that stuff?" he demanded contemptuously one day, after finishing a sample hair-curler I had shown him. "It's all coarse and mechanical, and you know the villain's going to die at the right minute, anyhow, and the hero win out and all live happily ever after. And if you know it in advance what's the use of spending a whole day readin' through it to find it out?" Then the boy pulled a volume of poems from beneath him, a book that Miss Cora Hastings had loaned him. He read me "Grey's Elegy."

I confess that, red-blooded, hob-raising kid that I was, the sweet melancholy of the lines, as Nathan read them, "got" me. Often I found myself watching my friend, at a loss to understand him.

The other day while searching among the compartments in an old wallet, I came upon a folded, time-yellowed sheet of foolscap on which some verses had once been penned in a youthful but symmetrical hand. It was a poem which Nathan composed back in those years before he had "found"

himself. These are sample lines of what this sixteen-year-old was producing:

DAY DREAMS

"Somewhere over the miles, dear heart,
Off over a turquoise sea,
There's a pleasant isle that is set apart
For your rendezvous with me.
There'll be never a cloud in its skies, dear heart,
And the days will be always fair,
For free as the summer winds that blow
We will live in our Eden there,
Somewhere!

"There'll be no more heartache to spoil our dreams,
There'll be no more griefs to grieve,
We'll wander down eons of golden years
Through the vales of Make-Believe.
And I'll drink of your lips, your eyes, your arms,
Till I'm drunk with their beauty rare,
And you'll nestle me down till my stupor goes,
On a bed of your glorious hair.
Somewhere!

"The wealth of the earth and the sun shall be ours,
We shall know neither pride nor shame
Nor ever grow weary of too much romance
Nor spoil our sweet isle with a name.
And no one shall find our rendezvous,
No world break the spell with its blare,
For that will be Heaven—just you and I,
With no one to part us or care.
Somewhere!"

I submit this poem for what it is worth. The meter undoubtedly might be improved. Yet it shows the way the lad's mind was leaning, the romancer, the idealist, the colorist, the emotionalist, always.

Johnathan Forge viewed a certain change in his son with satisfaction.

"Thank God," he cried, "I've broken that boy's false pride at last. Now maybe he'll get solid ground under his feet and amount to something."

III

Yet one noontime in the October which followed, Nathan so deported himself in a certain pugilistic situation that the matter of broken pride was left open to reasonable doubt.

The boy had drawn apart to work upon a rime in a notebook. He found no recreation in sitting around the edge of the yard listening to cheap opinion, telling off-color stories, pitching horseshoes or flipping pennies. In a warm spot in the sunshine he worked upon a new poem which he had titled "Girl-Without-a-Name." One Silas Plumb stole up and snatched the notebook from him. Worse and more mortifying, Si headed back for his fellow laborers. Noting that what he had snatched was poetry, he was seized with unholy glee. Disregarding Nathan's cries of anger, Plumb leaped on a crate and dramatically began to "elocute"—

"Listen, fellers! This is rich! Poetry! Listen! 'You came to me in my dreams last night, Dear Girl-Without-a-Name——"

Blind, unreasoning rage boiled upward through Nathan. Chagrin and indignation fired every nerve in the boy's body to murderous retaliation. Plumb was a heavy-footed, rumple-clothed, corn-fed son of a typical Vermont small town. He was blue-eyed, shocky-headed, red-cheeked and three years Nathan's senior. But to have the innermost privacies of his romantic soul ballyhooed for the bucolic ribaldry and bovine amusement of the tannery men

was like maddening vitriol poured on Nat's naked flesh. He lurched for the notebook and when Si held on, Nathan struck him the hardest smash in the face he had ever received in his life.

Si held his sickly grin for about ten seconds. Then it froze on his mouth. He spat out blood and teeth. Purple rage flooded his features.

"I'm goin' to get you for that!" he swore.

He dropped off his coat, smeared his bloody mouth with the back of his big hand and fell into clumsy fighting posture. Loafers in the tannery came a-running. Nathan was pale but resolute. Silas struck him. Stung to fury, Nathan hit back twice. The epochal battle began. That battle was tannery talk for weeks, for months, for years.

"Si had the punch to push his dukes through the side of a plank fence," a local enthusiast described it afterward. "But young Forge hit him three times and run around him twice while Si was makin' up his mind where he'd hit once."

Back and forth across the enclosure the two youths struggled, upsetting boxes, knocking down hides, tripping on yard refuse, falling backward into the circle of wildly applauding spectators. Great pile-driver blows the larger fellow smashed at his lighter opponent. Nathan's counter-attack was swift and rapier-keen, taking the other by surprise, getting inside his defenses, smashing his nose, closing his eyes, lacerating his lips, but always lacking the bodily weight to strike the other down or finish him off with a knock-out.

There is something vitally fine and fair in an American crowd. It wants to see the under dog get the best of it. Nathan, because of his slenderness, was

the under dog. Si sensed that the moral support of the tanners was not with him. He grew Germanically furious.

The moral support of his fellow workers meant little to Nathan, however. He had to finish Plumb or be finished himself. And those who, through that summer, had called Nat a mollycoddle because he was finer grained than themselves, were swift and fair in revising their opinion and giving the stripling all the credit his proven prowess deserved.

The two came together in clinches only to break away when one saw an opening for a telling blow. Twice they both went down. The battle each time turned into a wrestling match, with any sort of a “hold” permitted,—biting, eye-gouging and hair-tearing being eminently permissible so long as it brought results.

At a quarter to one the fight had started. Fifteen minutes later it was still going strong,—arms and faces of both combatants bleeding, shirts ripped to ribbons, lungs bursting. The employees paid no attention to the tannery whistle for the reason that no tannery whistle was blown. The engineer and fireman were enthusiastically howling in the front row of spectators. The absence of the whistle was responsible for bringing Caleb Gridley down into the yard. But the old war-horse of the local leather business was immediately too interested himself to interfere or start his factory. He stood with a fierce, hard joy in his eye, awaiting the finish.

That finish came at ten minutes after one. Silas, worsted but unconquered, picked up a piece of board and swung it terribly for Nathan’s head. A howl of protest arose, then approval as Nathan dodged. But Nathan had not dodged far enough nor soon enough.

The board ripped his left ear from the side of his head. Silas followed in, raising one of his big boots to kick his opponent below the belt. By accident more than design, Nathan tripped him. As Silas went down, Nathan sent a left jab to his jaw. It rocked the roughneck's head. He sagged, grinned, pitched downward on his forehead, and went peacefully off to hear little birds sing sweetly.

The fight was finished. Likewise both participants. For Nathan saw his man prostrate, took three steps and crumpled—senseless.

Old Caleb pushed forward. "Take the kid to the office," he ordered curtly. Grim satisfaction lay on his paving-block jaw. "As for that low-brow, leave him lie busted. I stand for the man that fights fair!"

They carried the unconscious Nathan to tannery headquarters. Doctor Johnson was summoned by telephone. Nat was losing alarming quantities of blood from the ragged ear and more was trickling out between his teeth. First aid was administered, but it was a sickening business.

"That's nasty bad," Johnson commented as he tried to wash the wound. "It's almost tore from his head—this ear!"

"Sew it back," commanded Caleb.

"But he'll bear the scar for life."

"Can't help that! Sew it back! Mustn't have so gamey a little bantam goin' through life with one ear missin'!"

Johnson phoned for Doctor Birch to help him. Birch brought a crude anesthetizing outfit. The ear was sewed at once to prevent the loss of more blood. The lad was as white as paper in his coma. The

exertion of the past half-hour had been terrific. It showed grisly on his features.

Two o'clock arrived before the surgery was finished. Nat's head was swathed in bandages which were reduced to ribbons in the boy's thrashings, as he came out from under the anesthetic.

"Leave him here!" ordered Caleb. "He's gotta stay here till he's stronger." Then as Nathan gradually quieted, he demanded of the yard boss: "What started that mix-up, anyhow?"

"Poetry!" said old Richards. "This!" And he proffered a torn and besmirched notebook.

"Poetry!" cried Caleb. "Lemme see!"

"He's always moonin' 'round, writin' poetry," volunteered Richards. "Si yanked it outer his hands and Nat waded into him. We always thought Nat was a mollycoddle, sort of, 'count of his poetry and dandified talk. But I guess after this he can do as he pleases."

Nathan's weakened condition quickly induced sleep. It was night when he awoke. He was at home and his mother was bending above him.

"My poor, poor boy!" she crooned. And for the instant, groggy and faint with fiery pain as he was, a great up-welling tenderness toward his mother came in Nathan. When she kissed him, his arms went up around her frail shoulders and he clung to her.

But when he awoke the following morning all suggestions of tenderness were missing in the petulant, whining Job's comfort she gave him.

"You've bloodied all my best sheets and pillow cases!" she cried; "besides getting your clothes all

ripped and markin' yourself for life! Oh, you do make it so hard for your dear, dear mother—so bitter, bitter hard!"

Nathan's father came up during the noon hour and sat down beside the bed. Gravely he looked at his son and admiration lurked in his weak blue eyes.

"Well, I'm glad you've shown some starch at last," he commented. "I'd begun to think I was raising a sissy."

Thereupon, the seventeenth time for his son's edification and future emulation, Johnathan launched good-humoredly into a recount of how he (Johnathan) had whipped the town bully at fifteen, against tremendous odds, a brick wall, and a pair of brass knuckles.

It was Johnathan's way of being kind and showing his appreciation of what his boy had done. The reports about town of Nathan's prowess had come to the father as sweet music.

Praise of his boy's artistry, poetic talent and romantic temperament had touched only as the wind which bloweth where it listeth. But that his offspring had gone into a brute encounter, drawn blood, broken teeth, gouged eyes and torn hair—coming off victor though the struggle would mark him for life—was grand and noble and a cause for pride and satisfaction altogether. Johnathan felt that he, too, must not be found wanting.

So he finished off the town bully and then recounted various other deeds of a heroic nature in which he had also played the chief male lead.

Nathan had seen his father pale before the six-pound fist of Caleb Gridley. He had seen him shiver

and quake inwardly when a neighbor announced that he would shoot Johnathan Forge on sight for having wrung the necks of the said neighbor's chickens and tossed the dead birds over the fence in penalty for wandering into the Forge garden. And Nat wondered at just what point between boyhood and manhood his father had lost his bellicosity and proclivities toward the manly art of self-defense.

That is, he asked himself consciously. But in his heart he knew his father had never whipped any bullies or any one else. He was about as heroic as an old mop. The recount for emulation he was passing on to his boy was pure fabrication in which the end justified the means.

Besides, Nat had heard of these Roman holidays so many times that he could repeat them verbatim, even correct his embattled sire when multiple narration brought exaggeration, or the father went astray on minor detail. Nat turned over wearily, therefore, and went to sleep—in the center of a victory over the Foxboro selectmen in which "all hands had been ingloriously humbled and brought down to the dust"—meaning that the Foxboro selectmen had apologized and paid costs. Which they had not.

"And I used to tell that boy stories by the hour," Johnathan averred in later years, "—all sorts of virile, manly stories. But he never cared a great deal for anything I said to him. The boy and I simply couldn't hitch. He had his mother's blood—he was a Farman through and through!"

Nathan came back to consciousness and realized his father was still by his side, demanding angrily, "Are you listening?" and that Caleb Gridley's name was mentioned.

"He's sent word he wants to see you as soon's you're fit—over to his office. And for your own sake, young man, let's hope he doesn't fire you for this mix-up!"

The father eventually went out and Nathan passed from dreams with his eyes closed to dreams with his eyes open, pondering.

IV

Out of Nat's convalescence the mother remembered that she "had nursed him faithfully till she was about sick from the strain." That she had "made of him"—meaning undoubtedly the moment of his awakening when he had embraced her and she had kissed him—and had done her best by him according as the Lord gave her strength.

The father remembered he had "told the lad stories by the hour" (actual talking time, twenty-four minutes of a single half-noon) and "cheered him by praising him for not taking the back talk of anybody."

But Nathan! He only remembered that his mother had fussed about the blood on the bed clothing; that his father had come in and "reeled off the same old pack of lies" about his own boyhood and ended by reminding him that if he lost his job at the tannery, God help him for the father would not, needing his money just then more than ever.

V

Nat left his bed and idled about the house. His father came home at noon and contended that if he

were strong enough to “fool around the place” he was strong enough to “get back on the job.” So that afternoon Nat took an hour to reel a dizzy way to the tannery office.

Caleb looked up from a pile of freight bills.

“Dad says you wanted to see me,” announced the lad. He hoped old Gridley would “fire” him. Any job would be better than returning to the horrors of the tannery.

“Siddown,” ordered Caleb with a wave of his slab-like hand.

The boy accepted a seat and waited, his head whirling lightly. Caleb finished his business and then jerked his head toward a side room where the two could talk alone. It had an unused desk, an old iron stove, a battered table, a few chairs, an old green safe.

Caleb closed the door, motioned to a seat, found one himself and proceeded to fall into deep thought. He cut an enormous corner from a chunk of “chewin’.”

“Perty good scrap you put up the other day, bub,” he remarked at length.

Nathan sought to keep his mental balance, wishing some one would get him a drink, oh, for ice water!

“Thank you,” he said weakly.

“I allus admire to see a man that can use his dukes. Head hurt you much?”

“Yes,” the boy said truthfully.

“Hard luck! But you gotta expect bangs and bruises in this world, bub. What’s your old man think about it?”

"He said if it lost me my job here, God help me," returned Nathan defiantly.

Caleb was silent for a time. Grim humor lurked in his hard old eye. Twice he lurched forward, raised the cover and spat in the bowels of the dead iron stove.

"That so? Sort of a goldarn slave-driver, your old man, ain't he?"

Nathan offered no comment.

"Whatcher want to go gettin' into that fuss with Plumb for, anyhow?"

"I was writing something—private—and Si came up and grabbed it away. Then he wouldn't give it back."

Nathan stood in awe of old Gridley, partly because he was the boy's employer, mostly because he was *her* father.

"Yeah," affirmed Caleb, "what was it?"

"It was—it was—poetry," the lad confessed lamely. He wished he could get a drink, any kind of water if only it would keep the office from spinning around and around.

"So you're a poet?"

"I like to read poetry and try writing it—sometimes."

"So I heard. I'm a bit of a poet myself!"

For an instant Nathan was dumbfounded. Had he heard aright? The boy fought off his vertigo and stared. Was the old man jesting? But apparently Old Caleb was never more serious in his life. Moreover, he too was confused, as though chagrined by the

confession. Nathan would have accepted that his employer had speared grizzlies, kicked over baby carriages, fired orphan asylums and kicked the crutches from cripples. But a poet! It was cataclysmic.

"Did you—did you—ever write any poetry?"

"Once!"

"What for? What came of it?"

"That was a perty good piece you started to write when Plumb interrupted you. Jake gimme the book. Then again, my wife lemme see a piece you writ and give to my daughter a while back. You seem to be a perty good poet. I'll show you somethin'."

To Nathan's utter bewilderment, Caleb went to the green box safe. He selected an old wallet from its cavernous compartments and returned to his creaking seat. With his elbows on his enormous knees, he leaned forward. He went through the wallet until he came to a paper he sought. He drew it out with sausage-like fingers, a sheet of rusty, mildewed parchment on which some verses had been written in violet ink. Reverently he handed it across as though it were a million-dollar government bond.

Nathan read:

"To G. H.

"Your eyes are like the twinkling stars.
Your voice is like the dew
I sit upon the hill and dream
Of you, my love, of you.

"You are the inspiration of my life
To you I will ever be true
When I am old and my hair is gray
I'll ever think of you.

"All of us have a secret love
Some, memories of yesterday,
Like cake to finish a good square meal
It cheers us on our way.
—Caleb Gridley."

Paris, Vt., June 2, 1871.

The old man watched the youth's face closely as he read. There was pathetic anxiety in the question which followed:

"Well," demanded Caleb, "what's your opinion? There was folks said it was good enough to have published—once! But I couldn't—I couldn't!"

The tanner sighed and arose. He walked to the window looking down on the cluttered yard. There he stuck his big hands in his stomach pockets and "rolled his chew."

With the tactlessness of boyhood, Nathan announced, "The meter's off and besides—it doesn't really say anything—that is, in a nice smooth way."

If he had struck old Caleb with a rock he could not have surprised the tanner more dynamically.

"Don't say anything! Smooth way! Meter? What's meter?"

"In poetry it's the character of a stanza. It's made up of any given number of lines, divided into measures equal in time—and length of syllables—and rhythmic construction."

"Well, I'll be damned!" cried Caleb. "Where did you learn that—them big words and all?"

"Miss Hastings showed me. The rest sort of always came easy to me."

"Then what the hell are you doin' workin' here in

my place, when you got book-learnin' like that?"

"My father makes me."

"He must be a dog-gone bigger fool than I allus took him for. Say that book-learnin' over!"

Nathan complied.

"Now what does it mean in plain Vermont jaw-music?"

Nathan was beginning to forget his dizziness.

"It means that to make poetry read smoothly the lines in each verse must have exactly the same number of syllables. They must be emphasized in the same way in the same place in all the verses and yet give perfect emphasis. You've just got a lot of lines here with the final words rhyming."

"But you said it didn't say anything!" Caleb was not angry so much as hurt, grievously hurt. "I allus thought it said a lot," he added, with a little catch in his voice.

"I mean something really fine and beautiful and rare different from the ordinary way we write or think or talk, if you understand what I mean. For instance, you say in your first line that somebody's eyes are like the stars and his voice——"

"*Her* voice!" corrected old Caleb.

"—Her voice is like the dew. Well, that doesn't really mean anything. Nobody ever saw a woman with eyes like actual stars or a voice like real dew, because dew doesn't make any noise, anyhow, let alone having a voice. Poetry tries to say things better and softer and finer than any one has ever said 'em before and that's where you've fallen down."

"How would you say it?"

Caleb had come across, sunk down into the creaky chair with his knees parted, his bulbous finger tips pressed together between them, the world and business forgot,—a gray-haired man seeking pointers in rhyming from a minstrel with a bashed head.

“Well, what you want to express is that you sat on a hilltop thinking of a woman. And somehow the night was so soft and wonderful you couldn’t help comparing her with the view around you. So suppose instead of saying you sat on the hill and thought of the woman having star-like eyes, you looked off to some star, the prettiest, brightest of them all. And her face seemed to come before you in it—Say, who is this woman, anyhow?” Nathan broke off suddenly.

Old Caleb’s gaze dropped to his horny hands. He stopped chewing.

“Once on a time, bub—once on a time—back in my life—there was a girl. Well—I loved her—and so —I writ this poetry.”

It seemed to the awe-struck boy as though a section of the universe slid back then and disclosed the mighty works which make the worlds go around.

Old Caleb Gridley, rich—as the village phrased it —“beyond dreams of avarice”, hard-cider drinker, leading selectman and poker-player Saturday nights under Jimmy Styles’ barber shop—most of all her father!—once upon a time old Caleb Gridley had been as other boys and men, even as Nathan. He had loved a girl and sought balm in hexameters.

“And did you marry her?” asked the astonished boy after a moment. He spoke as the superstitious refer to the dead. “Was it Mrs. Gridley?”

“No, b’dam, it warn’t Mrs. Gridley!”

A little tear squeezed out of the man's hard eye—a ludicrously little tear on a ludicrously big and beefy face. It stayed there for a moment. Then it melted.

Nathan turned and tiptoed softly out of Eden. In quite another voice he suggested:

"I could show you, perhaps, how to polish this and make it better, by doing it with you as we go along."

A red-haired girl thrust her flaming head in the door.

"Mike Sweeney's come for them calfskins and they ain't all bundled yet," she whined.

"You tell Mike Sweeney to go to hell!" roared Caleb. "And if you interrupt me again with calfskins I'll kill the both o' ye and fire you beside!"

The girl closed the door. Caleb swore volubly for a half-moment about the deficiencies of certain hirelings "these days" in the matter of mental endowment. Then he begged:

"Go on, bub! Tell me what you was sayin' about that poetry."

"Let's get a pencil and paper," Nathan suggested. "We'll work it out together."

VI

It was dark outside and the tannery had long been deserted when a pathetically pleased old war-horse of business and an addle-pated young poet ended the new version of Caleb Gridley's youthful sentiment.

"Now read it all over, out loud," ordered the tanner. He paced up and down with his dented, dusty, greenish derby on the back of his head, cant-

hook thumbs in the armpits of his vest. Nat read:

"GRACIA

"Sometimes, dear heart, in the quiet night,
When the stars hang soft and low,
I slip away from the clash and care
To the Hills of Long Ago.
Across those Hills in the whisp'ring dark,
With the night-breeze sighing through,
I see those castles we'd planned to build
When our dreams had all come true.

"Your face grows plain in an evening star,
Ere the moon rides high and cold,
And Memory tunes with the summer night
On a chord that's rare and old.
The troth we pledged comes in sad rebuke
To a thousand loveless days,
But wandering fires led me off and down,
'Long a thousand ambushed ways.

"Yet somewhere deep in each tuneful night
Plays a softer, sweeter lay;
Though life is gray with a thousand sighs
It has held one deep-pink day.
And thus the glow of the Long Ago
Keeps my path to you, dear, bright;
Yet a little while and Our Morning dawns
So good night, dear heart, good night!"

"Don't you see," argued Nathan, "you've said the very same thing, only this is smooth and dreamy. You have a feeling old Mr. Abbot, the music teacher, might play it on his 'cello, maybe. That's the meaning of real poetry, Mr. Gridley—at least as I see it—to say the common thing uncommon, sweet and soft and low, so it lurks in your mind like music."

"I guess I understand, bub," replied the old man huskily. "That's a dam' good piece we've writ here. If Sam Hod, o' the *Daily Telegraph*, can't make space for

it, I'll call his notes. Bub, what the plunkin'-hell does your old man be thinkin' of, settin' you to skinning cows? Want to make you at my age what I am, maybe?"

Nathan was silent for a moment. Then he answered sadly:

"It's the money I can earn. He needs it."

"Money? Money? Dam' money! Once I might o' writ pieces like this, bub—dam' good pieces. But my dad put his foot down and said that I should make money too. An' look at me! I ain't worth nothin' else. And all this town knows it." The tanner's voice broke and he began to chew furiously. He turned away.

"I can't help myself," lamented Nathan. "He makes me work and so I must. I'm only waiting to grow. And then I'll go away, I guess, where he can never get trace of me again."

"Bub, what say you and me be partners—in poetry?"

"Partners—in *poetry*?"

"I'd like to write more pieces like this, with you, bub. B'dam, I ain't had such a soul-satisfyin' afternoon in thirty year! S'pose you quit the yard and come up here and see to things about the office. The brains o' that redheaded girl rattle round in her head like a peanut in a wash boiler. And now and then we'll fool with hexy—hexy——"

"Hexameters," said Nathan gravely.

"Hexy-whatever you-call-'em," said Caleb.

"You mean you aren't going to fire me for fighting? You'll give me a job up here in the office, instead?"

"That's it, bub. You and me! Cow hides for bread and butter. Poems for dessert. Saturday afternoons and Sundays? What say?—what?"

"Th-Th-Thank you, Mr. Gridley," was all that Nathan could call up. He felt a sudden grim affection for the old tanner who had been keeping the heart of a poet locked under his tough hide for two or three decades.

"The wages," said Caleb, "will be two dollars more a week. I guess a poet oughta be worth it. But the real reason for the raise is keepin' your mouth shut. The minute you go tellin' what you and me's mutually interested in—you're fired!"

"I understand, Mr. Gridley. I'm much obliged."

Overwhelmed with this sudden turn in his affairs, the boy began blindly picking up the scratch papers strewn about which they had spoiled. Carelessly he ripped them in strips until he came to the asinine lines of Caleb's in 1871.

"You won't need these any more, will you," he asked, "now that we've written them better?"

The tanner rescued the sheet from the boy's hand, however. Carefully folding it, he laid it away in the worn, brown wallet and locked it up in the old green safe.

CHAPTER XII

FIRST COMPLICATIONS

I

"The Elms" school for girls consisted of a trio of high-pillared Colonial buildings on the main street of Mount Hadley, Massachusetts. They stood behind lofty arches of towering trees that were old when Washington passed through to inspect Ticonderoga.

Mount Hadley had an atmosphere possessed by many scholastic, hilltop New England towns,—wide-verandahed, leisurely, sharply colored, exclusive. From its diminutive brownstone Memorial library to its chaste white churches, it expressed simplicity, asceticism, grace and dignified charm. The nasturtium-flavored individuality of the town stood in clearly defined contrast to the clash and clatter of muddy-guttered, smoky-scented, foreign-populated paper cities farther down the Connecticut. A ninety-minute suburban trolley service connected it with Springfield, Massachusetts.

Madelaine Theddon was entering her second year at "The Elms" when, upon emerging from the college

store-and-postoffice early one September evening, she saw a motor-car draw to the near-by curb and a man leap out. He blocked her way with easy self-confidence. She recognized Gordon Ruggles.

Physically, Gordon seemed to have attained maturity in a year. He had gained in height at an expense of girth. His auto togs made him look still taller and older. But his twisted front tooth was as prominent and his eyelid flopped as badly as ever.

“Hello, Madge!” he cried. “Still sore?”

“I’ve never been ‘sore’ at you, Gordon. That’s a coarse and unkind thing to say!”

“Well, you swallowed all the guff Aunt Grace handed you about me.”

“Please don’t talk so, Gordon. If you haven’t been —well, interesting, it’s because you haven’t seemed to me to live up to the best that’s in you.”

“You didn’t talk that way the first time we met, Madge—when Aunt Grace was showing me the gate. You seemed like a regular girl, for a time. Then right off you got stiff—stiff as froze mutton.”

“You didn’t act very gentlemanly around my home afterward, Gordon. Your behavior displeased my mother. I couldn’t help charging that displeasure against you.”

“You made me feel for a time, Madge, as if you’d give a fellow a chance. Then you turned the glassy stare on me like—like—all the rest.” Gordon said this in a hard, dry self-pity which he knew intuitively how to employ with deadly effect on Madelaine’s type of femininity.

“Mother asked you not to try to see me or find out

where I'd started in school. She begged you to go away and leave me alone. And you haven't paid the slightest regard to her. Is that honorable? What 'chance' do you want?"

"What right did she have to ask it? She flung me a dare. Because I took it and smoked you out, she's sore. And she's gypping my game—with you."

"Just what is your 'game,' Gordon?"

"Aw, you know what I want. You could show you were a good sport once in a while. At least, be human. But instead of acting like a cousin, you act—and Aunt Grace acts—as if I were a pestilence. I want to be friends and neither of you will let me."

Gordon had planted himself in front of Madelaine in such a manner that she was unable to pass easily. But she was not afraid, merely annoyed. She was willowy and fragile beside him but her calm, dark eyes searched his own bravely.

"We can be friends, if that's all you wish. But so long as you annoy mother, you annoy me. And that's all I have to say."

"You think I am a hell-buster, don't you, Madge? You—even you!—won't give me the benefit of the doubt."

Along this attack, Gordon knew he could always score, if he acted sufficiently persistent and apparently sincere. The quick gleam in those expressive dark eyes showed when he had scored now.

"Gordon," cried the girl, "why do you persist in coming up here, week after week and month after month, talking and acting as you do? What is it you want?"

"You're the only girl who ever made me feel that if she were friendly, really friendly, I could pull up and amount to something. Is it any wonder I should be interested in sticking around? When a guy has met that kind of girl, he's on the outs with every one unless he can have her to play with. And that's you! And the truth!"

"But I can't play around with any one. I'm attending school. And next spring mother and I are going abroad——"

"Every one plays 'round part of the time, Madge!" Gordon came closer as the girl shrank back. "I've been thinking about you nearly every day since I met you, Madge. I'm in a rotten way. Instead of helping me, you make it worse. Is that fair? When a fellow might go square if he had the chance, is it fair to make it as hard as you can?"

"I don't want to make it hard for any one, Gordon. But mother made me promise I wouldn't encourage you and I should keep that promise."

"A bad promise is better broken than kept, Madge. And what kind of a promise is it anyway, when it injures and hurts somebody?"

This sort of argument, harped upon long enough, would have the girl's defenses down.

"Please, Gordon, let me pass. People are watching."

"Madge, are you afraid of me?"

"Of course I'm not afraid of you!"

"Get into the car then. For an hour let me talk to you—while we're driving, I mean. I'll have you back by eight o'clock. I promise it, faithfully. You've never

heard my side of the story, Madge. Until you do, it's not fair to condemn me. Not on your mother's say-so."

"I can't! I just can't!"

Gordon's face assumed the proper recklessness.

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it. But next time you hear of me raising hell don't blame anybody but yourself. Didn't you ever have the feeling that no one care about you—what you did, or what became of you? No, of course you haven't——"

"Gord! Come back! Don't go off feeling so!"

"I can't help the way I feel. I'm getting to the place where I don't give a hang. I thought for a time you might help me. I see, as usual, I'm out o' luck!"

It hurt the girl to have the lad talk so, especially as he appeared sincere. Suppose Mrs. Theddon were wrong! Suppose she *were* prejudiced! She, Madelaine, had known that horrible feeling of nobody caring. Was it square of her mother to put such restrictions upon her? The girl was a queer mixture of half woman, half child. The "child" was always the orphan child, wondering to whom it belonged, why life had been "different."

"Where do you want to drive?" she asked.

"Oh, up to Amherst and back, or Greenfield; what does it matter so long as I have a good chance to talk, and get you back by eight o'clock?"

"Well, I'll have to tell Mrs. Anderson over to the House. And you may have to assure her you're my cousin. It's against the rules otherwise, you know."

"Fair enough! Hustle! We've a couple of hours yet before dark."

II

Madelaine soon discovered, not without annoyance, that the pummeling of the machine precluded much confidential intercourse. Also, once under way on the Deerfield road, Gordon's mood shifted. He began to show off his dexterity in managing the contraption. Beside the motors of five years hence, it would be listed as a "haybaler." But in Gordon's hands it was no "haybaler." It was a threshing-machine with the "governor" lost.

"I thought you wanted to tell me about yourself," the girl reminded him as they reached a stretch of reasonably smooth roadway three miles out of town.

"Oh, for the love of Mike! Can't you be human for once, Madge? Simply enjoy yourself! Or if you can't, let me enjoy myself. It's enough for me to have you along at such a time. You're that kind of girl. That's why I've wanted you so much."

The sun sank down behind the Berkshires. The Connecticut valley was hushed and beautiful. Cattle lowed in moist barnyards along their way. They heard the clinking and squeaking of milk pails and the nicker of horses with heads hanging low over whitewashed paddock fences.

A dew mist hung above the glassy river. The world grew dreamy. Gordon turned off upon a country road. With a sudden twinge of alarm Madelaine lost her sense of direction.

"Where are you going, Gordon?" she demanded at the end of a half-hour.

"Oh, I know a short cut. You'll see. Hell! *What's that?*"

They had passed through a thickly shadowed

wood. The road opened out between a hill of undergrowth on one side and a pasture on the other. No houses were in sight. They were surrounded by typical western Massachusetts country. And the car had stopped abruptly.

The boy alighted, raised the hood, tinkered with the engine. He cranked several times in silence. At first Madelaine was interested. Then she grew annoyed. Gordon did not appear out of temper. This was unnatural. He even stood off, looked at the machine and—grinned.

“Has anything gone wrong—seriously wrong?” the girl demanded.

“Don’t know yet. Hope not!”

He toyed with the engine again, even going to the trouble of producing a bag of tools. Then he lighted a cigarette, inhaled a head full and opined:

“This looks like a peach of a fix, Madge. It’s lucky I’m your cousin!”

“But I’ve got to get back by eight o’clock, Gordon. You promised that!”

“Schools make me sick! A girl as old as you having to get into the house at dark—like a little freckled-faced brat! It’s the limit. You ought to shock ’em good!”

“Gordon! Please see if you can’t start the car. We’ve come a long way and an evening star is shining already.”

“I can’t help it if something’s gone wrong, can I? I’m no mechanic. I didn’t make the machine! I’d fix it if I could!”

“You mean to say you can’t fix it—that there’s no

prospect of getting it fixed—so we can get back by eight o'clock?"

"Oh, get off your high horse, Madge! Have a heart! What do you think I'm trying to do—get you in Dutch?"

Madelaine looked at her watch. It was twenty-five minutes past seven. The most disturbing phase of the predicament was that she had no knowledge of the locality nor where to go for help. Gordon lighted another cigarette and stared at his car ruefully.

"There's only one way out," he finally declared, "find a house with a telephone and have a garage car come out and tow us."

"That will take an awful long time, won't it, Gordon?"

"Well, and what of it?"

"But I've got to be back at eight, I told you! How many times must I say it?"

"Oh, hang eight o'clock! I didn't guarantee to get you back regardless of accident! They ought to have sense enough to know that some things might happen that couldn't be helped."

"Perhaps they would if so many girls didn't use that accident excuse until it's thin and threadbare. Besides, I'm not quite convinced, Gordon, that this is an accident. I fail to understand why your car should stop so suddenly away off here in this lonely wood. Everything appeared to be working excellently until we left the highway." Her lips grew hard. "I think you'd better start hunting that telephone, Gordon. And I'll go along and call mother in Springfield. It's plain we're not going to return by eight o'clock or anywhere near it."

"Well, you wait here till I go around the next turn. I'll see if I sight a house. If I do, I'll call you." But the girl did not miss the dull angry flush on Gordon's face at reference to Mrs. Theddon.

The fellow stumbled off down the sandy road. Madelaine waited. To run after him would have been asinine. He was gone a disquieting time. The girl drew her sweater-coat about her shoulders as the last daylight faded and the stars grew brighter. It was ghastly quiet. Somewhere off across the valley a dog barked. She heard the faint tinkle of a cow bell. From down among the frowsy woodland ferns at her right came a faint trickling of water. A mosquito sang close to her ear. The dew was heavy. It gathered in huge drops on the leather seat and the thick, brass-framed windshield.

Madelaine heard her cousin's returning footsteps in the sand before she discerned his figure. Then he stopped to light a cigarette.

"It was a devil of a ways, Madge, and I'm sorry I had to leave you. But I got 'em! A tool car will come out in an hour."

"An hour! You found a telephone?"

"A devil of a ways down the valley—yes. I had to cut through a pasture and swamp. There's nothing to do now but wait."

"Gordon! I——"

"Oh, don't get sore. I called The Elms, too. Miss Anderson said it was all O. K. I told her we'd met with an accident—a real accident—and if she didn't believe it, she could call the Mohawk Garage and find out if I hadn't sent there for aid."

"You called Miss Anderson? She said it would be

all right? On your honor?"

"On my honor!"

He lurched up into the machine and Madelaine had to make room for him in the single seat.

"Mind cigarette smoke?" he asked. "It'll keep off the mosquitoes."

The girl was greatly troubled. She wished she could believe that when Gordon swore "on his honor," it was his honor.

"Great out here in the country, this time o' night, ain't it?" observed the fellow, idly turning the impotent gas and spark levers beneath the wheel.

"How far was it, Gordon, to the house where you telephoned?"

"Oh, I dunno. Couple of miles, I guess. Forget it, Madge! Too dark now for you to make it through all that bog, anyhow."

Gordon twisted his body around and rested one arm along the seat-back behind her.

"Did you tell the garage men very explicitly where we were stalled?"

"Sure I did! What's biting you, Madge, anyhow?"

"How did you describe it? Just where are we?"

"On the Shutesbury road, about eight miles above Amherst."

"How far is it back to the main road?"

"Say, Madge! Are you afraid to wait here with me just because there's no houses in sight?"

"Afraid? Oh, no, Gordon. I'm not afraid of you in the least."

"Then I wish you'd cut out the catechism."

The girl bit her lip and slapped at a murderous mosquito on her wrist. She drew the sweater-coat tighter about her and started that wait. She was glad she had her purse in her sweater-coat pocket. Gordon smoked his cigarette to the final puff and sighed philosophically as he lighted another. He restored his arm along the back of the seat. It grew darker.

"Madge," said he, "did you know—honestly!—you're one of the swellest girls I ever ran across!"

"Please don't let's have any cheap flirting, Gordon. I'm bothered enough as it is, by this predicament you've forced upon me."

"I've forced upon you! Madge, if I didn't have a whale of a lot of patience, you'd certainly get my goat. Here you are, away out here in this God-forsaken spot alone with me in the dark, and you act as if we were in the middle of Main Street, Springfield, with a whole flock of cops looking on!"

"Just what do you mean to infer by that, Gordon? Is there any reason for me to expect anything but the most correct conduct from you?"

"You can't go provoking and tantalizing a fellow and expect him to remain a dummy—forever!"

"Meaning just what, Gordon. You may speak plainly."

"Aunt Gracia ought to have wised you to a few things. Then you'd try to be more agreeable."

"Your Aunt Gracia has 'wised me to a few things' as you so crudely term it. Which is why I'm not afraid of you in the least."

"Madge, let's cut this out! I've got a rotten temper

and I know it. Sometimes it's a devil of a job to hang on to it. So let's talk of pleasanter things. This breakdown gives me just the chance I've wanted for a darn long time—the chance to talk about you! Madge, look here! I might as well get it out of my system right off the bat and have it done for good and all. Madge, honest-to-God, I love you!——"

"Gordon!"

"Oh, never mind the high-horse stuff! It's no crime for a fellow to love a girl——"

"No, but it's a contemptible thing to intrigue one into a dilemma where she must listen to your insults whether she cares to or not!"

"Insults!"

"Very much so, Gordon. If you were a gentleman ——"

"Lookit, Madge! Do you know what I could do to you, if I wanted?"

"Yes. Being stronger physically, there are many things you could do to me—if you wanted. The question is, would you? I hardly think you would ——"

"Wouldn't I, though? I know this game! I've played it before!"

It was a reckless assertion but it escaped before Gordon gave it thought.

His worldly wisdom had been gained through contact with femininity whose motto was: "Treat me rough, kid,—treat me rough!" He believed a woman enjoyed being "mauled", even though she protested; that the man ultimately won who had the nerve to play out his hand. And he had never been seriously

called to account for indiscretions to date. Madelaine's attitude was cool dare—a challenge—or he so assumed. He proceeded to accept that challenge—to show her what unleashed male strength could do.

Laughing coolly, the lad's arm closed tightly around Madelaine's shoulders. His left hand caught her two wrists and held them firmly. He pulled the girl's face toward him. He kissed her—as much and as long as he pleased.

Madelaine stiffened as she might have taken a blow she could not avoid. She did not attempt to fight back. She did not try to scream, to struggle, to excoriate him, to claw at his eyes. She endured the profanation until the boy's temper was appeased. He could not hold her so always. His own position was too contorted. The moment his iron grip was loosened, she pushed open the car door and was over its edge in a flash. Down into the soggy, fern-choked ditch where the water trickled she jumped, falling on knees and hands. Her face was scratched. But she struggled up and darted around the rear of the car.

Gordon knew she must go that way and on the opposite side he waited. His lips were laughing but his face was white. He had struck a shin-bone in scrambling from the machine to capture her and the pain was maddening. As well be killed now for a sheep as a lamb! He caught the girl roughly by her left shoulder and almost pulled her from her feet as he yanked her toward him.

Never for an instant was Madelaine confused. Without a word she bent and scooped a handful of sand. Squarely in the young man's features she threw it,—in his eyes, his nostrils, his half-opened mouth.

Gordon emitted a hoarse bellow and loosed her. In that instant the girl darted away down the road, into the woodland shadow, back in the direction from which they had come.

Gordon spat out mouthfuls of the grit and yowled his curses. But the stuff in his eyes was blinding. It gouged and seared his eyeballs, cutting and inflaming the lids so that a great wash of tears coursed down his face, streaking it ludicrously. He groped his way to the car and sank on the running board. Securing his handkerchief he swabbed his eyes.

He was fifteen minutes clearing his sight. He lit the jets in the big brass head lamps, cranked the car, scratched the varnish viciously backing it into the brambles to turn it around, then started after Madelaine.

He knew it to be four or five miles back to the main highway. Madelaine could not yet have covered the distance. So the big reflectors lighted the cloistered woods several hundred feet ahead and a cloud of ghostly dust hung low in his rear.

Madelaine, fleeing along the shadowed wood-road, heard and saw the machine coming behind, before it made the turn. She darted into a copse of willows and hid there until it passed, Gordon low above the wheel, one hand holding his handkerchief to his face. So he missed her, ultimately reaching the Amherst highway in another fit of black rage and disappointment.

It was after nine o'clock when Madelaine emerged from the wood. She saw the valley and its main highway ghostly in the starlight before her. Far to the north an electric car was coming,—bobbing up

and down on the uneven roadbed. She climbed a low fence on the south and ran swiftly across the hay stubble in a diagonal direction. With deer-like, gymnastic suppleness she covered the distance. Into the highway she finally stumbled, hair fallen free and lungs distressed. But the electric car was still far down the line. She had time to recover her breath, cleanse her scratched face, and arrange hair and clothing before the car worked its rocking way toward her.

No one could detect in the pretty, flushed girl who boarded that trolley the recent victim of a near-assault in the woods to the eastward.

The car went through to Holyoke. Madelaine remained aboard. While waiting to secure a Springfield connection, she slipped into a High Street drug store and called Mrs. Anderson. As she now suspected, Gordon had not 'phoned The Elms. Mrs. Anderson was informed that she need not expect her pupil back that evening, as Madelaine had left suddenly for Springfield. Then Madelaine called her mother but her trolley arrived before she had secured her number.

Gordon left his auto on the main road, extinguished its lamps and went back toward the woods afoot, hoping to encounter his nimble foster-cousin.

"All right, you little wildcat," he snapped as he returned to his machine an hour later. "Get lost if you want! But believe me, next time I get you alone, it'll be where there's no sand to throw in my eyes. A catty woman's dirty trick! We'll see!"

CHAPTER XIII

GOD AND THINGS

I

A favorite retreat for most of the Paris boys in those days was the region known as “down the river.” From the Process Works dam to the mill pond at Hastings Crossing flowed a wide, smooth body of water between indolent, pastoral hills and fern-clogged, wooded shores musty with swamp bog or rotting second-growth.

Often Nathan and I borrowed Pete Collins’ old red scow, let the current carry us dreamily down-stream in the afterglow, to work our way slowly homeward under the stars. The hills, mist-haunted, were exotic in those late evening hours. Trees in the silhouetted woods rose weird against the sky. It was not difficult to imagine ourselves back in Neolithic ages,—those trees rising out of decaying fens, with outlandish shapes wallowing in the bogs along the shore.

They were pleasant, never-to-be-forgotten nights, —those trips down the river. To the dull, rhythmic knock of oars in creaky oarlocks, and the drip of

warm water as we disturbed the far-flung expanse of fallen stars, we talked of many things. Our elders might have smiled if they had heard. But then, if our elders could have heard, we would never have given those long, long thoughts expression.

One sultry sunset we had gone down the river and were opposite Haskell's clearing on our return, when Nathan, who was lying along the boat's bottom, with arms behind his head, remarked in his slow, meditative way:

"Billy—did you ever wonder about the stars?"

"Not especially. What about the stars?" I asked.

"Did you ever imagine you were God, away above all the suns and worlds, looking down now and then at the earth? It would be an awful small place, the earth now, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose it would," I agreed.

The boy was silent for several minutes. Then he continued:

"If some of those stars are suns—like I read in a book a while back—and each sun has its worlds revolving about it too, the earth's only an awful small speck in a great big space, isn't it, Billy? It can't be anything else!"

"Well, and what if it is?"

"If the earth's only an awful small speck in a great big space, think how much smaller we livin' people must show up—down here on it. I don't mean in size, Billy, I mean importance. Well, then, if you were God, away off up in the heavens, what would one little earth like this amount to, anyhow? Still less, what would any one person or persons amount to—

you and me, for instance? If you or I wanted to go to the devil, be just as bad as we pleased, do anything we wanted, what really big difference would it make? Do you know, Billy, I don't believe God gives any single person half so much attention, or cares half so much what becomes of him, as a lot of grown folks try to make out. It's just conceit. That's the word, Billy; conceit! Men like my father, for instance! They get the idea that God's a whole lot like themselves. They think he's got the time and patience to go sneakin' around watching for folks doing things they've been told not to do. But somehow, when I lie out in a boat like this and think about the stars, I sort of see things different. Myself, for instance. And the minute I go back home and listen to Pa, I get my proportion all twisted. My sins are all big and important again."

"But the Bible says the hairs of our heads have all got numbers on 'em," I defended. "And no one goes out and shoots an English sparrow but what God sees it when it starts kicking."

"I don't believe it, Billy! Because if God did know the numbers of the hairs on everybody's heads, what good would it do Him? And what if He does know when some one shoots a few birds? What's the use of Him losing sleep over tiny, foolish things like those when it's lots more important to keep that frail, pretty evening star hung up there in space? Seems to me there's too many folks want to make God a cranky old man, always finding fault with people because they don't do things His way—or a bookkeeper like old Joe Nevins at the knitting mills who almost wrecks the place if he finds two cents off in his balance."

"And what kind of a person do you think God is?

You believe there is a God, don't you?"

"I like to think God would be a kind old man. His eyes would laugh when people take Him so serious, and think He's as fussy as themselves. And He'd have long white whiskers that it'd be lots of fun to pull—so long as it didn't hurt Him—much."

"I'm glad you believe there is a God anyway," I told Nathan, shocked with the *lèse-majesté*.

"Oh, I don't know. I haven't said I really do yet. Oh, Billy—we don't know nothing about Him—not a single thing! Then why is it we keep fooling ourselves that we do? Why not be honest and say we don't? If there is a God, don't you suppose He's wise enough and big enough so He knows we don't know nothing about Him? Why is it such a sin to refuse to take everything on faith, like old Doctor Dodd is always shouting about, on Sundays? We don't think it's any terrible crime to 'want to be shown' in business or science. Why should it be in religion? If we're honest and ready to believe the right thing when we're shown it is the right thing, why shouldn't that be enough?"

"You can search me!" I answered.

"Well," continued Nathan, "I don't know there is a God—and if there is and He's Pa's kind of God, I don't want anything to do with Him. And if He isn't Pa's kind of God, then Pa's all wrong about all the other things. And if Pa's all wrong in the other things, then he doesn't know what he's talking about in the first place and I'm not obliged to believe him in anything. Oh, Billy, I wish I could live in a world that would just be honest! I wish I could live in a world where people were brave enough to come right out and confess they don't know anything—

about God and religion, I mean,—but were willing to be shown."

"Don't you believe in the church and the Cross and everything,—and Jesus Christ?"

"I don't know what I believe," Nat repeated angrily. "And I don't believe any one else does, either, if they'd be honest. I'm sick of being ordered to believe things whether I do or not!"

"But if you don't believe in the church and the Cross and everything, you'll go to hell. The Bible says so."

"I don't believe there is a hell," snapped Nathan. "Everybody tells us hell's a place where the wicked burn forever and ever. Who's the wickedest man in this town?"

"Why, Jake Pumpton over on the East Road, I guess. Or Mr. Gridley, he swears so much!"

"All right! Say any one of them! Now then, you know how hot the furnace fire is at the tannery in the winter? Never mind how rotten and wicked old Pumpton or Gridley are, could you shove 'em into that fire and see 'em writhe and shriek and burn?"

"No!" I protested weakly.

"Then you're more kind and merciful than God. Yet you're only human. According to the Bible, God's worse than you. Because He would! Could you love anybody who'd shove a live man into the tannery furnace? No—of course you couldn't! And if God does things like that, you couldn't love Him and neither could I or any one, never mind how much you swore you could—or did! They're lying when they say so! I'd hate and loathe a God like that—who'd even allow such a place. And I'm not afraid to

say so, either. So I don't believe there's any hell because the kind of God who made that pretty evening star couldn't roast folks alive any more than you or I."

"Well, that takes an awful load off my mind, to know there ain't a hell," I declared. "Because there's lots of things I like about Mr. Pumpton and Mr. Gridley even if they are Lost Souls."

Suddenly Nat made a gesture of despair:

"Why? Why? Why—are we sent into this world, Billy? When we weren't asked if we wanted to come into it in the first place, why are we scared and pounded and prohibited and lambasted, day after day and year after year, made to work, or get sick, or get well, or die—and so long as we say things with our mouths—we'll be saved, and if we're honest and won't say 'em, we'll be sent to roast in everlasting fire. Why is it, Billy? Why is it?"

I couldn't answer. Of course I couldn't answer. But I fancy that ghosts of the Pharaohs heard and echoed Nathan's heart-cry from the night wind. Isaiah and Socrates and Napoleon listened and shook their heads sadly. The saints and the prophets sighed from the far-flung shadows and the infinite hosts of the dead were in atonement with two little boys blinking at the stars from a river scow in a New England summer night.

II

On another night Nathan asked:

"Did you ever think about your marriage, Billy, and wonder what day it would come in the future, and where it would happen, and who the girl was to

be, and just where she is and what she happens to be doing right this minute?"

"Yes," I answered. What boy—or girl—has not?"

"A queer feeling comes over me at times, Billy. Somewhere ahead in life it seems I'm standing in a great church with faces as far as I can see. There's millions of flowers, Billy, and soft autumn light is coming in at a window on the left. The music's playing so it makes me want to bawl and everything's wildly beautiful and there's laughter and love and fragrance all around me. I can see that picture awfully plain at times, Billy. Down the long aisle from the back there's a woman in white coming toward me—the most beautiful woman in all the world—really beautiful, Billy, not because I'm in love with her and she looks that way to me. That's my wedding day, Billy—and it's fine and grand. Do you ever picture yours that way?"

"Somethin' like it," I answered. "Only mine's in a house at night so my w-w-wife and I can sneak off in the dark and not get our hats busted with old shoes. They threw shoes at Matty Henderson's weddin' and broke the windows in the hack and the horses ran away and tipped over a banana stand."

III

Edith Forge was growing along with Nathan, but saucer-eyed and awkward. At school they nicknamed her "Yard-sticks" and the insinuation made her furious. Nevertheless, despite her ungainliness, she was the worst "boy-struck" girl in town.

The day that she was twelve and Johnathan came upon her giggling with an unknown boy in an empty

Sunday-school room, the sex prohibition went promptly into effect for Edith also. But between Nathan and his sister was this difference: a certain sense of self-discipline and proclivity toward law, order and obedience, strong in the boy, was utterly lacking in the girl. She possessed instead a “terrible temper.” She didn’t propose to forego the most interesting subject on earth, Boys, not a little bit. She “had a tantrum” and for the first and only time in her life Johnathan Forge thrashed her. Thereupon—when the neighborhood had been duly edified and quieted—Edith went promptly into illicit alliance with the brother.

“You help me to sneak out and I’ll help you!” she bargained.

In her studies, Edith had the academic mentality of a child of eight. But at thirteen she knew how to dance better than that “questionable” Miss La Mott, the village teacher. And at fourteen Edith was insisting that school would never do her any good anyhow, and she wanted to go to work “sticking eight-point” in the local newspaper office “to buy herself some rags that looked decent.”

Her mother prevailed upon her to stay in school by the compromise of filching money from the father’s trousers after he had retired. They tore holes in the man’s pockets so he would believe he lost the money. The petty loot went to purchase ribbons, waists, high-heeled shoes and two-dollar bouquets from Higgins’s greenhouse for Edith to wear to twenty-five-cent parties.

Early in the girl’s life it was expected that ultimately Edith would “marry money.” That was quite the natural and rational solution for every conjugal and domestic woe; Edith must marry

money.

Not that Edith especially merited the good fortune of marrying money. Simply that if Edith were thus clever enough to land a husband of means, the girl's family might turn parasites and dip their penurious hands into son-in-law's golden pile.

It is always a daughter or a sister whom a family hold up when it wants funds. Never conceded, yet always recognized, when a boy of means marries a girl without means, he likewise marries her family. What are blood ties for? Why else have we daughters, being poor in purse as well as in spirit?

Of course Edith would have nothing to give such a wealthy husband but her bovine body; the mind of the girl is always a thing passed over. So Edith's education, begun at twelve by a work-gnarled, disappointed, narrow-visioned mother, had solely to do with making her body attractive and planning what would be done with the Unknown's cash when it was secured.

Edith "met boys" at school, she "met boys" at church; she also "met boys" on the streets. Half the parents in town at some time or other took note of those clandestine meetings and opined wrathfully, "If that Forge girl was mine, I'd lambaste her good and plenty," well knowing they would do nothing of the sort. Because under the jurisdiction of other parents, Edith's sex proclivities would probably have been diverted into normal, healthy channels.

Edith "never did a stroke of work at home." It was Mrs. Forge's contention that daughter must be "saved" from it and not get her hands all hard and red or her face lined with premature care, or she wouldn't be attractive to Money.

So Mrs. Forge “slaved and drudged” and was always too tired at night to go anywhere or do anything but retire into the front room and rock in the dark. Edith, like the Dresden Doll, toiled not, neither did she spin. She fussed and fumed in the morning and was always late to school. She “never ate her meals” properly at noon, and after school she was either off on the edge of town, fire-playing with her latest short-trousered “catch,” or sprawled on the couch devouring Charlotte Braeme, Bertha M. Clay or Laura Jean Libby. At fourteen she knew more than most women know on their wedding night and what she didn’t know she was reasonably willing to learn.

So Edith whiled away the shining hours around the calendar and Johnathan Forge ruled over a painfully moral household.

It is notable, however, that his moral responsibility to God for Edith’s soul didn’t cause him a quarter of the fuss he made over Nathan’s.

IV

Of etiquette in the Forge home or manners at the Forge table there were none. Etiquette was snobbish, “putting on airs.” “Manners” were something to be displayed largely for the edification of company. The only time the Forges were scrupulously polite in the privacies of the family circle were when they were angry at each other.

Mrs. Forge railed at times about her children eating too fast or fleeing the table without folding their napkins. When they wanted a helping of food, they were supposed to say “Please” and “Thank you”, and on quitting the board to say “Excuse me.” But as the parents never observed these niceties themselves,

practice by the children was rather superficial,—and Mrs. Forge's despair.

Whatever else may be said of Johnathan, the fact remained that "he did relish his vittles." "Good food and plenty of it" was his motto. So it became a matter for special domestic citation to "see who could eat the most", notably at Sunday dinner, Thanksgiving or Christmas. A monstrous appetite was a sign of health and virility and a distended stomach more to be desired than gold—yea, than the gold of the caliphs. Roast beef and boiled potatoes, corned beef and cabbage, anything that afforded inward bulk, therefore, were favorite and familiar dishes on the Forge menu.

Johnathan's favorite dinner pleasantry was wiping his mouth on the tablecloth as a coy rebuke to his wife for forgetting the napkins.

During the progress of the meal, knives, forks and spoons sprawled all over the cloth or against dishes, and the clatter of china and silver exceeded the cutlery music from twenty tables at a church supper.

The mother was ever in hot water because Edith only "nibbled at her food" and Nathan "washed his down with water." After the meal, like a gorged python, Johnathan leaned back and picked and prodded his mouth for five or ten minutes with a huge toothpick.

In allied domestic functions the Forges followed suit. Sometimes on Saturday nights the family bathed. Sometimes it did not bathe. It all depended on whether Mrs. Forge was energetic enough to "heat the water."

The household ran on no schedule. Nothing could be kept in its place because nothing had a place in

which it could be kept. Edith particularly was the worst offender. Her bedroom resembled the pathway of a Missouri cyclone through a rummage sale until her mother “found time to pick up”, about once in two or three weeks.

Clothes and shoes were bought and worn until they were worn out. Then more were grudgingly bought and worn until they were worn out also. Excepting Edith’s.

Johnathan boasted—mostly to his wife and children that he and his family were solid and substantial; you always knew “just where to find him.” No stuck-up notions or fancy fairs to the Forges. People like themselves were the backbone of the nation.

V

Once, at Christmas, the children, imbued with the holiday spirit, wanted a tree. A tree was easily procured by Nathan and hauled home on his sled. Mrs. Forge and Edith strung popcorn and made paper chains. Johnathan, in a spirit of holiday generosity, gave his wife five dollars. The children got a dollar apiece with which to buy presents.

Mrs. Forge bought a much-needed underskirt with most of her money, knitting the children mufflers and keeping her purchases down to a few pathetic gifts in the local “five-and-ten.” She searched long for a gift for Johnathan. She finally chose a little painted picture of a scene in the Bay of Naples, Vesuvius smoking in the background. She said it was “so pretty.” The gifts made a rather thin exhibit on the tree.

Christmas morning, when the tree was denuded, Johnathan got his picture, opened it, threw back his head and roared.

Mrs. Forge had hunted a long time for Johnathan's gift. The little picture meant a blind, vague, piteous groping after Beauty in her crushed and maltreated soul. It was "so pretty."

But Johnathan failed utterly to grasp its erudite potentialities. He spent the greatest part of that Christmas morning making fun of the picture. He got a string and hung it around his neck, sandwich-board fashion. He said he admired his wife's tastes in frames; he had a rubber-heel placard at his shop which would fit it exactly.

Mrs. Forge, who had parted with seventy-five cents which she might better have used for stockings, finally fled the room in tears. During the ensuing year, the picture was facetiously referred to as "Mother's Volcano."

Johnathan, by the way, gave his wife a new bread board and Edith a fancy calendar.

Nathan received a small, leather-bound copy of the New Testament.

It was a red-letter Christmas!

CHAPTER XIV

CONSIDER THE WORM

I

By the time he had reached seventeen Nathan had attained what it too often requires discouraging years for older persons to negotiate.

He had lifted his handicapped, browbeaten young shoulders above the drab-colored dead level of village mediocrity.

Fourteen of his poems had been printed intermittently as “boxed” features on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph*.

The village, therefore, had been forced to admit—grudgingly to be sure, but nevertheless to admit—that if he kept it up long enough, and nothing stopped him, and the quality of his verse showed improvement instead of deterioration, and no one surpassed him, and the *Telegraph* kept out of bankruptcy, and the Federal constitution wasn’t amended so as to prohibit poetry altogether—somewhere down long vistas of future years he might possibly be expected to approach a fair-to-middlin’

resemblance to a near-celebrity.

These qualifying adverbs and adjectives constitute an attempt at faithful reproduction of the community's attitude toward budding talent. Paris, like all Vermont, like all New England, like small towns all over the planet, was doggedly determined that a loophole should be left, in fact several loopholes, so that in case of failure and fizzle it might be in that crushing position to retort, "I told you so!"

To bet on a local son's ability to rise above the common herd's tenor of nothing-in-particular and have the wager turn out a loss was more to be deplored than a failure of the nation's credit system. The grocery-store and barbershop economists could blame the prevailing administration for the latter, but for the former there would be no one to take the ignominy but themselves.

It was only natural that there should be those in town who had no patience whatever with the tone of Nathan's verse. It was sickly, sloppy, moon-sighing stuff, that suggested "dying calves with their mouths full of mush."

Another element, chiefly recruited from the young, unmarried set, or Raveled Ends of Might-Have-Been Romances, clipped out the boy's verses and mailed them to sweethearts. Or they pasted them in scrapbooks alongside clippings from the Poet's Corner in the *Boston Sunday Globe*.

But as a matter of genuine enthusiasm, the bulk of the local census was phlegmatic. They read the boy's amateurish little girl rhymes with indifference, waiting for it to be disclosed "whether that mopey Forge young one was a darn bright kid or a goddam

fool."

Yet the fact remained that the lad was getting "published." And every effusion carried its tuppence worth of advertising. Soon the town was forced to sit up and take notice. Some of the best of Nat's work had been clipped from our smudgy, homely, country sheet and been copied in the *Springfield Union* or the aforesaid *Boston Globe*.

That a lethargic exchange editor in each case, hunting for material to fill odd corners with "hay", had snipped out the verses with a vast and pardonable ennui, spiked them on a linotype hook and forgotten them, was immaterial, even if it had been generally known. Paris felt duly edified.

The effect on Johnathan the day Uncle Joe Fodder, the town philosopher, found the first of Nat's poems in the *Globe* and advised John to that effect was as amusing as it was interesting.

John had been positive his boy's propensity for poetry was in the same category with his Abaddonic proclivity toward girls. Realization that fame was being forced upon the family despite his dogged assumption to the contrary came as a shock. A great city newspaper had printed the name of a Forge and circulated the same by hundreds of thousands of copies! What could Johnathan do in the face of such titanic refutation? Nothing but to glow in his heart that the celebrity was his son and then treat the said celebrity as his own personal washpot.

"I guess I know best how to bring out talent and ability in a youngster," he affirmed. "Keep 'em in their places and give 'em a little hardship to rise above! That's the thing that makes men. Give a boy encouragement and he either gets a swelled head or

turns out a mollycoddle."

Besides, what encouragement had his father ever given him?

II

Many times in those months and years, I saw the man opposite me in church or shop and studied him. But there was little to "study."

It puzzled me for a long time how two such people as Johnathan and Anna could remain together year after year in any such loveless connubiality and not realize its prostitution. But of one thing I am convinced absolutely: Johnathan was no hypocrite; up to the time of Nathan's marriage and still more vital events yet to be delineated, the man, however narrow, had the courage of his convictions.

Separating from a woman whom he had once married and by whom he had received children—even if not divorcing her—was not only heresy and against all ethics, but it struck at the very roots of society and nominated him for the seventh strata of the bottomless pit.

All marriages were made in heaven. That was the Alpha and Omega of the whole business. The Bible says a man shall cleave unto his wife and they shall be one flesh, though they fight openly from New Year's to Christmas and make the home life of growing children a nerve-racking hell. You can't get back of the Bible. There it is in black and white. And you know what it says in the ending of Revelations about daring to change one jot or tittle of Holy Writ.

If there were unpleasantness in his home, it was the woman's fault. She rebelled against the

hypothesis that he was the head of his house, the arbiter of its destinies, the party responsible for its souls and bodies to God and State. She spat upon the verdict of St. Paul: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands as unto the law of God.” She was responsible for everything wrong. She was “undermining Church and State.” She was a sinner from wayback.

The man totally lacked the capacity to see himself in any other rôle than that of model father, husband, citizen and church member.

He was one of those men of whom it may truthfully be said that he took life seriously. To say nothing of himself. To associate, disport or enjoy himself with family or neighbors was something he did not know how to do. He couldn’t have taken enjoyment from life even if he had wanted. It was rather pathetic.

He was a finished product of his own philosophy and never saw it. His father had succeeded in doing in him exactly what he was trying to do in Nathan. Only there were leavening and countering chromosomes in Nathan’s make-up ultimately working for the boy’s salvation which had not been Johnathan’s heritage.

He rarely attended any church or village function unless admittance was free, and on rare occasions when the circus came to Paris and he consented to take his children, he bought no admittance to performance or side shows. He taught them to be content with standing off in the background and “watching people make fools of themselves.”

When by unavoidable circumstance he was forced to participate in any social function where people

looked on, he either did so with an awkward, clumsy, painful, red-faced self-consciousness, or he "tried to be funny." But in both cases he withdrew into innocuous desuetude as quickly as he was permitted. Thereupon, unless the affair had been directly connected with religion, he carried away the impression that he had been a "cut-up" and a "card."

Once, just once, when Edith had been ten, the Forge home had been opened for a party. But on that occasion he had not been content to let the youngsters work out their own social salvation. It had devolved upon him as "master of his house" and "protector of his children's morals" to place himself in the best chair in the front room and preside over the progress of the affair. It was his business to see that no kissing games were played, suggest when the children had applied themselves to each pastime long enough, inject witty criticisms of juvenile deportment, indicate when it was time for the refreshments to be served and when the hour had come for adjournment. All this he did in slippered feet, with hair a bit rumpled and vest unbuttoned. On the whole, it was quite a responsibility.

Vainly his wife had tried to spirit him out and away so the children might act naturally and enjoy themselves. Johnathan was indignant. He guessed it was his house. His carpets were being scuffed out. His money was paying for the ice cream and cake. He stayed.

His favorite contribution to the entertainment when the children sat around like little wooden puppets, half-frightened to death by the Moloch presiding over them, was the demand, accompanied by an indulgent toe-tapping: "Who can tell a funny story or sing a funny song?" But ten-year-olds who

wanted to play “Copenhagen” or “Drop the Pillow” were rather deficient in the matter of volunteering comic anecdotes or rendering humorous ballads. And whereas Johnathan’s repertoire was rather limited along those lines also, the party was not all it might have been.

That night in bed an exasperated wife “started in her same old tirade” and ended her excoriation by kicking her loving husband in the shins. Johnathan exhibited the black and blue spot to Nathan in the week ensuing to prove to the son that his father had married a virago. There never was another party.

And now Nathan, the offspring of a God-fearing male and an unholy female, was upsetting all his father’s unassailable calculations and becoming known throughout our part of New England as a celebrity. Just what should Johnathan do about it? Not being in a position to do much of anything about it, the father concluded it best to pursue a policy of watchful waiting.

So matters drifted—with Nathan performing rather indefinite tasks in the tannery, the vague nature of which bothered his father not a little bit, but which nevertheless brought in six dollars a week—until the disturbing young coot “up and wrote ‘The Pagans.’”

III

To speak truthfully, our prune-and-prism community received a shock. Sam Hod, proprietor of the *Telegraph*, undoubtedly wanted to administer a shock. Anyhow, he not only printed what the precocious rhymster had composed but called attention to its moral excellence in his editorial column that night.

"THE PAGANS

"We bought two slaves on the Block of Life,
Out-crying the bidders all;
Two slaves as rare as the maids of Punt,
White-limbed as the girls of Gaul.
The Pagan bought for the right to own,
With gold that he could not miss
While I bought mine for the right to love
And swapped for her flesh a kiss.

"We pushed our slaves from the auction hall
And drove them along Life's street;
We jested over their bodies pink,
The pad of their naked feet.
Ahmed chained his to a black floor ring
As butt for his brutal fun,
While I chained mine to a kitchen range
And work that was never done.

"The Pagan's slave was a high-strung lass
And fought with a courage rare;
But broke at last 'neath her master's whip
And pain from her tortured hair.
Now my slave, too, was a high-strung lass,
And so—for my right was clear—I
broke her back with a thankless drudge
And a baby every year.

"The Pagan swore that his slave should die
By slash 'cross her milk-white throat,
Her body sewed in a sack by night
Be dropped in his harem moat.
I likewise ordered my slave should die
But I did the thing with art:
I ground my spleen to a rapier point
And stabbed till I found her heart.

"The Pagan slept when his slave was dead,
For he had much gold to spare;
Next day he went to the market place
And bought with a better care.
But when my slave had been killed with words
I placed at her head a stone:

‘Here sleeps the one that I loved most dear
While I go my way—alone!’

“We bought two slaves on the Block of Life,
The Pagan and I one day;
But he killed his with a short, curved sword,
A damned, paganistic way.
My slave died too, but a Christian’s death,
And God tells me all is well;
So while white heaven’s ahead for me,
The Pagan must writhe in hell.
“—NATHANIEL FORGE.

“Paris, Vt., Sept. 25, 1906.”

It should not be difficult to understand where Nathan derived material or satire for this poem. Neither should its reception be difficult to grasp in a prudish New England community.

“That boy’s mind is becoming positively foul!” cried Mrs. Caleb Gridley when she had found the paper that night and then dropped it as though it were hot. “The very idea of putting such a thing in type! What’s Mr. Hod thinking of? Moral excellence, indeed! I thank the Lord that pure-minded little Bernice-Theresa is out of town and away from it all. Her sweet morals are safeguarded from any such youthful depravity as that Forge boy is showing.”

Old Caleb secured the paper and read the verses in silence.

“Oh, I dunno,” he answered after a time. Then he sat staring into space.

Many husbands in Paris sat staring into space after reading Nat’s poem that night. A few, however, did not get the chance to stare into space.

“Cost me twenty-five dollars!” growled Artemus Harrington in the Smoke Shoppe Cigar Store later

that evening. “My wife says it was the best thing she’d ever read and it would do a heap o’ men around town good to read it, too. One thing led to another and we ended up in a fight. She made me ‘fork over,’ and she sashayed home to her mother’s.”

Cora Whipple, Nathan’s former teacher, declared it was bizarre, but nevertheless Literature. She said it ought to be printed in all the best magazines. Her prim old-maid sister called it the height of obscenity and gave the *Telegraph’s* editor a piece of her mind over the ‘phone, ringing off before Sam had the chance to reply. The poem set the town by the ears, so to speak.

“You sure can pick out which hubbies love their wives and which women ain’t happily married by the way that poetry sets on their stummicks!” observed Uncle Joe Fodder. “B’dam whether I think the kid writ it himself or whether he’s got some old person coachin’ him. But believe me, if Sam goes on printin’ the likes of that poem he’s sure goin’ to swell his subscription list. And not because folks want to see the report o’ the tax commissioners, either.”

It was old Doctor Dodd who caused the direct reaction on Nathan, however. The poem—particularly the last two lines—perturbed the old minister grievously. And he “took it up in prayer meeting” that evening.

Johnathan had read the verses shortly after supper while waiting for the drone of the weekly church bell. Nathan had luckily returned downtown before the carrier boy tossed a *Telegraph* on the Forge veranda.

The father sat stupefied for a moment, after bringing the front legs of his chair to the floor with a

clump. Then as the “coat” fitted him perfectly, he proceeded to put it on. He left the house without speaking and wandered through the neighborhood, hands clasped behind his back, lips set tightly.

Reaching the church, hoping to receive comfort and consolation from the service in this latest parental “trial”, Doctor Dodd “opened up” on it. And the father’s blood ran icy cold.

The minister’s subject was “Train up a child in the way he shall go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Every person in that vestry knew to whom and what the pastor was referring. Every face was turned toward the ashen mask that was Johnathan’s countenance before that discourse ended.

The father stared stonily ahead until the minister had finished. Then he arose and “testified.” It was deathly quiet in the prayer-meeting room as Johnathan concluded that “testimony.”

Everybody present felt “so sorry” for poor Brother and Sister Forge.

IV

Nathan slunk like a felon through the back streets to reach his home. He knew the town was talking about his poem. He was shy of praise and criticism hurt him. Not because it was criticism but because it usually rested on some one’s disapproval. The last thought in his head was any back fire at home from the verses. Consequently he was puzzled when on reaching the Spring Street corner he saw his sister arise from the steps and hurry toward him.

“Natie!” she cried. “Don’t go in! Run and hide!”

"Hide! What for?"

"Dad's whopping mad over what you had in the paper to-night. He's laying for you good."

"Laying for me?"

"He thinks you've slammed him somehow, for the fights he has with Ma. And I guess the minister didn't like it either and jawed him about it in prayer meeting. Anyway, Pa came in as white as a ghost. He asked for you. When Ma said you was still out, he took off his things and started pulling down all the curtains. He shoved back the furniture and went and got the strap. Ma wanted to know what was eating him, and he said when you came in he was going to give you the darnedest dressing down you'd ever got in your life."

Nathan sank down on the low cement wall which ran around the Granger lawn.

"And how did Ma take it?"

"Oh, she stood up for you. Not because she'd read the poetry or cared a hoot what you'd said in it. Just because it was something to fight about with Pa. They were going it hot and heavy when I decided to sit out on the steps and warn you. I've got to go back before they miss me, so, listen! You hang around outside, Natie, and if Ma talks him out of it or he gets winded and goes to bed, I'll put a lamp in my upstairs window and you'll know it's a sign to sneak in."

Nathan remained seated on the fence. Once or twice he cast glances toward his home, fearing to go in, fearing to remain out later. He looked down at his shoes, worn, sloppy and unshined. He felt supinely small in the ludicrous suit he wore, an old one of his

father's. His hands were soiled. His finger nails were broken. He needed a bath, in fact, it seemed as though he always needed a bath. He felt grimy and seamy and prematurely old.

He had been that evening in the Seaver home. Fred Seaver's father ran a meat and grocery store in East Main Street. Fred was experimenting with electricity and Nat had gone over to inspect his apparatus. But it had not been the apparatus which had most interested Nathan. It had been the Seaver home.

The Seaver home had hardwood floors and all the rooms were lighted by electric chandeliers. The dining room had a cozy "dome" above the table, and silver sparkled amid cut glass on the buffet. The Seaver parlor wasn't "saved for company." It was open all the time and in one corner an open fire burned cheerily. The Seavers called it the "living room." There were bookshelves between the windows and a soft-shaded reading lamp on the center table.

In the Forge home, Johnathan "roared like a bull" if more than one gas light was burned at once. Out from the west wall of the Forge kitchen stuck a twelve-inch gas bracket with a single Welsbach burner. It was a white, cheerless light which burned unevenly. Beneath it each night Johnathan tipped back his plain wooden chair and read his *Telegraph*. If the rest of the family cared to read, they "strained their eyes" or waited until the father had finished. Nathan could not help comparing the two lamps,—the difference in homes which they represented.

The Seaver home was inviting, restful. In the Forge home, clothes were always piled on chairs or tables. More ironed clothes were usually strung on a wire

from corner to corner, making the kitchen atmosphere stuffy. The sink was always filled with greasy dishes. The faucet dripped. There were crumbs on the red tablecloth and sugar grains on the worn linoleum.

Nathan had compared the two and wished, poor boy, that he might know such a home as Fred Seaver's. He thought of it now as he sat out in the chill September night, afraid to enter a house where a father waited to flog him.

Of one thing the boy was grimly resolved. At exactly the moment the law allowed him his freedom, he would find a girl somewhere and have a home that should exhibit some claim toward beauty, cheerfulness and peace. Who the girl might be was immaterial. To flee the horrible, fear-driven, Scripture-surfeited place he had known from earliest boyhood was becoming the greatest objective in existence. But meanwhile, what should he do?

The question answered itself. The front door of his father's house opened and Johnathan himself emerged. He wore hat and coat. Down the steps he started and in the opposite direction from where Nathan waited. Before the boy could solve the mystery, his sister appeared. She ran frantically for the place where she had left her brother.

"Natie!" she cried hysterically. "Natie—come quick! Something's happened to Ma!"

Across the street Nathan leaped and into the dark hallway. He bumped into a door, stumbled over a chair, reached the kitchen.

His mother was seated on the floor, hammering her gnarled fists crazily upon the linoleum. One of her legs stuck out, uncovered, from beneath her

body. Her spectacles were off, her face was swollen —as it usually was swollen—with weeping.

“She’s having one of her spells!” cried the awe-struck sister. “You’ll have to put her to bed—or do something!” The girl spoke as though they were gazing down on a strange biological exhibit.

Mrs. Forge was only letting her nerves go in an enjoyable fit of hysterics. But it was an epochal fit of hysterics. She pounded the floor and she kicked her heels. She tore down her hair and ripped her washed-out blue wrapper from her thin shoulders, leaving soiled underclothes and rusty, broken corsets exposed.

“I’ll kill myself!” she shrieked. “I will! I will! I’ll not stand it another day! I’ll kill myself!” She emphasized each “will” with a thump of her tightly clenched fist upon the floor.

“Doctor Johnson told Pa once the quickest way to bring folks out of a ‘spell’ was to throw cold water on ’em!” suggested Edith. “You better get the bucket, Nat. Give her a sloppin’—a good one!”

But Nat could not “give her a sloppin’.” He was suddenly overwhelmed with pity.

“Come, mother,” he said. “Let me help you to bed!”

“I don’t want to go to bed! I want to kill myself! And I will! I will! I will! Get me the butcher knife! Edith!—Nathan! Get the butcher knife! Watch your mother kill herself.”

Edith started to cry. Nathan saw something should be done and he did it. He stooped and picked up his mother. Though she fought and clawed his face, he managed it. Bidding Edith go ahead with the lamp,

he carried his struggling mother up the stairs and into her chamber. There he laid her on the bed.

“Undress her, Edie,” he ordered. “Get her into bed before Pa comes back.”

“I dassent, Nat. I’m afraid.”

Nathan locked his mother into the bedroom, first making certain there was nothing about the chamber with which she could “do anything rash.” Then he went back down the stairs.

He was inclined to agree with an oft-expressed sentiment of his father’s. It was a “hell of a home.”

“Where you going, Natie?” cried Edith. “Don’t leave me alone with her. I’m afraid, I say.”

“She can’t get out, unless she jumps through a window, and I don’t aim to be here when Pa comes back.”

“Where you going?”

“I dunno. Just out.”

Nathan started for the hallway. But he got no farther. He met his father—coming in.

Johnathan made an arresting gesture.

“Young man,” he announced hoarsely, “I want to see you.”

The boy was startled by the strange quality of Johnathan’s voice. The father’s face was white and drawn. There were puffy circles beneath his eyes and almost no color in his lips.

“Whatter you want?” demanded the boy sullenly.

“It’s time that you and I had a talk, young fellow. You’re approaching man’s estate. It’s time that you

and I had a talk."

V

They went into the parlor and sat down in the dark. Nathan was first puzzled, then alarmed. As the time passed and his father sat silent, an ominous silhouette opposite in the dark, that alarm increased to panic. Finally Johnathan cleared his throat.

"I just met Caleb Gridley up the street a pace," he announced. "We had a talk—him and me. We talked about you—and your poetry."

"Mr. Gridley?"

"Yes, Mr. Gridley! You've been coming along, Nathaniel. You've been coming along so fast I've hardly noticed. But to-night you've had a thing printed in the paper that's brought me to my senses. You're getting too big to thrash. So I've concluded to talk with you, I say. It's time we got this poetry business straight. I'm responsible to God for your soul and this poetry business brings home how much. How old are you, Nathan?"

"Seventeen," the boy answered grimly.

"Yes, you're seventeen. And at the wild, foolish age of seventeen you're starting out to ruin your life precisely as I started out to ruin mine. And did! Only I started at twenty-one instead of bally seventeen."

"Ruining my life? How am I ruining my life, by writing poetry?"

"No! By going contrary to your father's best judgment for your welfare and future. By trying to do something and be something which your father doesn't approve of. At twenty-one I was in the same

position toward my father—I admit it! My father knew what was best for me; he was older and therefore wiser. He wanted me to be a business man—to set up a shop with him. But I had hazy, half-baked ideas that I wanted to be a minister. So I went contrary to my father's advice and his wiser judgment."

"You regretted wanting to be a minister?"

"No! I've regretted I presumed to know more than my father about what I was best fitted to do. And now my own boy has come along and stands exactly on the brink of the same horrible precipice. I'd have thanked my father if he'd broken my neck for my independence. I'm not going to do that to you. But I want to show you the hideous mistake you're making. Nathaniel, I want to save you from frittering away your life being any such puerile, willy-nilly thing as a poet!"

"But I like being a writer! I could do something big!"

"Stop! I'm doing the talking! You like to write poems, yes. And some men like to drink whisky and smoke cigarettes. But this isn't a world in which we can pamper ourselves in the things we like to do. It's a world in which we've got to school ourselves in stiff self-discipline—do the things we don't like to do. Always! The moment a boy or a man goes doing something he likes to do, he's guilty of a weakness—of a sin!—and sin is displeasing in the sight of the Heavenly Father. The Bible says so!"

"But if I can't write, what do you want I should do?"

"The Bible says, 'By the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread,' Genesis, third chapter, nineteenth

verse. That means a man's chief concern in this world is work, business. All other things come second to work, business. A man should first of all have a trade, succeed in a good business, make money. After he's done these things, then perhaps he can waste a little time with foolishness like poetry. But to put the poetry nonsense first,—that's the cart before the horse; that's to court failure, poverty, all the hardships I've had to endure, wanting to be a minister before I knew my own mind—*marrying your mother*! And I've decided I don't intend to see you do it. As you're not old enough to make up your own mind yet, it's my duty to make it up for you. But I want you to see why and how it's done. Twenty years from to-night, on your bended knees, with tears in your eyes, you'll kiss my hand and thank me —just as you're going to thank me some day for keeping you from girls or setting you to work in the tannery—having that valuable experience in contacting with unpleasant things."

"Pa!" cried the aghast boy. "You're not going to say I can't write any more poetry!"

"I'm going to say you can't write any more poetry until you know your own mind. What you've written in to-night's paper goes to show the injury an immature, undisciplined boy can do to himself and to those who love him—by not knowing his own mind. All over this town to-night sensible people are reading your poetry. They're laughing at you and pitying you. But they're damning me as your father for not keeping a guiding hand on you, training your thoughts and impulses into healthy, money-making channels. To-night in the House of God I hung my head in shame for the thing my son had done. Even a minister of the Gospel rebuked me before the Elders

in the Temple. And that shame, your shame as well as mine, is almost greater than I can bear. It can't be duplicated, young man. It's got to stop before you do something far more sickening."

"But, Pa! I like to write poetry! It comes so easy ——"

"Who are you—little, inconsequential, immature Nathaniel Forge—that you should consider yourself capable or talented enough to go before the public with your silly little rhymes? What do you know about life and its responsibilities and penalties—merely living here in this quiet, sheltered, comfortable home with your dear father and mother and little sister? Hasn't it yet dawned on your brazen little brain that all the great poets have been men of mature intellect and venerable years—Longfellow, Tennyson, Whittier—what were they but bent beneath the weight of time, with gray heads and flowing beards——?"

"Bryant wrote 'Thanatopsis' at eighteen!" flashed Nathan. "And it's one of the biggest poems in the English language!"

"Don't argue!" roared Johnathan, his temper rising. "'Harken to my counsel and give heed to my understanding!' I'm talking for your own best interest."

"Hang it all, Pa, I don't care about business! I don't take to money-making at all!"

"Then all the more reason why you should be made to take to money-making—correct a weakness in your character. Making money, doing business, is fine and manly and virile. But is there anything fine and manly and virile about wasting your time on silly, obscene lines of rhymes—that start a whole

town laughing at you and pointing the finger of scorn at your father? Answer me, sir! Answer me!"

"I don't know what to answer. You cut all the solid ground out from under me. I thought I'd found something I could be a success in, if I did it long enough. But you throw me all up in the air. I don't know what I want to be, or what I want to aim for, at all!"

"That's God speaking to you, my boy—telling you you're not old enough nor wise enough yet to decide such matters for yourself. That's why boys are given fathers—to decide for them. The proper and commendable conduct for a boy is to be meek and docile and humble, to accept the dictates and judgments of those who are wiser and older. The Bible says, 'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth!'—Matthew, fifth chapter, fifth verse. All great men are meek men. They efface themselves. They harken to those more learned and venerable—not ram about the world trying to poke their half-digested opinions at people, especially at seventeen. And in poetry!"

"I suppose I should have been meek when Si Plumb made me the laughing-stock of the tannery crowd that day? Let him walk all over me. You said then you were glad I'd showed some starch——"

"Young man, we'll not make this an argument! Standing up for your rights in a fist fight is a far different matter than trying to show you are somebody in print, before you've reached your majority. Besides, if you hadn't been drooling around with poetry that day, you wouldn't have got yourself into that fight in the first place!"

Nathan had difficulty in following his father's logic

excepting that Johnathan had decided he did not care to have his boy a poet,—at least at present. Tears welled in his eyes. He pillowed his head wearily on his arm.

“Hang it all, Pa! It seems as if Life’s getting to be nothing but a regular fog. I feel as if I were groping my way around in it—not being able to see much sun—bumping into all sorts of things—not knowing which way to go to get out, or reach any special place. I’m just blundering around and around and around and—oh, what’s the use?”

“All the more reason why you should listen to your loving father’s counsel. I’ve been through the mill of experience. I want to save you from going through it, too—making all my hideous, horrible mistakes.”

“But you haven’t made a success of your own life, Pa! Then how can you tell me what to do, when you haven’t been able to do it yourself?”

“Be careful, young man! No impudence! I’m older than you and therefore must know better.”

A long, strained silence followed. Finally came Nathan’s voice.

“Father!”

“Yes, my son?”

“I’m not going to do it!”

“You’re not going to do what?”

“Stop writing!”

Johnathan Forge could scarcely believe his ears. For a quarter moment he sat rigid, hardly seeming to breathe.

“What say? What say?” he gasped weakly.

"I'm not going to promise to stop writing poetry—nothing of the sort! I've got a hunch for it, if I am blundering around in a fog. But somewhere, sometime, I'll find my way out. I know I'm not the kind of son you wish you'd had. Edith's not the kind of daughter or mother isn't the kind of wife, either. But I'm me and I'm going to keep trying. Nobody's going to stop me—and——"

"You saucy young pup! You saucy young pup!"

"I'm not saucy! I'm honest. I'm giving you a fair, square answer——"

"I'll flog you within an inch of your life!"

"Don't do it, dad! It'll only make things worse."

There was a queer ring in the boy's voice. Johnathan was so totally and completely taken aback he was weak all over. His own son!—in his own house!—openly defying him!—declaring bluntly and boldly that he, the father, was not to have perfect obedience in all things.

"My son, don't have me call down the curse of God upon you! It will follow you all the days of your life."

"You don't have to call down anything, Pa. You're trying to make me give up the only thing I know how to do and do well. You haven't any right to do it. I know you haven't. I *feel* it. I can write good enough to get published. So I'm going on. I don't believe you know what's good for me at all, or you wouldn't ask it. Instead of helping me in the fog, you're only making it worse."

"You miserable, little——"

"I'm going to be twenty-one in just four years

more. I'm going to boss my own life then. You can lick me now if you want. But if you do—for just wanting to keep on with the thing I can do best and easiest and like to do—I've pretty near made up my mind I'm going to run away—where you can't find me till I'm twenty-one. And I'm never coming back."

"God's curses——"

"I don't believe God curses any one, Pa. He's too busy running the stars and suns and—heaven—to care whether I like poetry or you want me to be a business man."

"And you'd—stand up to your father—like this ——?"

"When I don't think I've done any wrong, yes."

"I'll thrash you——"

"All right, Pa. Only to-morrow morning I won't be here. You'll never do it again."

"I'll have the law on you and fetch you back!"

"The law'll never know where I am—to fetch me back."

For the first time, Johnathan stood checkmate. That queer, hard ring in his incorrigible son's voice told him subconsciously that he was close to the end of seventeen years of bullying.

Such a thing had never happened before. His wife had fought with him, indeed, but it had always been a "chewing match." Though he had never struck her, the fact remained that he could strike her and beat her up thoroughly, if he chose. He had a feeling, however, that if he went beyond a certain point with Nathan, the devil had hold of his son's soul just hard enough so that Johnathan might encounter the

distressing predicament of not being able to come off victor. Nathan had whipped the Plumb fellow. The Plumb fellow was larger than Johnathan. In popular parlance, Johnathan was rather “up against it.”

The father did a strange thing. He arose abruptly, turned and walked from the room. Nathan heard him pass through the hall, out the front door, across the veranda and down the steps.

Why had he gone? Where was he headed? This silent, abrupt, unexplained, ominous departure unnerved the lad more than any commencement of fistic hostilities.

Johnathan Forge did not return that evening. All that night he walked the streets, debating whether he should call down God’s curses on his boy. He actually believed that if he did, the son’s life would be blasted forever. Morning came cold and gray and clammy across the eastern hills.

But in the morning the Forge household resumed the even tenor of its way. Only Johnathan did not speak to his son for four days and then only on matters of absolute necessity.

Nathan, however, had made a discovery. This is a world in which people suffer and endure exactly what they choose to suffer and not much more. When the worm turns, ninety per cent. of the early birds turn also.

As a discovery, it opened many prolific possibilities.

VI

Johnathan, on that night’s walk, however, had

determined upon a maneuver and reached a great decision.

If he could not control his son by scoring his body with a harness tug for the good of his soul, he would employ tact and discretion. In order to save his son from a horrible life of poetry, he would get into some business, ostensibly of a manufacturing nature, which might grip his boy's interest as his own, and set up an industrial counter-irritant to poetic pathology.

If Nathan hadn't written that Pagan poem and set his father by the ears, Johnathan would never have gone into business and taken Nathan with him. And if he had not gone into business and taken Nathan with him, all the course of the boy's life would have been changed.

Viewed from the perspective of the present, truly it was a happy stroke,—writing that Pagan poem.

CHAPTER XV

VALLEY LAMPS

I

Madelaine Theddon was seventeen that autumn. She was one of those rare girls who seem to slip subtly into maturity while contemporaries of equal age are giggling over pimply-faced lovers, locking themselves away in bedrooms to indite silly *billet-doux*, sighing over novels or clandestinely "putting up their hair."

On an afternoon in mid-September she had climbed Mt. Tom with a party of schoolmates older than herself in nothing but years. They had accidentally (?) encountered college boys from Amherst. They lunched, flirted, drank and danced in the great, airy Summit House.

Madelaine was an accomplished dancer because of her litheness and exquisite grace of carriage. Yet to-day she had not cared for dancing. "Old Mother Hubbard" the boys often nicknamed her,—and left her alone. It was increasingly difficult for Madelaine to endure the crudities and vaporings of slangy, big-

footed adolescence. They had left her much alone today.

She stole down the deck-like Summit House verandas, one by one, down the weather-mellowed and unpainted steps, and wandered off to the lower point of ledge at the south of that summit plateau. The Connecticut valley was far-flung at her feet, already hazy with dew-fog and twinkling with the first lamps of evening.

Hushed, peaceful, lofty, that place was,—serene, like the hour. The western afterglow was dying into lead. The sky—always finer and vaster from a mountain height—seemed a mammoth arch of sapphire porcelain where a low-hung evening star in the clear southwest shared ephemeral honors with a chaste new moon.

Madelaine stood for a time with her figure in silhouette against the south, far out on the point of rock, raised in spirit above the world. The night wind, warm and river-moistened, blew up from vistaed lowlands, rippled her accordion skirt and raised pretty havoc with her hair. Her hands were thrust in the pockets of her sweater-coat, a sinuous protection of old-rose silk. She drank deeply of the night wind. She was thankful for the solitude.

The world was very beautiful in these first clear hours of early evening. She sank down after a time on the rock, gathering skirts about fragile ankles. She rested an elbow on a knee, a cheek in a shapely hand. And fancy wandered.

Faint, disturbing yearnings had throbbed in the girl's body of late—her hunger for an Unknown Something was gradually changing—assuming a different aspect. There were times when she wanted

to love—overwhelmingly—every one and everything in the world. Then she hated the world for its crudities and shrank from the monstrosities which shocked her on every hand.

Why did people remark—and keep on remarking—that she was “different”? Wherein was she different?

In so far as her school life developed, she played tennis, gave chafing-dish parties, went canoeing and handled the canoe herself, was officer and active worker in most of the school societies. She was versatile without being prodigal. Yet through all her activities ran that same thread of dark-eyed observation,—poise, self-conservation without repression, the intuitive ability to be ever the spectator while also the participant.

The other girls frankly “did not know what to make of her.” Yet when they were in difficulty or desired help on matters they were restrained from carrying to their elders, they sought out Madelaine Theddon as straight as a homing bee.

Up and down the slope at her left, the mountain cable-cars kept steep and endless shuttling. At her feet the serried lights of Holyoke Highlands brightened. Far to the south the concentration of radiance she knew to be Springfield glowed clearer on the horizon. Yet none of these, nor the stars, nor the fresh new moon, held the attraction of those dots of brave, optimistic twinkle where isolated homes were scattered upon the face of a night-shrouded valley floor. Was that it—the thing that troubled her—the lights of other people’s homes?

She did not wonder that heaven was peaceful, that God could be calm and omnipotent, high above the world. The spot and the panorama was an allegory.

Yes, the earth was beautiful—very beautiful. She had always known it so. She knew it now a hundredfold. The pain came from wondering about her part in it, and of it, even as in her school life she remained the spectator though virilely the participant.

Waltz music from the Summit House drifted down to her. The world was hers, all its lights and laughter, all its fine rare things, all its rewards and fairies. No, the world was nothing of the sort! She was a mendicant, a Nobody. Always a Nobody. How could she ever forget that? So her moods played upon her. This at seventeen.

For Madelaine Theddon at seventeen, on a mountain height in the starlight, was as surely the Madelaine Theddon whom One Man found gloriously, as the sand-crusted diamond in the Kaffir's girdle is the same burst of iridescent whiteness on Milady's finger at Delmonico's.

Madelaine, on the rock, wondered about the future, what she should do in the world, what niche she should fill. At times she felt a wild, instinctive impulse to attempt great tasks,—build, win, create, worship vast gods. Then her own weakness, namelessness, impotency, would overwhelm her. She must be attached to something substantial to do great work. Some one must have emphatic need of her. In these last moods she felt that building, winning, creating, worshiping vast gods, was all hollow nonsense,—tinsel and mummery. She only wanted to complement. But what she wanted to complement she could not decide, even if she could reach that far in her self-analysis. She was flowering indeed, but she was still seventeen.

The evening deepened. The afterglow—even the leaden afterglow—died on the hills. The stars and

moon rode close. Lethe-like, exotic scents wandered through the upper air, no longer earthbound, soaring onward and upward to sweeten the reaches of infinity.

She was not in love, not at seventeen, despite encroaching maturity. Boys she knew, even the best of them, were calloused, independent, painfully sophisticated young hoydens whose principal invocation to the opposite sex was “Say!” And yet that restive, insatiable hunger to complement—the finest, grandest heritage of true womanhood—was gnawing. Gnawing pitifully.

Yet if she were not in love, love was in her,—blind, wingless, already beginning to look up through the latticed windows of cloistered maidenhood, observe the stars, long for freedom without knowing exactly what she would do with freedom if it were suddenly accorded her. Dreams came to her in detached hours, vague, breeze-wafted, miracle-laden. But when she tried to lay hold upon those dreams, make them over into conformity with reality, the world veered askew. She seemed to abrase her delicate soul in the enforced juxtaposition.

II

The “crowd”, regardless of proper chaperonage, had to be back in Mount Hadley at nine o’clock. But the girl stayed there on the ledge until the final moment of departure. Alarmed companions, missing her, searched the mountain top, calling her name.

The “chaperone” was a hulking maiden whose eligibility consisted in the fact that “come December she was going to be married.” The woman arraigned

Madelaine severely.

"... If you ever give me another scare like this, I'll have you read out of school! The very idea of running off by yourself and moping close to the edge of a dangerous precipice in the dark! I never had such a fright in my life!"

"I'm sorry," returned Madelaine. "The valley was very beautiful. I stole off to watch the twinkling lamps."

"Oh—you stole off to watch the twinkling lamps? Rather watch a few twinkling lamps than have some real fun while you've got the chance. I wouldn't be like you, Madge Theddon, for all the money there is in Massachusetts. Why! You simply don't know how to enjoy yourself——"

"Maybe," suggested a snippish little prig who had entered the school a couple of years before, "maybe she's wondering who her folks are!"

The prig's name was Gridley and she had shown a dislike for Madelaine from the first afternoon. Miss Bernice Gridley had small patience with the quiet smile that played about Madelaine's lips when the former sought to impress upon whosoever it might concern the vast importance of the Gridley money and blood. "She's an orphan," went on the Gridley girl, loud enough for Madelaine to overhear. As Bernice intended she should. "An awful nice feller I got acquainted with at the prom last June told me so. He's a cousin of hers or something. She was adopted out of an orphan asylum. She's all stuck-up because her foster-mother happens to have money! I'd rather be poor than a nobody!"

Madelaine's features burned scarlet. A newspaper was lying on the seat of the trolley beside her. She

picked up the sheet and tried to read, hiding her flaming face behind it.

It was the editorial page of that evening's *Springfield Union*. In the "goofus" column the staff humorist had included several verses clipped from an exchange. When Madelaine's sight had cleared, she read the words. Then she forgot the ill-bred Gridley girl. The subject and sentiment was mesmeric and the catty environment faded.

"GIRL-WITHOUT-A-NAME

(From *The Paris* [Vt.] *Telegraph*)

"You came to me in my dreams last night,
Dear Girl-Without-a-Name;
A lovely phantom from out the space
That parts our lives, you came.
You greeted me with your eyes, dear heart,
And secrets Peri keep;
I moved with you, with your hand in mine.
Down the mystic glades of sleep.

"We idled long in those glades, dear heart,
The world a purple mist;
Beside an amethyst stream we strolled
And kept that midnight tryst.
The little stars drifted down the sky,
A hush! ... I felt a hand,
And once ... just once! ... came a whisper soft:
'Dear heart, I understand!'

"I do not know all we said, dear heart,
The night ran swift away,
But all the charm of your presence sweet
Came back from Dream to Day.
It's not the words that you spoke, dear heart,
That made that tryst so fine,
But that kind night found a subtle way
To bring your hand to mine.

"The tears and toil we may know, dear heart,

Must some day reach an end;
Through miles and years we must search sometimes,
Ten thousand for one friend.
Yet some great noon in the sun-glare bright,
In some vast open space,
You'll stand, flesh-clothed, with your arms outstretched
And triumph on your face.

"I know few words will be needed then,
Lament nor name nor plea,
We'll let our eyes speak the message sweet:
'Grow old along with me!'
A thousand years shall become as one
As heart to heart shall press,
And God shall start all his worlds anew
From that first white caress.

"You may be dark or you may be fair,
You may not have a name,
Though you've been sold for a caliph's gold
That kiss will mean the same.
The soul of man has a thousand lives,
Yet Love has only one,
That leaps alive to the Glory Cry:
'Dear heart, the trek is done!'

"And so the nights with a velvet tread
Mount softly into years;
The gray days come and the bright days go,
With smiles and fears and tears.
But somewhere off o'er a clean sea's track,
Each soul's High Noon is due;
Be strong, dear heart, though the wait is hard;
Till then ... just dreams ... and You!

—"NATHANIEL FORGE."

Madelaine read the fine-typed verses again and again. An inexplicable, constricted feeling tightened across her chest. Somehow the lines frightened her, as though a Voice had come from the void and whispered a promise close at her ear.

She finally creased the edges of the column neat and true. She tore away the ragged portions and folded the poem in her purse.

Who was Nathaniel Forge? Why should he write such a poem? She wondered. She saved the poem.

CHAPTER XVI

MORE ROMANCING

I

Nathan was in love again!

The winter of 1906-1907 contributed two incidents of far-reaching importance to this account of hectic romance.

Johnathan Forge bought the local box-shop.

Miss Carol Gardner came to Paris from Ohio—pronounced “A-higher”—and when the boy met her, “to his eye there was but one beloved face on earth and that was shining on him.”

It developed that for a considerable time, unsuspected by his family, Johnathan had been “looking around for some good business”, professedly of a manufacturing nature where the labor of others might accrue to his benefit in more sizable portions than the cobbling business allowed. Henry Campbell died suddenly in November. The executors offered his property for sale. The first inkling Paris received that the town cobbler had aspirations toward capitalism came via the *Telegraph*

one February evening. A deal had gone through that day with Johnathan Forge for the box-shop. The cobbler was assuming management at once.

Mrs. Anna Forge heard the news via the *Telegraph* also, by the way.

The Campbell Press-Board Company, as the firm had been listed in town directory and telephone book, made pasteboard boxes. In them were packed the products of the larger industries of Paris, the Thorne Knitting Mills, the Stevens Hard-Rubber Process Works. The business was considered profitable, in a modest way, if expenses were held to a minimum. Johnathan felt himself especially born to that business. If there was one thing he emphatically knew how to do, in business or family, it was holding expenses to a minimum. To his wife's stupefaction, he drew eighteen hundred dollars from the Paris Savings Bank and gave notes aggregating thirty-two hundred in addition. Thus Johnathan became a "manufacturer."

The "box-shop" was located on the northern edge of town where Paris "ran out" in cheap pastureland and cat-tail bog. It was a big ark of a building, constructed on filled-in-land, two stories in height and painted a dirty yellow. In the southeast corner, facing the roadway, was a fourteen-foot room known as the "office." In this office Johnathan established himself, and the son, the moon and the stars were summoned to rise and set at his bidding.

Only the son obeyed, however. The moon and the stars were not at all affected by Johnathan's new industrial importance. Nathan was called upon to relinquish his position in Caleb Gridley's office on the simple hypothesis that "his father needed him." The idea was that office help cost money. "Until the

business was firmly established" (it had been running twelve years), the boy should be willing to work for his father, gratis. Besides, there was the need for saving him from poetry.

Nathan demurred against leaving old Caleb. If he had tutored the tanner in the gentle art of poetic composition, the tanner had reciprocated by schooling Nathan in the fundamentals and finesse of business until to-day, down here in 1921, that same education is responsible for my friend holding down a position that nets him an annual salary of—but that is anticipating. Old Caleb laid the foundation for all that Nathan knows about business. If Nathan has gone far and is going further, what old Caleb taught him is responsible, augmented by his own artist's imagination and inherent creative ability. Yet Nathan's demurring availed him nothing. Nat bade old Caleb a tearful good-by one February night and the tannery was a closed chapter in his life.

After six months without Nathan, old Caleb sold the tannery.

There were several antiquated job presses in the Campbell plant, fitted with cutting dies, on which orders for folding cartons were executed. But the bulk of the work was done by girls on a piece-work basis. There were about twenty of these girls when Johnathan assumed the management. Their average weekly wage was seven dollars. Johnathan looked over this "organization", was at once persuaded that Henry Campbell had not "held expenses down to a minimum", conceived that if all hands did twice as much work, half the employees could be dispensed with, and the labor item thereby reduced just fifty per cent. So the second morning the "organization" consisted of one lone male to work the paper-cutter

and ten girls to paste the boxes. Nothing was said about giving these eleven more money. They should count themselves lucky to retain jobs at any wage. “Twice as much output or discharge” was the cheery motto that Johnathan hung in his “factory” and he pursued it consistently.

He pursued it so consistently, in fact, that the second week no one was working but Johnathan, Anna Forge, Nathan, Edith and an undersized boy with adenoids. The pay roll had been cut from $163.00 a week to $4.50. The boy got the $4.50. He had to be paid money or his folks wouldn’t let him work.

Johnathan was so intent on holding expenses to a minimum that the art and necessity of likewise holding his help was entirely overlooked. The box-shop girls may have been only seven-dollar caliber but they had their ideas about slavery, as practiced by Johnathan on his immediate family. They walked out to a girl and the man with them. Then local firms began wrathfully demanding boxes.

Johnathan knew how to hold down expenses. There was not a doubt about it. Pay out no money, whether necessary or not. Bank the balance and work the family.

Thus matters drifted along into the second week and the third, Anna Forge trying to do the work of four former girls and Edith doing about one-half of one girl. Nathan ran the paper-cutter. Johnathan spent most of his time down in the office, punching out “important correspondence” on an old blind typewriter with his two forefingers. The adenoidal boy spent his time out on the back platform clandestinely smoking cigarettes.

By the end of the first month so many orders had been cancelled and the remainder were in such a hopeless state of chaos that Nathan, with old Caleb's training and the imagination of the artist, saw that something had to be done and done quickly. As usual, there was no one to do it but himself.

"Pa," he observed one noontime, "I've got a proposition to make that will save us money."

"Go back to your work!" snapped Johnathan. "If we don't get a gross of Number Sevens to the knitting mill by five o'clock we lose their business."

"That's exactly why I want to make you a proposition. I'd like you to turn over that room upstairs to me absolutely and let me organize and systematize the production end as I please——"

"Turn over the business to you? Have you gone crazy or do you think I have?"

"—for a specified price per box over the cost of materials and profit. Let me spend the money as I choose so long as I turn you out the boxes and have them on schedule time on the shipping platform?"

"Do you mean to infer you know more about running a business than your father, who's wiser and older and therefore must——"

"I'm not arguing that I want to run the business! I only want to run the production. We've got an order for fifty thousand Number Tens for the process works. We're far behind, already. You're getting eight cents a piece for those boxes. The stock costs three and you're figuring half a cent profit. That leaves four and a half cents to cover labor and all factory expense. Will you give me three and a half cents for producing every box, regardless of how I

spend the money? You stay down here and run the office and have no care but supplying the materials, getting the orders and collecting the money?"

"No!" snapped Johnathan, "I will not! Get back to your work."

One week later the order for the process works was cancelled. The process works announced they were putting in their own box department. They had no time to waste while Johnathan ran a factory as he ran his family. Moreover, the knitting mills also delivered an ultimatum. Johnathan called his son to his "office."

"Nathaniel," he declared, in a large voice, "I've been thinking over what you suggested Friday. I don't know but I'm disposed to give it a trial. For one week, say—to see if you could assume such a big responsibility. I doubt it. But I've got so much work and worry here in the office, with this correspondence and all——"

"A week! I couldn't work out anything permanently effective inside of three months."

"Three months? What would take three months?"

"Getting order out of that awful chaos upstairs. There's got to be a careful organization planned, routings for the work laid out and systems installed."

Johnathan shied at that word "organization." It meant spending money, giving hard cash to indolent employees who "soldiered" the moment his back was turned. But in the end he capitulated. He had to capitulate.

Nathan, with the high heart of youth eternal, set to work. The boy traded with his father until he made him promise on his honor not to cut the piece rate if

Nathan cut the costs. On that promise the artist-imagination of the lad built soundly and swiftly.

Johnathan was horrified at the number of girls and women Nathan set to work at the long tables. That they were being paid piece rates and if they failed to deliver, got no money, cut small figure. The great, stark, horrible fact remained that some of them were earning eight, ten, twelve, fourteen dollars a week. Money was running out like water, or blood from a wound in Johnathan's side. So many boxes were being produced that it was taxing him to the utmost to get materials up to the benches. Not only were all booked orders being filled on schedule, but others had to be secured to keep the little plant running. All this was never once weighed against the money going out for pay rolls. One cow-like little girl, Milly Richards, had perfected a certain operation so deftly that she was drawing fifteen to eighteen dollars a week, and it could not continue!

What mattered it if Nathan had used his imagination and inherent creative ability to cut corners and manage efficiently until the cost per box had dropped to less than a cent and a half? That Richards girl was drawing eighteen perfectly good dollars every Saturday noon. And it could not continue!

Johnathan awoke in the night and agonized over it.

Finally, while checking up the pay roll one week, the father threw down his pencil and banged an angry fist on the desk.

"I'll not pay that Richards girl eighteen dollars a week! I'll not do it! This nonsense stops right here and now!"

"She's earned it!"

"Before she came here she worked in the process works and was content with eight dollars. But you get her down here and the first thing I know, she's run eight dollars up to eighteen. Eighteen dollars! For a woman! I'll not pay it. You can go and tell her so."

"You mean you'll cut the rate?"

"I mean I won't pay any female eighteen dollars for six days' work! That's what I mean and it stands!"

"You made a bargain with me for three and a half cents a box. I get the cost down to a cent and a half and you want to break your promise."

"I'll not pay any girl eighteen dollars for six days' work!" This outrageous thing had become an obsession with Johnathan. "Why, you obstreperous young dolt, you've gone and gathered an organization here that's making so much stuff I can't get materials or orders to keep it going! And you want to pay one girl eighteen dollars a week!"

"I should think the proper thing would be to hustle out and put in your valuable time getting more orders—not waste it worrying over the high wages one clever girl has managed to make by applying herself to her job."

"Don't give me any lip, young man! I know how much business I want to do. And you've built an organization to do too much! Another phase of your youthful indiscretion, the same that made you write that obscene poem about slaves before you knew your own mind and I stopped it. If I gave you a free rein here, you'd wreck the place!"

"If you gave me a free rein here I'd build a sales

force that would find firms who would consume our boxes," the lad answered grimly.

"And where would the money come from to swing all that business?"

"I'd go to the bank and borrow it!"

"Huh! I suppose you think banks are just lying awake nights hoping I'll come and ask to relieve them of their surplus? Maybe you'd enjoy knowing that I've been to the banks here twice. Each time I've been refused, but you'd still keep paying eighteen dollars to eight-dollar girls."

Nathan felt that he knew why Judge Farmer, president of the People's Bank, might have refused Johnathan money. But he said nothing.

"Well," snapped Johnathan. "Answer me!"

"If the bank wouldn't loan me money, then I'd get out and incorporate this business and put out some seven per cent stock. I've got twenty-five girls and four men upstairs. A certain percentage of work must be turned out to carry this overhead,—rent, taxes, depreciation, insurance. It isn't how little we can do or how much we can do. It's how much we're obliged to do, to operate at a profit. And I've found that figure exactly. Not a man or girl can be turned off without crippling our output and losing us money by running up our overhead per unit of production. What's more, if you cut the piece rate, the girls are going to get discouraged and quit, or if they don't quit, do just enough to hold their jobs. What's the answer? It's somebody's business around here to find orders and I'd say it was up to you. I've done my part. Now you do yours."

Johnathan arose, his face pale.

"We'll go into that some other time, you saucy young pup," he snapped. "Just now I've got to get to the bank. But I'm marking down the Richards girl to ten dollars. That's all I'll give her. Not a cent more. Not a cent less! Ten dollars!"

"But, Pa!" cried the son aghast. "You're not going to cut her this week—on the work she's done already?"

"Four times I've told you I'll pay no female eighteen dollars a week. I could get a man—a man as old as me—to work for eighteen dollars!"

"What's the use of a man—what ice would a man cut anyhow—if a girl can do the work as well and quicker?"

"Don't sass me and don't argue! This is my business and you're my son! I propose to run both in any way I please."

And Johnathan slammed out the door, fully persuaded that no man's earthly trial is greater than headstrong offspring.

The pay envelopes were made out that afternoon, Johnathan getting great enjoyment from writing the names on each in a very precise hand and admiring his penmanship with great self-pride. When they were filled, he took them upstairs personally. "Paying off" was something he always reserved for himself. It gave dignity to the owner of a business. The help thereby associated him with money. Finally the Richards girl's envelope remained.

"You give her this, and explain why it's short," the father ordered, tossing it across to the boy when he returned to the office. Such a thing was good discipline for obstreperous youth.

Nathan removed his overalls and went upstairs. He had eight dollars clandestinely removed from the petty cash.

‘There’s a mistake in your envelope, Milly,” he said. “It only holds ten dollars. So here’s the other eight to make it right. And Milly?”

“Yes?”

“Monday morning I’m not coming back. If you know of a better job, you’d better take it.”

“Where you goin’, Nathan?”

“Back to the tannery, to keep the books for Mr. Gridley.”

The girl’s face fell. She was pretty in a dumpish, common sort of way. She flushed slightly and turned toward the window looking down on the acres of rushes.

“I dunno as I care to keep my job here—if you’re going, Nathan,” she confessed.

Then she fled down the stairs, leaving the boy stupefied.

II

It was Saturday night and Nathan went up to the Gridley front door and rang the bell. The Duchess answered. The boy asked for her husband.

Old Caleb had been the only real father Nathan had ever known. Old Caleb had been the first to notice him, a poor young slave in an abattoir, the first to encourage him, to treat him kindly, to give credence and deference to the boy’s opinions, efforts and dreams. It had been old Caleb who had kept his

spark of self-confidence alive and burning when time after time Johnathan tried to extinguish it. Old Caleb, let it be stated now, loved Nathan like a son. As for Nathan's love of old Caleb, it stood for the lad's entire faith in human nature. If old Caleb had ever betrayed his confidence the milk of human kindness in the lad might have turned to sour clabber.

"He's in his study, on the second floor," declared the Duchess grandly.

Nathan knew his way upstairs; he had been there before. The Duchess returned to a visitor in the side room as Nathan passed the portières.

The boy was closeted with old Caleb half the evening.

"No, bub, I wouldn't quit your old man yet," the tanner advised. "My advice to you is to mark your time. Always remember that the man who can deliver the goods is the man who rules! You've delivered the goods down to the box shop and so you're the real ruler. All your old man needs is a lesson. You stay out for a week; pretend you're sick if you want, then let him try to boss the gang. He'll have you back—high, wide and handsome—with a valuable lesson learned in addition. At least let's hope so."

"He tried to get some money at the bank——" Nathan began.

"Sure! I know! I'm head o' the discount committee. I turned down his loan. A man that can't run his family no better than your dad's run his can't run no business—on bank money, anyhow. If he gets sick and quits, or there's any way for you to have full charge o' the business, come and see me, bub. But

your dad's exactly my idea o' nothin' to brag about, and the sooner he finds it out, the better!"

Tears came to Nathan's eyes.

"I'm much obliged, Mr. Gridley," he choked.

"That's all right, bub. Come 'round some day and we'll talk poetry. We was so kind of busy boomin' the leather business just before your dad took you away that we almost forget poetry, didn't we? But maybe we can ring in a day or two yet. Writin' any more yourself?"

"I've been so interested in getting the shop running smoothly I haven't had time."

"Pshaw, now! Don't you go lettin' business get ye too hard! You're a poet, young feller, and you got a talent that demands development."

"I wish I could make dad see it."

"He's goin' to see it one o' these days. But I'm all-fired 'fraid—it's goin' to be too late!"

Nathan reluctantly withdrew and started downstairs. Caleb came after him in slippered feet, vest unbuttoned. This sort of thing always horrified his Duchess. If she could have had her way, the tanner would have spent his time at home in a dinner jacket.

At the foot of the stairs a young woman was being helped into her cloak. It was a bright red cloak, trimmed with gray lambskin. She had been the caller in the side room when Nathan went up.

"Know this girl, maybe?" asked Caleb of Nathan.

The boy colored.

"I've not had that pleasure," he answered. He had

heard the minister's wife so rise to a similar situation and considered it neat.

"Introduce 'em, Clem," suggested Caleb. His wife's name was Clementina but Clem was plenty good enough for Caleb. She was far from being a Duchess to her husband.

The woman withered her husband with a glance of loathing, then forced a wooden smile.

"This is Mr. Nathan Forge," she condescended. "Mr. Forge, Miss Carol Gardner."

"Hello!" said Miss Carol Gardner. And she giggled.

Nathan bowed stiffly. He raised his hand, lowered it, raised it again, thrust it behind him.

"Mr. Forge has been engaged with my husband in the leather business," the Duchess explained largely. Then to Nathan, "Miss Gardner has recently come from Ohio to visit her grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Archibald Cuttner."

Nathan bowed stiffly again. It was characteristic of him, a habit he had acquired the last few years, to turn his mutilated ear away from those with whom he might be conversing. But his eyes had met the roguish, laughing face of the Gardner girl. And he had seen—enough. She was very easy to gaze upon.

"If you're leavin'," suggested Caleb to Miss Gardner, "Nat better hoof it along with you to see you don't up-end on the ice. The walk is slippery to-night."

The Duchess assumed a "this-is-what-I-have-to-endure" expression while Nathan tried to find his tongue. Referring to this girl's risk of accident between the Forge residence and the business section

as an up-ending was embarrassing to the ninth degree.

“If I’m going your way, I’d be glad to see you safe home,” the boy volunteered.

“Oh, that’s so sweet of you!” responded the girl. She found her gray lambskin muff, buried the lower part of her oval face in it, looked slantwise at Nathan and laughed that mischievous giggle again.

They went down the steps to the sidewalk. It was a stinging cold night. The sky was clear, deep sapphire. The full moon resembled a Japanese print, shining through bare, gaunt limbs of winter-creaking trees.

“I better take your arm, Miss Gardner,” the boy suggested. “You might fall down at that.”

“Grab hold!” the girl assented.

Nathan slid his hand in the warm aperture between her right sleeve and her soft body. His fingers closed about that plump arm delicately. The girl in red and gray, a head shorter than himself, pressed against him with the usual helplessness of the man-escorted female.

And at contact with her body thus—in that instant—he knew he had grown a man.

Miss Gardner slipped on the Pine Street walk, whether by accident or design is unknown. The thing that counted was that Nathan caught her in time and she did not resent it. In fact, she rather enjoyed it. She laughed gleefully and turned her small, snub-nosed face up to his, coyly and viciously close.

“I’m awfully clumsy,” she confided. She did not enlighten him whether she was equally clumsy when walking without an escort.

This opened conversational possibilities. Nathan averred that she was nothing of the sort. So they traversed two blocks, Miss Gardner insisting that she was clumsy and Nathan making it his portion of the argument that she was not. Anybody might slip on the old icy walks, as icy as they were around the little old town of Paris. They had a rotten old lot of selectmen—no sand or ashes on the walks or anything—so on toward Walnut Street.

“So you’re in the leather business with Mr. Gridley,” the girl observed.

“No! I was in the leather business with Mr. Gridley. Now I’m in the paper-box business with my father.”

Miss Gardner observed that it must be an awful interesting business. Nathan observed, Oh, he didn’t know; sometimes it was and then again, sometimes it wasn’t.

“And what position in the business do you occupy?” the girl asked next.

“Oh, I run the place,” Nathan told her with a careless gesture, as though running places was the most inconsequential and offhand job in the world; undoubtedly he could run places before breakfast or between meals or in his sleep. So Miss Gardner was left to infer.

“Very interesting!” the girl commented. “And how many employees have you in your factory?”

Nathan was suddenly ashamed of his factory, the size of it. Oh, to be able to describe it in hundreds of thousands or tens of thousands!

“Twenty-nine,” he said truthfully, with difficulty.

"I'm sure we're going to be awful good friends," remarked Miss Gardner quickly. "I'm so lonesome here, you know, a new place and all." Being a stranger in a new place was hard, hard.

Nathan assured her he knew how she felt exactly. He would do his utmost to see that she was not lonely. He promised it. It really was his duty, as a resident and a matter of civic responsibility. Strangers must be graciously acclimated and made to feel at home. That was only ordinary hospitality.

"I've been living out in Ohio with my father," said Miss Gardner. "But he married again and my stepmother was cruel to me. So I came east to stay with grandpa and grandma and enjoy life for a little time before I have to go back to it all again." This sort of thing was also hard, hard.

Naturally, likewise as a resident and a taxpayer, Nathan was duly sympathetic. How could any one—male or female—be "cruel" to such a delicious little woman in red and gray? He tried to frame phrases appropriate to the sentiment but decided the time was not yet auspicious to give them utterance.

"You must come in," declared the Gardner girl when they reached old Archie Cuttner's house. "I'll simply not take 'No!' I'm so deeply grateful to you for seeing me home so safely. Why!—I might have fallen and broken a limb!"

By her tone she made Nathan feel that he had done something akin to averting a national panic, or negotiating the peace of hemispheres. He went in.

Old Archibald Cuttner "had money"—at least enough to "let him potter 'round" after a lifetime of keeping the books in the Thorne Knitting Mills. He and his wife lived in the eastern half of a big double

house at the far end of Walnut Street. Nathan had never met the Cuttners, but he felt agreeably—nay, graciously—disposed toward them. At least they were fellow Parisians in the responsibility of entertaining the stranger within the gates and they were also *her* relatives. He would cultivate the Cuttners. Why had it never occurred to him to do so before? Why, some day he might be intimately calling Old Archibald "Grandpop!" Stranger things had happened.

There was to be no cultivating of the Cuttners that night, however. Both had retired, leaving the oil center lamp burning and turned down low on the reading table.

Nathan followed the girl into the close, oil-scented sitting room furnished in mid-Victorian and with Larkin soap premiums. There was a horse-hair sofa, several chairs, hideous with handworked "tidies", a sewing machine, a what-not, a mantel holding curios from the four corners of the earth—and Troy, N. Y.—and an upright piano of two-day installation.

"Do you sing, Mr. Forge?" asked this siren from Ohio.

Nathan countered by desiring to know if she played. And when she said a little, not much, Nathan affirmed he also sang a little, not much. And Miss Gardner "took his things" and hung them in the adjoining bedroom and came back into the sitting room, feeling of her belt in the back and primping and patting her hair. Likewise she produced a pair of tiny pince-nez spectacles and polished them with great care while Nathan kept his mutilated ear away from her and wished to high heaven he had given better attention lately to his nails.

Putting on the spectacles at last, Miss Gardner poked her lacy handkerchief away in her blouse and sank in an opposite chair. She remarked that it was fortunate Grandpa Cuttner had retired, because now they had the house all to themselves and Nathan agreed it was indeed fortunate Grandpa Cuttner had retired, because they had the house all to themselves, although what they were going to do with the house, now that they had it all to themselves, remained to be disclosed.

Seated beside the lamp, Nathan had his first satisfactory look at the girl who might possibly "be his consort and his comfort down all the future years." Undoubtedly both would always look back to this night and cherish it as one of Life's Great Moments! And to think he was living in it now—that very instant!

She was a well-built girl, rather small in stature, with soft chestnut hair and large hips. She had a kissable mouth and a slightly snubbed nose and pink, shell-like ears. Likewise she had a "You-don't-dare" manner that was tantalizing. She pulled her heavy mohair skirt down quickly over her ankles as Nathan sat opposite her and thereby the boy appreciated she was very modest and chaste and altogether a worthy object for the bestowal of his connubial affections. He tried to imagine that she was his wife already, sitting so domestically beside the lamp, and came back to earth by realizing she held an open library book in her lap and had launched into a dissertation on the decline of current fiction.

Nathan clandestinely smoothed his hair, shot his cuffs, got his feet stored away under his chair with minimum display and agreed that there were no masters like the old masters. As for himself, give him

Dickens. There was a certain style about Dickens. Then at the psychological moment he remarked contemptuously:

"I write a bit, myself!"

"You write! What?"

"Poetry!"

"No!"

"Oh, yes!"

"Why! how perfectly stunning!" It developed the Gardner girl was just wild about poetry. And had Nathan ever had anything published?

Nathan gave her a blasé smile such as Kipling might bestow on a high-school sophomore from Racine, Wisconsin. Certainly he had been published. No one could count themselves real writers or poets until they had been published. Did she happen to have a file of last year's *Telegraphs* handy?

Unfortunately the Cuttners did not keep such a lexicon of local pabulum handy about the house. *The Daily Telegraph* served a more practical purpose each morning by kindling the Cuttner fire. But it really didn't matter! Anybody in Paris could tell her who Nathan Forge was and what he had done. All she had to do was ask.

The Gardner girl was gratifyingly impressed. To think she had come to know a poet and never realized it!

Nathan drummed his fingers on the chair arm, tightened his tie, took his feet from storage long enough to tap a tattoo on the carpet, put them back hastily, hitched on his chair, remarked it was too bad the Cuttners had gone to bed, for that unfortunate

retirement of course precluded any chance of music.

Miss Carol Gardner immediately assured him that Grandpa Cuttner loved music, even in his sleep, and she would go to the public library to-morrow and read everything Nathan had ever written. In a sort of daze at thus entertaining a celebrity unawares, Carol moved across and twirled the piano stool—no one ever saw a piano stool twirled to its proper height for extemporaneous performance anyhow—and—— What could Nathan sing?

Nathan affected a great ennui as he left his chair, and they went through the sheet music and popular ballads of the day with their heads rather close together.

Did he know this and did she know that? It was hard finding selections with which both were familiar. But this was awful pretty and maybe he could catch the words. So Carol played the opening bars of “Come Take a Ride in My Airship,” which was just then going the rounds of the picture shows, Graphophones and street pianos.

Nathan hummed this initial experiment in melodious aviation and then declared he believed it too high for his voice. He had something more negotiable ready: “Everybody Works but Father.” The sentiment was rather silly, of course, but the tune was catchy.

Between a badly tuned piano and Nathan’s cold—which he had not realized he possessed until that moment—the symposium on parental aversion to physical exertion was duly delineated. By which time both conspirators in this nocturnal songfest had lost much of their self-consciousness and were “ready for most anything” in the way of lyric and harmony.

Of course it was only natural that ballads of a more sentimental and intimate persuasion should be acceptable by both. So down in the pile, which had recently come from A-higher, Nathan found more sober and touching offerings: "'Neath the Old Acorn Tree" was particularly appropriate, especially the last verse:

"Out in the golden west to-night I'm dreaming,
The moon shines o'er the mountains, clear and cold;
I'm going East where candle-lights are gleaming,
Again to wander through the scenes of old.
The old mill wheel seems silent, all is lonely,
No loving form is waiting there for me.
In fancy I can hear a dear voice calling:
'Dear heart, I'm sleeping 'neath the acorn tree.'"

"How sweet and beautifully sad!" affirmed Miss Gardner. "Death is always so sweet and sad, isn't it, Mr. Forge? But then, not so sad as disappointed love. Have you ever been in love, Mr. Forge?"

"Yes," responded Nathan thickly.

"Oh, how romantic! And did you suffer a great disappointment?"

"Oh, I lived through it," returned the boy with a sad laugh.

"But what you really mean to say is that it left its scars on your soul. True love always does that, doesn't it, Mr. Forge?"

Nathan began to feel that the temperature of the room was uncomfortably high.

"I guess I don't know much about true love," he returned. "To be frank, I've never run up against the real thing."

"I understand perfectly. You're waiting for some

great overwhelming passion to come into your life and sweep you off your feet. There's always an overwhelming passion in everybody's life, isn't there, Mr. Forge? How true! How true!"

Nathan had an uncomfortable hunch that the Gardner girl was talking drivel. So he put a new piece of music on the rack before her.

"Let's play this," he suggested in lieu of a lowered window.

They hollered through "The Good Old Summer-Time," or at least Nathan did, and old man Cuttner in the next room—the same who liked music even in his sleep—arose on one elbow in the dark and swept his arm around the floor at the head of his bed in hope of locating a shoe which he could hurl at the door. Not finding any shoe, however, he slammed over angrily and jerked the bedclothes over his head, muttering something about brainless young cootes who didn't have gray matter enough to let honest folks get a good night's rest, and who in hell had Carrie picked up so quick before she'd been in town two days?

"And have you ever been in love?" asked Nathan amusedly, as he sought in the avalanche of melodious sentiment for more breaches of the Cuttner nocturnal peace.

Miss Gardner played the scale with one finger.

"Oh, there's a dear-enough boy back in A-higher that loves me to distraction. I suppose I'll marry him eventually. But I can't quite decide whether I love him enough yet."

The sheet-music titles fused before Nathan's gaze and his stomach turned over.

“Has he asked you yet?” was Nathan’s quiet question. He hummed through the tune of the sheet upon his knees—“On the Hills of My Old New Hampshire Home”—as he asked it.

“Oh, yes!” (Long sigh!) “But there’s quite a story to it. Some day maybe I’ll tell it to you. I’d really like your advice as to what it’s best to do.”

Nathan felt himself extremely competent to give advice on what it was best for her to do. In fact, he rather knew in advance what the tenor of that advice would be, regardless of the detail of the predicament. Music rather lost its charm after that. Carol arose and walked across to the window. She stood looking out into the winter moonlight where the shade was but half-way drawn.

“A girl now ought to marry for love alone, hadn’t she?” was her question.

“Absolutely!” affirmed Nathan.

“Yes. I’ve always thought so! There isn’t anything greater in the world than love, is there?”

“No,” cried the boy grimly. “And if more people would only stop to realize it, this world would be a better place. Happier, anyhow!”

“It’s so good to get a fresh, virile, masculine viewpoint on so important a subject. Because it affects one’s life so vitally, doesn’t it?” sighed Carol.

“My God!” groaned Archibald Cuttner in his bedroom. Whereupon his wife curtly advised him that he was pulling the bedclothes all up at the bottom.

Carol went on:

“And we can’t see a problem in proper perspective

when it's up too close to our noses, now, can we?"

"Usually not," agreed the boy.

"Do you know, Mr. Forge, I think we're going to be awfully good friends. We understand each other so completely. And it's such a relief for a girl to have a firm, true gentleman-friend to turn to—in such a vital matter as love and marriage."

"I wish you could have read some of the stuff I've written," observed Nathan. "You'd get my viewpoint exactly."

"It must be very wonderful, Mr. Forge. You understand human nature so perfectly."

Nathan thought it discreet to preserve a dignified silence, as befitted one competent to advise perplexed young women on such momentous subjects as love and marriage.

"I'm hungry!" declared the girl suddenly. "You wait here. I'll see what I can rustle in the pantry."

Nathan arranged the music in order and laid it away on the lower shelf of the what-not. He paced the room only to sink down into a rocker, hands thrust deep in his pockets.

So he had found *the* girl at last!

Vaguely he remembered a Biblical verse—"All things work together for good to those who love God." He wondered just how much he loved God. His conscience pricked him a bit as he recollected his caustic comment upon the Almighty in the past. Somehow the Lord was magnanimously returning good for evil. Yes, he had treated God rather scurvily. And in return, the Almighty had sent him this great happiness! Henceforth Nathan would take

his Sunday-morning presence at church more seriously.

Nat decided to apply himself at the factory with redoubled energy, beginning the ensuing Monday morning. What was a mere quarrel with his father over one cheap girl's wages beside losing the financial chance to keep his wife-to-be in the style and luxury she deserved? What if the Richards girl did get a raw deal? Who was the Richards girl, anyhow? Nathan felt like offering her up on the industrial altar without a qualm,—in the same class with the A-higher Unknown.

Carol returned. She had a big fancy plate holding half a layer cake and a pitcher of milk.

"It's all I could find," she apologized. "But I'm hungry enough to eat a boiled owl."

Nathan affirmed he likewise was sufficiently emaciated to assimilate boiled owl, but the cake would be a perfectly satisfactory substitute, seeing there was no boiled owl to be had at that hour. And so he was served to a generous helping of the cake and dropped jam on his pants and crumbs on the floor. Whereupon he was advised not to mind—What were a few crumbs on the floor?—and as for the jam on his pants, she would get him a damp rag and she did.

But when Miss Gardner affirmed that she had made the cake, Nathan ate with a new relish and the fastidiousness of an epicure.

So she was a cook! She could make cake as good as the sample under present mastication! What a girl! And what a wife! Nathan wondered if he hadn't better get down on his knees that night and humbly say some regular prayers.

Of course she depreciated her ability as a cake-maker. This was merely a little old mess she had "thrown together." Some night he must come to tea and she would show him what a real meal was like. Would he come to tea?

Oh, well, Nathan might. He applied himself rather diligently at the "office", didn't have much time for social nonsense. Still there were occasions when it was beneficial for a man's head to forget business. Yes, possibly he might squeeze out a night and come to tea.

The cake being eaten and the milk consumed—so much so that Old Man Cuttner ate his porridge next morning milkless—and the hour being late, there was nothing for Nat to do but take his departure. Which he did—regretfully.

"I'm depending on you to help me with my problem, Mr. Forge," was the last thing the girl whispered to him solemnly in the cold front hall.

"Depend upon it, I shall not fail you," were Nathan's magnanimous words, closing that wonderful evening. And he walked off with his head high in the air, manfully, masterfully, to skid badly on the ice by the gate and turn bottom up with his hat flattened beneath him. But the Cuttner front door had closed. His fiancee had not seen.

Therefore Nathan picked himself up painfully, knocked the dents from his hat, limped more carefully down the rest of the sidewalk and came back to the world.

CHAPTER XVII

VALLEYS OF AVALON

I

It was a rainy Sunday afternoon in March. Nathan lay on his bed and tried to read. But his book was developing into a love story, weak and asinine beside the greater love story he felt he was living. What was she doing; how was *she* putting in that long, dreary, windy, Sunday afternoon?

A febrile restlessness ached in Nathan's limbs. There was a hot, uncontrollable nervousness in his torso. The girl's hazel eyes came between the lines of his story. Her face laughed at him witchingly 'twixt simile and metaphor. Verily the heroine of his narrative was but a painted bawd beside the diminutive figure in red and gray, always in the background of Nathan's mind.

"I'll go calling on her," he avowed. "I'll be darned if I won't go calling on her."

"Where are you headed for?" his father's stern voice demanded as he crept softly down the front stairs.

“Out to take a walk,” the son answered sullenly. “I’ve read so long my head’s muddled.”

“I’ll go with you,” announced Johnathan. He arose from the couch and started after his hat and coat. Of course this was manifestly and emphatically what Nathan did not want. Yet how could he explain?

Vague rumors had come to Johnathan of late about his son being seen in the outlying sections walking with a girl. Johnathan at once had more “load” added to his burden. For ten years he had successfully “kept his boy away from girls”, or so he supposed. That was all very well while the son was a youngster. Nathan was no longer a youngster. He was eighteen and taller than his father. As his son had grown bigger than himself, as well as shown an alarming propensity for managing his own affairs, the time had come for Johnathan to exercise “discretion, diplomacy and tact”, getting him past the “girl age.” It being Sunday and Nathan’s restlessness having culminated in a desire to walk, it was only too evident that he meant to meet a girl. Therefore Johnathan would frustrate any such assignation by becoming Nathan’s companion and chaperone. This was the father’s idea of exercising discretion, diplomacy and tact. A couple of years before he would have snapped, “You’ll do nothing of the sort. Go back to your room.” But the boy had to be given a little more leash now. He must not be opposed openly. He must be frustrated.

So Nathan bit his lip in anger and exasperation, execrating himself for not sneaking down the back stairs. He suffered himself to go to walk with his father and they talked about the business. Or rather Johnathan talked about business. Nathan answered in monosyllables.

II

Perhaps this tendency of Johnathan's toward sudden discretion, diplomacy and tact had been partly augmented by the past month's events at the factory.

The boy had begun to show a perturbing independence. He gave veiled hints daring his father to thrash him. For instance, the week following the quarrel about the Richards girl's pay, Nathan had absolutely refused to work, "sulked" was what John Forge called it.

"If you can run that bunch upstairs better than I, that's your privilege, Pa," was the way he had put it.

Johnathan had purposed to demonstrate whether he was to be bullied and bulldozed by a few spoiled employees and a stiff-necked, incorrigible son. He had talked dramatically about the sharpness of a serpent's tooth, thrown things about the office, stormed upstairs, donned a duster coat and proceeded to "boss his own factory."

He had "bossed" it so adequately and completely that at twenty minutes to three o'clock that same afternoon, the men "walked out flat", and all the girls but Milly Richards had been mysteriously missing one by one each time Johnathan came back from office calls downstairs.

Johnathan said all right! he was glad they had gone—it saved him the trouble of firing a lot of cheap help whom his boy had spoiled with too much money. He would hire new and train them as he wanted them trained. Meanwhile he 'phoned for Edith and his wife to come down and paste boxes. Mrs. Forge came humbly enough but a dour time

followed with Edith. According to Johnathan she was assimilating altogether too much of her brother's growing incorrigibility.

During the next day John began hiring "new" help. It was a discouraging business. All workmen were spoiled these days, anyhow. They knew their places no longer. They expected too much money. All the men who responded wanted three to four dollars a day. No girls could be procured on a piece-work basis at any price because the cutting of the piece rate had quickly percolated through the laboring element of the community. John "took on" old Mike Taro to help unload a car of cardboard and two rouged and perfumed young ladies who had never held one job for two consecutive weeks anywhere in our section of Vermont. They were temporarily willing to accept three dollars a week apiece because they had "gentlemen friends", they explained, who would help their otherwise slender exchequers. But all three of these failed to show up for work the second morning because Taro was dead drunk, and the rouged young ladies had been mysteriously warned to remain in discreet desuetude or direful calamities were liable to fall upon them from unexpected quarters, chiefly police.

The fourth day Johnathan sent for Joe Partridge, one of Nathan's cutter-men. Joe came down late in the afternoon dressed in his painful best and smoking a cheap cigar. Johnathan took him into the office and "went into conference" with him. Joe listened for a time with an exasperating lack of servility.

"I don't understand none of them big words," Joe finally confessed. "But so far as us working folks is concerned, the situation is just this: Your boy Nat knows how to run this business better'n you. And

until he comes back, we don't care about working."

This was flat and frank. Johnathan was angrily jolted.

"If that's the way you feel about it, you'll never come back," he roared.

"I ain't so sure about that."

"You mean you'll dictate to me how to run my own business?"

"No, but I reckon we got something to say about who'll fill our jobs."

"I'll hire other people to take your places——!"

"Why ain't you hired 'em already?"

"Because I wanted to be fair and square——"

"Oh, hell! You ain't been able to get nobody to take our places! And you won't be able to get nobody so long's Nat stays away. We're seein' to that."

"You mean you'll intimidate any persons I may hire in your places?"

"We'll knock the blocks off any one who takes a job here while we're out. Yes!"

"You get out of my office!"

"Surest thing you know!"

Johnathan held out for nine days.

"I'm too nervously constituted to handle such cheap humanity as factory help," he explained stiffly to Nathan the evening of the ninth day. "I'm not giving in, understand, or admitting you're anything but a bumptious, swelled-headed boy. But I want you to go back upstairs and get those orders off—somehow! It's only because I haven't the patience

and time to give to the manufacturing end that I'm temporarily sacrificing my principles——"

"The piece rate stands, Pa?"

"For the present, yes! When I've had time to study into it, we'll go into conference over it."

"All right—if you'll promise to keep hands off, I'll try to get the wheels turning once more. But, Pa!"

"Well?"

"I'm getting kind of sick working here for next to nothing. I want to go down on the books for twenty dollars a week."

"Twenty dol——"

Johnathan nearly fell on his forehead.

"Twenty dollars, yeah!"

"Not a measly penny! You're having two whole dollars a week now to squander——"

"I'm filling a superintendent's job here that couldn't be filled by any one else short of thirty. I'll pay board at home. But I want what I'm worth and I'm not a bit unreasonable to ask it."

They compromised on twelve dollars.

The box-shop "help" trooped back exultantly. Nat knew how to handle human nature. The peak of production was regained in a single afternoon.

Outside, the labor differences at the Forge plant were colloquially known as "the box-shop strike." But Johnathan would have had an arm torn out before he would have admitted any strike. His boy had simply "poisoned the minds" of the help against his own father and they had refused to work.

"I've got an awful problem on my hands, Doctor Dodd," he told the pastor of the Methodist church the following Thursday evening. "And where it's going to end, the Father only knows. My son's behavior is graying my hair. Think of him having no more filial loyalty than engineering a walk-out of my employees and keeping them out until I give him a raise in his wages of six hundred per cent!"

"God will humble him," the kindly old man solaced. "The sympathy of the community is with you, Brother Forge!"

III

And now the long-dreaded, the sickening thing, had happened. All the father's care and worry and training had gone for naught. Nathan had taken up with a girl!

Johnathan refused to believe it. It was absolutely impossible, after all his father had said to him, and warned him, and preached to him, and threatened. The boy simply couldn't be such a deceiver, such a double-dealer, such an ingrate—such a sneak!

And yet rumors persisted. People had actually seen Nathan with the girl; swore they had seen him!

True, boy and girl had been doing nothing exceptionally amiss, except strolling along unfrequented by-paths looking rather sheepish and irresponsible, and acting mutually infatuated. Still, Nathan was deliberately disobeying his father; he was "carrying on" behind his father's back. Suppose the hussy—she must be a hussy—intrigued the boy into premature matrimony! God in heaven!—Suppose he had to marry her! Johnathan went icy at

the horror of it. Better the boy lay dead in his coffin. Somehow he must be saved from his folly. Yet such was his precocity and independence that it must be done in a manner not to drive him into the girl's arms or make him run away and therefore cause another loss of his services at the box-shop. Yes, in God's name, what was the pitiable, harassed father to do? He prayed much over it. He lost sleep. His face grew drawn, and gray appeared in fine strands at his temples.

Then one Sunday afternoon in April Johnathan came home from a few hours' work on his books to find the gas lighted in the front parlor and some one playing on the cottage organ.

The father purposely went around to the rear door. His wife was preparing supper in the kitchen.

"Who's in the parlor?" he demanded hotly.

"Only Edith and a friend of hers—and Nathan."

"A friend of Edith's—a girl?"

"Yes! I didn't think there was any harm letting them play on the organ."

"Who is she—the *girl*?"

"Her name's Gardner. She's visiting the Cuttners. She sang in the choir last Sunday."

"Anna! Answer me, quick! Is it the girl Nat's been seen publicly on the streets with?"

"I don't know. Perhaps so! What if it is? There's no crime in Nat being seen walking the streets with a girl, that I know of. Nat's got to have his girl friends some time."

"But my God, woman! Suppose she compromises the innocent, unsuspecting boy! Suppose——"

"Compromises him?"

"Suppose the boy loses his head and has to marry her! I'll see him dead before I'll see him make hamburg of his life as marriage made hamburg of mine!"

"You'll only make it worse by opposing him! Do have a little sense!" The wife was too calloused to appreciate the insult to herself.

"I know! That's the hard part. What can I do? I feel so helpless and weak and incompetent."

"Why go to all this fuss? Why do anything at all about it? You're an awful lot of trouble to yourself at times, John Forge! Let the whole thing work itself out If you don't attach any importance to it, neither will Nathan."

"But he's such a sickly, sentimental young fool! I can't trust him! I can't trust him, I say!"

Nevertheless, intent on seeing what manner of Circe was ruining his son's life, Johnathan shed hat and coat and headed grimly for the parlor.

Hands in pockets, face glowering, Johnathan stood between the portières, waiting for the music to cease. Nathan was advised of his father's appearance by a warning dig from Edith's elbow. Miss Gardner sensed something amiss, stopped playing, turned around.

"This is my father," said Nathan thickly. "Pa, this is Miss Gardner."

Carol arose and moved over effusively, one hand on a hip, the other outstretched to Johnathan.

"Oh, Mr. Forge," she gushed, "I've heard so much about you and so wanted to meet you——"

Johnathan did not remove his hands from his

pockets. He addressed himself to his daughter.

“Edith, your mother wants you! Nathan, you and I have business to discuss. Miss Gardner will excuse us.”

Edith’s face flamed scarlet.

“But, dad, I’ve asked Miss Gardner to stay to supper——”

“I’m sorry! We’ve got other company to supper. Miss Gardner will excuse us from supper too.”

At the coarse insult, the righteously angered Gardner girl threw her chin in the air.

“I’m sorry I’m intruding,” she said. “I’ll be going.”

“Carol! I——” Nathan’s face was piteous with the humiliation of it.

“Nathaniel!” The father’s voice was ominous. “As soon as Miss Gardner’s gone, come to the kitchen. I’ve pressing business to discuss with you!”

The Gardner girl departed in high pique. The boy’s face wore an unhealthy look as he came into the kitchen. Edith was already sobbing on her mother’s sharp shoulder. Johnathan closed the door and spoke first.

IV

“You dared,” he cried hoarsely, “to bring her right here into this house! You dared!”

“Well,” demanded the son desperately, “what do you want me to do? Sneak up some back alley with her?”

The apparent impudence of the question was so

flagrant that Johnathan's temper exploded with a bang. Like lightning he ripped a hand from his pocket and struck Nathan in the head, an unexpected blow so fierce and hard it knocked the boy sprawling over a clothes basket.

"Pa!—I——"

"Shut up! Not a word out of you! There may be murder done in this house to-night! You're not too big yet for me to thrash, even if you can line the help up against me in my own factory."

Despite his white-hot rebellion Nathan saw a facial expression that made him fear his father. It cowed him. Beside, at heart he was still much of a boy and the habit of obedience was strong in him.

"Now," declared Johnathan, "you're going to listen to me. Edith! Anna! Go out! This is my affair and Nathan's—alone!"

The terrified women withdrew. Father and son faced one another beneath that ghastly white light from the burner sticking out from the wall.

"You've been going with that girl—unbeknown to me—you've been seen with her!"

Johnathan began moving back the chairs dramatically.

"All right! Suppose I have! What of it?"

"Then you—you—admit it!"

"Yes. I admit it!"

"Unbeknown to me—against all I've told you—you've gone with her and now you admit it!"

"Do you want me to say I haven't? Do you want me to lie to you?"

"I want you to keep your mouth shut! Don't speak unless you're spoken to!"

"But you did speak to me, didn't you?"

Johnathan walked over deadly close.

"Nathan," he said gutturally, "you're my son—and murder is punishable by hanging. But I swear if you give me any more of your lip, I'm going to send you to the undertaker and I'm going to do it to-night!"

The boy backed away from his father against the wall, as far as he could retreat. He did not answer. He waited.

"Six or eight years ago," went on Johnathan, when he saw he had browbeaten his boy into silence, "six or eight years ago I told you you were to have nothing to do with girls! Not until you were old enough to know your own mind, became of age and reached years of discretion. You understood me plainly enough then, didn't you? What? You may answer! What?"

"Yes, sir!"

"And all down the years you've understood I insisted on obedience, didn't you—right down until to-night?"

"Yes, sir!"

"But regardless of the fact that you knew my wishes and preferences in the matter perfectly, regardless of my warnings, my whippings, my admonitions—just like you did that picnic day with the Gridley girl—you've deliberately disobeyed me, haven't you? You may answer me that too! What?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then what's the answer? What is it you deserve—

deserve terribly?"

"Nothing, sir!"

"What?"

"I said 'Nothing'!"

"Nothing!"

"Precisely! Nothing! You can't lay down a law that runs contrary to human nature and expect obedience."

"Nathan—I'm—going—to—kill you!"

The boy never batted an eyelid.

"No, father, you're not going to kill me. And when you go talking so, I've cause to believe you're not quite sane."

It was the boy's utter calm and perfect poise in a crucial situation, more than the girl question now, which was making Johnathan a man obsessed. He wanted Nathan to cringe and be afraid. Nathan was driven back against the wall but he did not cringe. Neither was he afraid. For the son had at last looked into his father's weak, inflamed eyes and realized that he—the son—was the better man.

Johnathan's lips moved ghastly before his voice would come.

"So I'm crazy, am I? And if I choose to murder you, what would you do?"

"I won't hit you, father. But no one could criticize me for defending myself when any one, even my own father, announces he's going to murder me."

"You'll defend yourself? How?"

"That remains to be seen."

"God Almighty——"

"It strikes me, father—and this is as good a time to say it as any—it strikes me that there's altogether too much dragging of God into our family affairs, and mouthing His name over and over is little short of blasphemy. Let's leave God out of this and settle it between ourselves."

On the son's face was slight contempt. Johnathan moved deadly close. Forked lights were dancing in his eyes.

"I demand respect and obedience," began Johnathan in a cracked, unnatural voice.

"Respect isn't something that one person can demand of another, father. It's something we earn by the way we conduct ourselves, day by day——"

Nathan never finished his sentence. Johnathan aimed a blow for his son's jaw which, landed, would have split open the lad's face. But this time Nathan saw the blow coming. And——

The step from terrible tragedy to divine comedy is oft but the space of a hair. Johnathan struck for his son's jaw. But when his fist reached his son's jaw, his son's jaw wasn't there. It had moved. With a boxer's nicety of perception for distance, Nathan had whipped his head to the left.

The father's fist went through plaster and lath halfway in to the elbow.

Anna Forge heard the dull smash and Johnathan's bellow of agony. She burst into the kitchen. She beheld her husband for an instant with his hand and arm caught in a ragged aperture in the plaster. Off to one side Nathan stood with a tired, amused smile around his mouth.

But there was no amusement in the incident for Johnathan. He had broken two small bones in his right hand. And all further attempts at parental chastisement were adjourned for that night in the greater calamity of broken bones.

“You go to bed!” he ordered his son hoarsely. “We’ll finish this in the morning.” The father’s face had been ashen with anger. Now it was white with agony, and his eyes were streaming tears.

Nathan pitied his father. But he shrugged his shoulders and went from the room. The pain from the broken knuckles was so great that Johnathan soon sobbed openly. Still, one could hardly expect the boy to leave his face around to intercept any such blow as Johnathan had purposed.

V

It was after ten o’clock when Nathan heard his father come in from the doctor’s. The boy had gone to his room to throw himself, fully dressed, upon his bed. He lay staring out through opened windows at the warm spring stars. Somewhere down to the south of town the frogs were piping faintly. Wonderful scents of awakening shrubs and sod wafted in at the window. The night was hushed, mystic. He was eighteen and in love.

He waited until the snarling voices of father and mother had become double-muffled by the closed door of their bedroom. He heard both father and mother retire. The hour slipped on into deeper night and utter nerve exhaustion brought sleep to his parents. Then he arose and tiptoed softly across the hall.

"Edie," he whispered, "I'm going out."

Edith sat up in bed.

"Where are you going, at this time of night?"

"Down to see Carol. I've got to square myself for the raw deal she got to-night."

"How you going to get out?"

"Over the woodshed roof. And listen! If Pa or Ma get wise, hang something white in your window, so I won't be climbing into a trap. It'd be just like him to hit me a crack from the dark before I could defend myself."

"I'll do it if to-morrow night you'll keep watch while I sneak out!"

"Why do you want to sneak out?"

"To meet Tad MacHenry. He's just wild about me. You oughta hear him. If Pa won't lemme have him into the house or even speak to a feller during the day, why I'll do it at night, that's all."

"But, Edie—it's a little different—for a fellow to go out at night—than for a girl to—I——"

"Huh! Think you're smart, don't you? Think you've thought up a swell way to see Carrie, skinnin' out over the woodshed room. Well, just for that, I'll have you know that Mr. Turner, the hardware man, made a duplicate of the back-door key most two months ago. I been seein' Tad two or three times a week since February, already."

The flabbergasted brother managed to ask:

"Then why do you want me to let you out to-morrow night——"

"It's my nerves, skinnin' back into a dark house

and thinkin' I was walkin' into Pa who'd missed me and was up waitin' for me. Besides, I got a good scare one morning when I almost run into old Braithwaite, the milkman."

"We'll talk about that to-morrow, Edie. You're taking pretty tall chances for a girl—going out all night with a fellow like Tad. He's a pretty smooth pool player and with girls——"

"Oh, I guess I can take care of myself—and no thanks to Pa and Ma, either. Anyhow, you don't need to sneak out over the woodshed roof. You can use my key. But for the Lord's sake, don't go sprawlin' over anything in the kitchen or the jig's up."

VI

Carol and Nathan had reached that stage of intimacy where a private whistle had been evolved in case Nathan elected to call Carol without advising her grandparents.

Nathan approached the Cuttner house now through silent, deserted streets. An arc light on the distant corner of Walnut and Pearl disclosed the length of the Cuttner side piazza ghostily. Nathan dodged into the shadow of a big maple before the house and cautiously gave the whistle.

Twice, three times he repeated it. No signs of life stirred within. Was the girl sleeping too soundly to hear? Or was she too incensed over the father's conduct to want any more of the son?

As Nat stood waiting, wondering, hoping wistfully, with a sudden thump of his heart he saw the Cuttner front door give way and a figure slip through. This figure in silhouette turned and remained for a

moment with face close to the door, latching it slowly and in perfect quiet. Then it tiptoed stealthily across the veranda, down the steps and Carol came into his arms. She had arisen from bed, dressed hastily and by no means completely, thrown up her hair in a quick knot at her neck and made the red cloak cover the exigencies of a hasty toilet. She giggled mawkishly as she met him. She too assayed this tryst on pique, against her grandfather. Old Archibald had declared “she’d got to cut out havin’ fellers traipsin’ into the house every night and twice a day on Sundays, that Forge yelp in particular. He didn’t have any too good a reputation about town on account of writing dirty-minded poetry.” But Carol, having heard Nathan’s side of the story, was inclined to give the lad the benefit of the doubt. Besides, it was spring and “she couldn’t sleep a wink, anyhow.” A walk in the night was very acceptable. Love laughed at locksmiths, didn’t it? And think how romantic it was, just like Romeo and Juliet. Taking care that no neighbors saw them, they went down Pearl Street hill, out along Adams Street, past the Catholic Cemetery and the pumping station, into world-old, moist, spring country.

It was one of those warm, sensuous nights which often visit New England in early April, with the snow almost gone excepting in far corners of sunless woods, with the ground drying and the incense of budding leaves and flowers surfeiting the shrine of Youth in the vast out-of-doors. The stars hung large and mellow and close. In another hour a half-made moon would find its way through the ephemeral stratas of upper haze. It would stay clear and fine until early morning.

It matters not where they walked; all the spring

world through which they moved was wrapped into a soft, sweet dream. There were no distances. Distances were blurred, dissolved in fantasies of mauve and purple nothingness. Poor, distorted, twisted, perverted young love had mocked at locksmiths, indeed. But the singing, sighing spring night threw a mantle of sweet solitude over those distortions and perversions. The boy and the girl were alone, off under a starlit sky in the great out-of-doors. And earth was a garden spread in silver and bound around with impalpable walls of Heart's Desire.

Nathan recounted what had ensued in his home following Carol's departure. The girl was already acquainted with the sordid injustices done the boy.

"Served him right!" she snapped pertly. "Personally I think your father's a little bit 'off'!"

"Let's forget it," responded Nathan. "Let's just talk about ourselves." And he breathed a happy sigh. Parents and guardians were sleeping, like all the world about them. The night and its hours belonged to themselves.

"Carrie," said the boy—thickly, softly—as they moved slowly through infinite reaches of happiness, deep-toned, voluptuous with the spell of springtime, "I want to tell you something."

"Yes, Natie!"

The boy's arm was about her warm, yielding, corsetless waist. Instinctively it tightened.

"Carrie—dear! I—love you!!"

He had never said it in plain words before. His heart leaped with the admission. The hour, the vastness of their freedom, acted upon his self-

conscious ego as an opiate. He was the eternal lover.

The girl hung her head. She pressed her arm against the hand which held her tightly. Laughing nervously, she returned:

"I love you too, Natie, or I wouldn't be here, would I? No girl would trust herself out with a fellow so, unless she loved him—very much. Isn't that right?"

"You know you can trust me, dear."

"I don't know as I'm thinking very much about it, Natie. There's a point where a girl doesn't care, you know, when she loves a fellow very much."

They covered a quarter mile in silence.

Far out beyond the Cogswell place was an abandoned pile of weather-grayed lumber. It was half hidden under brambles and wild grape. Nat and the girl reached this pile. Behind it the Cogswell wood lot reared like an enchanted forest, Stygian dark, peri haunted. Across the road, a pasture of sumach and blueberry fell away to the lower shores of a choked and stagnant pond. The hour was too late for the frog chorus to pipe down in this bogland. But occasionally up across the pasture came a single plaintive note or the dull, lugubrious "gut-a-chunk" of a philosophic bullfrog. Once very far away they heard a whippoorwill.

They sat down on this pile of lumber, its weather-spiced fiber even more fragrant than the shrubs and sod around them. Darkness hid scarlet faces. Nathan took the girl on his lap. Their lips met.

Carol resigned herself with a happy quiver. She lay in his powerful young arms like a tired child and blinked at him owlishly in the weird moonlight.

“I think, Natie,” she whispered, “I think—I love you more—than I ever dreamed I could love any man—even back in A-higher.”

Her weight began to numb the boy’s limbs. Yet he could not disturb her; she was a wonderful burden.

Hairpins bothered where her head rested against his shoulder. With her left hand she pulled them out. She shook her riotous chestnut tresses free and they fell about her oval face like the bacchanal crown of a Sybarite. The lad bent his head and buried his lips in them.

She was his—his! Such a night would never come again—could never come again—because this was the first. No thrust-and-parry, drooling calf-talk; no bids for sex-interest here.

Youth, nature and night were stripped to their framework. For this were the worlds made and the constellations hung infinitely. For such was a soul given a maid and a man. For this had a cricket sung beneath these old gray boards for a hundred thousand years.

Again the boy’s lips found the girl’s. Her left arm crept up his right shoulder and around his neck. Their lips clung together.

“Oh, Natie!” she whispered. She had no strength.

“Let’s stroll back toward home,” the boy suggested thickly.

The old clock in the tower of the Universalist Church was striking three when they finally reached the Cuttner gate. In another hour the first streaks of warm dawn would bring the summit of Haystack Mountain into sharper silhouette.

"Just once more, dear boy," the girl whispered as she stood close before him in the hush of somnambulistic morning.

Arms interlocked, once more Nathan kissed her.

She bade him good-by in a whisper. She tiptoed up and on to the veranda. The door yielded. The Cuttner household still slept. She waved him a comradely farewell and slipped noiselessly inside.

Nathan hurried through the deserted town and into Spring Street. There was no white signal in Edith's window. The Forge house was weirdly quiet.

From the other side the partition he could hear his father's lumberous snoring, when he gained his bedroom. He undressed and slipped into an unmade bed as a trillion birds were beginning to awaken and hold tuneful conversation in a hundred thousand tree tops.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANOTHER CASE

I

June had come again. A class of eighteen girls, graduating from The Elms, were holding Commencement on the twenty-fifth.

Commencement Week was Mardi Gras for Mount Hadley in a refined, dignified, academic way. While The Elms was chiefly a college-preparatory school, many of its graduates were going abroad, becoming débutantes, receiving no further schooling. So Commencement Week and especially Commencement Night was a gala time. The little tree-bowered, hilltop town overflowed with parents, relatives and guests. Music, lights, laughter and love were as extravagantly squandered as the wealth of Nature poured out for the sensual gratification of insatiable summer.

And the Door of Life opened large on the world.

Madelaine Theddon was among those graduating from The Elms with that Commencement. She had taken a course preparing her for college. What

college and what lifework was coming after had not been decided. She hoped to reach a decision before September.

The afternoon of June 24th, strange to relate, found Madelaine aboard a suburban trolley, headed for Springfield. Her face wore an expression of vague worry. In her calm eyes was dread. This while merrymaking at Mount Hadley was approaching its peak and no one was more urgently sought after than the girl whose school nickname had been “Old Mother Hubbard.”

A letter had been responsible. It had been scrawled upon several sheets of expensive note paper bearing the crest of a Springfield hotel. It was a woman’s penmanship; Madelaine would have recognized to whom it belonged had no name been appended. But a name had been appended—Bernice Gridley’s name —and there was no ignoring the letter’s appeal.

Reaching Springfield, Madelaine hurried to the hotel whither Bernice had preceded her by two days. It was then about six-thirty in the evening and a warm summer rain was shining on city walks and pavements, reflecting the first lamps of evening nebulously. Madelaine called Bernie in her room, announcing her arrival. Then she went upstairs. Bernie admitted her. The room was unlighted.

Bernice threw her arms around Madelaine when the door had closed, despite the latter’s wet silken gossamer, before Madelaine had even found a place for her dripping umbrella.

“I’m so glad you’ve come! You’re an old dear,” choked Bernie huskily.

Despite the rain clouds and spring mist smothering the city, there was yet light enough in the lavish

apartment for Madelaine to see that Bernie was in trouble, terrible trouble. “Old Mother Hubbard” stood her umbrella in the bath and threw her gossamer over the nickel-work of the shower. She cast aside the mannish felt hat she had worn because of the wet and returned to where Bernie had dropped into a chair by the window. Madelaine took the rocker opposite, their knees almost touching.

“What is it, dear—a man?”

“Yes,” whispered Bernie, her voice poignant.

“Just how bad——?”

“Mother’s due to arrive in the morning, for Commencement. I can’t see her, Madge. I can’t see her again, ever!”

Bernie fumbled for her handkerchief. She had braided her tawny hair in a single heavy cable; it fell down across her left shoulder and breast. She wore a Japanese kimono, incongruously flowered, with obi girdle. At nineteen the Dresden Doll was a Dresden Doll no longer. She had become a big-bodied girl with prominent, bony features, a small, narrow forehead, wide cheek bones, prominent nose and weak, sensuous mouth. The saving feature of her countenance was a deep dimple in her chin. It was a coy, devilish dimple and had wrought much damage. A type of Mona Lisa face, Bernie’s—without the Mona Lisa humor.

Madelaine sat motionless, her hands relaxed along the chair arms. She was very calm, very grave. Only tender compassion lay upon her cameo features now.

“How did it happen, dear?” she asked. “Do you want to tell me that?”

“No! I want you to tell me—what I ought to do—

what's ahead for me. Oh, Madge! Madge! I'm so scared I want to die!"

The Gridley girl fell into a paroxysm of trembling, such an ague that Madelaine leaned forward and took her hands. Bernice was ill, far worse than Madelaine had expected. Though Bernice made the demand on her as a right, the girl called "Old Mother Hubbard" was broad enough and human enough to make allowance. Bernie was a woman grown physically, perhaps. Otherwise she was a little child, alone in the dark, panic-stricken in a world of savage ignorance and injustice.

"There's nothing to be frightened about, Bernie. Nothing. Get it firmly into your mind and hold it there. We only fear the things we fail to understand. Apparently that's where you've made your blunder. You haven't understood. The secret of solving any great trouble is to keep calm and poised about it. Remember there's no human difficulty but what there's a human solution. Now, then, what we want to determine first is the thing that's frightening you most. Once cleared away, we can proceed to the elimination of other bothersome things. Just what bothers you worse, dear—physical fear or the reaction of your predicament on your family and future?"

"Oh, Madge! You're so wonderful. I'm sorry for all the mean and spiteful things I said about you! You're an angel and a——"

"Let's not talk about myself, dear. I'm here to talk about you. If you've said or done anything unfair about me in the past, it's because you didn't understand. So not understanding, you can't of course be wholly blamed. Anyway, I believe it's an obligation all of us have, to give our help so long as

people are sent into contact with us who need and deserve it. If there's any way I can aid you, I'm here to do it. And I want you to feel my friendship before we go any further."

"I guess—I can't help it," choked Bernie.

Madelaine softly pressed the two cold hands she held.

"Now then, dear, let's have the story. What's frightening you most?"

"Madge! I've got to tell you how it happened. I can't tell you his name. I just can't! Don't ask me why I can't. But—I just can't——"

"I know, dear. You love him. To protect the man who has taken advantage is a feminine atavism since river-drift days, I suppose. I don't want to know his name. And I only want to know the story as it helps to show what's bothering you most."

"Madge! It happened this way. One night——"

The rain stopped after a time. The clouds rolled away toward the southeast. Stars shone brightly. The roar of the Springfield evening traffic, the honk of motor cars, the purring grind of trolleys, arose to the room where Madelaine had lowered the upper sash of the big window. When Bernice completed her ragged story, she was leaning forward, weeping intermittently. Madelaine was a silhouette in the semi-dark. She rocked slowly.

"But, Bernice," she said at last, "why should you do it? I'm not rebuking you, dear. I'm asking for information. I can't understand it. Why didn't an intuitive reserve and decency prompt you to conserve yourself? Why didn't the very greatness of your love urge you to nurture and cherish those

things which lie at the root of it—not squander and spatter and waste and cheapen them?"

"I don't know, Madge. Somehow I just felt devilish. I wanted to do something shockingly wicked. I wanted to get as far away from all the goodness and decency I've known all my life as I could. That's the truth, Madge. At the moment I didn't care. I'll tell you more truth: I gloried in it! Yes, I did! I was glad I was wicked—until—until I saw I was going to face all the penalty."

"I can't understand," murmured Madelaine.

"No, perhaps not. But you might if you knew my mother. Ever since I was a tiny girl, Madge, I've lived in an atmosphere of things that were 'strictly proper.' Oh, how tired and sick I grew of things that were 'strictly proper.' Mother always gave me to understand I was different than other children, I was better quality. So I had to live up to that better quality. It was awful dull and tedious. At times it maddened me. Mother lay awake nights worrying about her culture—and mine. After she'd married dad, she made the discovery that on her mother's side, a few generations back, she'd descended from a duchess. Being born in a two-room apartment over a Rutland Quick Lunch and then discovering there was the blood of a duchess in her veins, she had a horrible time with herself, and with dad too, forgetting 'Quick Lunch' beginnings. Dad was a money-maker. He never worried much about his culture. Beside, I don't think they were very happily married. He didn't understand her. He let her go her way as she pleased. Just paid the bills. So in the second generation, meaning poor me, mother determined the 'Quick Lunch' business should be outbred if it cost her a leg. And I lived our royalty

from Monday morning to Saturday night, double doses on Sunday. And when I got old enough to see how much fun I was missing by not being just natural and normal, without consciously thinking about our culture every minute, I rebelled. Madge, dear, why is it their culture gives some people such a horrible, distressing time, making them miserable and wooden-like, instead of natural and joyous?"

Madelaine was silent a moment before answering.

"I think, Bernice, it must be because they've missed the meaning of true culture entirely. They have a blind pride groping for higher things. That's fine and commendable. But they don't stop to reason why that culture should be, what lies at the bottom of it, I mean. Speaking for myself, I've reasoned it that real culture has its base and foundation in an inherent appreciation of the Beautiful. And unless one has an inherent taste and appreciation of the Beautiful, dear, and builds all things upon that, they're merely apes and imitators. They're ludicrously copying the behavior and tastes of those who have. People who do the most worrying about their culture, as you phrase it, are not worrying about their own sense of the beautiful and appropriate. They're worrying because they may not be aping correctly some one who has the fundamentals and is letting culture take care of itself. Having no fundamentals of their own, the imitators, I mean, merely a superficial, competitive pride, they fret their lives away. They make themselves and all those around them miserable—acting a part instead of living a part."

"Well," continued Bernie, "mother crammed royalty and culture down my throat so long and hard that when I got outside I just had to explode. I guess

you're right, Madge; I never had it reasoned out for me why I should do this or that. Mother's battle-cry was, 'It simply isn't done by the Best People!' I got so heartily sick of those Best People—whoever they were—that I wanted to shriek. This thing wasn't nice and that thing wasn't proper. The Best People never did exactly the things I hungered to do. And everything was 'shocking! shocking!' Life wasn't like that. I saw it soon enough. And repressing all my curiosity and impulse to get my share of fun out of it grew more and more unbearable. I remember once I went on a picnic. I wandered off in the woods with one of the little hicks of our town. I wanted to be just as bad as I knew how. But all my poor little pate could conceive was kissing him and letting him kiss me as much as I pleased—and taking off shoes and stockings and paddling in a brook. I felt I was getting back at mother. Though why I should get back at her, or what I hoped to gain by it, I never stopped to think. Mother never told me anything about myself. She never sat down and reasoned with me. She never tried to make me understand what my impulses meant or why I possessed them. It seemed as if everything natural and normal was just shocking, shocking——"

"And hasn't the reason for intuitive decency and normality ever occurred to you, dear?"

"I never stop to reason things out. I'm not like you, Madge! I go more by my feelings."

Madelaine toyed thoughtfully with a tiny gold watch chain encircling her neck.

"Sometimes, dear," she observed, "when I think how narrow and short-sighted and unfair some parents seem to be, I wonder the race is as clean and decent as it is."

“Don’t talk like old Prexy Anderson to-night, Madge. It makes my head ache. I don’t want to know the reason for things. I just want to know the way out of them.”

Madelaine shook her head sadly.

“And so that’s how you met with this trouble? You wanted to spite your mother again.”

“Not altogether. It wasn’t mother especially just then. It was everything mother stood for. He flung at me, ‘Oh, you’re one of those “nice” girls, are you?’ and it made me wild. I proposed to show him I wasn’t one of those ‘nice’ girls and the sky was the limit. He couldn’t fling any such insult in my teeth as that. Then I didn’t care what happened.”

“You don’t love him?”

“I didn’t say so.”

“Well, would you marry him?”

“I don’t know. Oh, Madge, I don’t know anything —where I am—what I want to do—what I ought to do—what’s to become of me. I guess my folks are bothering most. Dad’s hard-boiled in lots of ways. Yet all the same, I don’t fear him half so much as I do mother. It’ll scandalize her so she’s going to make my life a misery. And not half so much because I’ve done any moral wrong as because what I’ve done isn’t sanctioned by the Best People. Damn the Best People! Who are they? Where are they? What are they—that they should injure me so?”

“Calm yourself, child. Then it’s fright of your mother that’s bothering you most?”

“I guess so. Yes!”

“Then don’t be frightened any more. Because when

your mother comes to Mount Hadley in the morning, I'll take it upon myself to see her and explain everything away all right. As for yourself, my foster-mother is very sensible about such things. Perhaps that's why I've come to look upon them so impersonally myself. I'll go up and have a talk with mother. For a few months you can be our guest. When the crucial time comes, mother will arrange matters. We are going abroad this summer. In so far as any one, even your parents, need know, you are accompanying us as our guest. My mother won't even ask who you are, if you don't care for her to know; any name you wish to go by will be perfectly all right."

"And my mother need never learn?"

"That depends upon my talk with her in the morning. Just now, in so far as Mount Hadley is concerned, you've broken down as a result of the final exams, and the excitement of Commencement."

"Oh, Madge! Madge!" Bernice went down suddenly on her knees with her feverish head in Madelaine's lap. She covered Madelaine's cool, capable hands with kisses. Her tears came in such a flood they dripped from her dimpled chin. "Tell me, Madge—you know everything—tell me what's ahead for me. I don't know, Madge. I never knew. Those things were always 'shocking! shocking!'"

In the next half-hour Madelaine simplified the great fundamentals of life into words of one syllable. Bernie clung to her convulsively when Madelaine came to leave.

"There's a God," whispered the tanner's daughter thickly, reverently, "because He made you, Madelaine Theddon!"

At ten-thirty that same evening Madelaine was back in Hathaway Hall, Mount Hadley, perfect in an evening gown of gold satin and cobweb lace, dancing divinely with a clean-cut young fellow from Boston "Tech" who was going to Buenos Aires in August as an architect for the Argentine Government.

The clean-cut young fellow decided Miss Theddon the cleverest girl he had ever met, as well as the most beautiful. She discussed architecture with him as though she had already qualified for an architect's position herself.

II

The following evening Madelaine sat in her room and from her ivy-bordered window looked down upon the little town she was leaving on the morrow. Behind her the lights had been extinguished. Now and then a trio of white figures moved across the lawn or the Common below, in and out of the shadows made by the lordly elms. Happy laughter died on the summer night. Somewhere down the street piano keys were tinkling and the rich tenor of a man's voice was softened by the distance.

Madelaine was thinking of Bernie's problem. Yet not altogether. She was also thinking of her own. Life was coming to her now as a responsibility. She owed much to her mother, far more to the world that had been so good to her, and the poor, perplexed, fog-groping men and women—especially young men and women—in it. What should be her life work? How should she try to repay that debt mounting with each passing month and year to overwhelming proportion?

Marriage did not seem her end and aim. Not then!

She had an intuition that marriage would come afterward, after she had paid the debt, or tried to pay it. What then?

Always her well-ordered brain came back to Bernie. There must be many Bernies. Could she find her niche helping them? How?

She tried drastic self-analysis. Then she relaxed and tried yielding herself unreservedly to instinct.

Finally she thought of Bernie in terms of immediate help—guiding her through her Gethsemane—concretely. The function of nursing was but a step to conceiving herself the physician—of body as well as mind.

The aptness of it struck her with peculiar force. A physician! Why not? Women were assailing all citadels of professions and business. Why not a physician? A great, warm, poignant self-assurance welled up within her. Why had she not thought of it before?

In the ensuing ten moments her life course lay clear as an etching before her. The film between herself and the future had suddenly been swept aside. She was radiantly, unreasoningly happy. She wanted to sing with the ecstasy of the revelation.

III

She did sing. Whereupon she was so happy too that she wept—a little bit. What had taken possession of her? For the first time she felt blindly content to relax to intuitions and emotions.

It was her last night in the dormitory room, where she had passed four beautiful years. Her roommate

had already departed. Madelaine arose, her calm face suffused with a quiet glory. She turned on the lights.

On the dressing table the last of her effects lay for final packing in her bag on the morrow. Among them was a poem framed in a heavy copper border. It had hung above her study table the two years past. She had grown very intimate with that little news-print poem on its deep brown mapping.

Though she could repeat it perfectly, she read it again now, line by line and word by word:

"Yet some great noon in the sun-glare bright
In some vast open space,
You'll stand, flesh-clothed, with your arms outstretched,
And triumph on your face."

She sat for a quarter hour with the framed poem in her shapely fingers. Her eyes were looking through a million miles. Nathaniel Forge! Who was he? What had ever caused him to write such a poem?

CHAPTER XIX

TACT AND DISCRETION

I

The box-shop was haunted!

Old Jake Richards made the discovery. He based his contention on concrete observation and abstract deduction.

Jake was the father of the Richards girl who had remained at work in the Forge factory during the "strike." He had three boys and four other girls. The Richards family lived on the northern edge of the "flats" at the end of the road on which the box-shop was situated. It was a hollow-eyed gray house with broken steps, set back in a cluttered yard. It had a French roof and its blinds were missing and family bedding was everlastingly hanging from the second-story windows.

Jake was Caleb Gridley's "all-around man" at the tannery, a sort of workman-foreman-superintendent. He had held the position for many years. Socially, from the mere location of his domicile, he did not exist. Then there was the nature of his trade, the

skinning of carcasses. Lastly his gross prolificality in the matter of children. Openly he bragged of his wife's versatility at giving birth to offspring in the morning and "doin' a good week's wash" in the afternoon. This may or may not have been true. In so far as fastidious Paris was concerned, however, it established Jake as somewhat beyond the pale.

Jake, old Caleb and a gang of steam fitters had worked until three o'clock one Sunday morning installing a new boiler in the tannery. Jake had plodded his weary way homeward just before daylight. Arriving opposite the box-shop office, he raised his eyes to receive the start of his life. There were not many starts in old Jake's life, by the way. Most of them were stops.

The box-shop was built about fifty feet back from the road. Not back so far, however, but that Jake had an unobstructed view of the office door. There were no lights in the gaunt, ark-like structure. The nearest arc lamp was an eighth of a mile away, across the waving acres of cattails, and rushes. Also the moon was going down.

Nevertheless, outlined quite clearly in the window of that inky black office door was a human torso. Also a very white face.

It was absolutely motionless,—that apparition. As Jake chanced to be in the shadow of the rushes across the road, it appeared to take no note of him or behave as though he had seen.

Jake could not pass onward. He stood rooted to the spot while icy chills played up and down his back. Who could be in an unlighted box-shop at three in the morning, standing grimly behind the door glass, gazing out into the waning night, "like

corpses fresh from the grave?"

Jake was too far away to make out the features or gain any idea of identity. He simply remained motionless and watched.

Then as picture films dissolve and fade into gray nothingness, so that apparition dissolved into the blackness behind. The oblong of door window was empty once more.

Jake finally believed a great physical weariness had been responsible for an optical illusion. He went home. But he awoke his wife and told her and Milly and the oldest boy also awoke and heard.

The boy confided to his sister when the house had quieted:

"I seen lots o' funny lights in the box-shop in the night! This ain't no news to me! Huh, I thought dad had more brains!"

"Brains? Whatter you mean?" demanded Milly.

The young worldly wiseman laughed, turned over and went back to sleep.

II

It was Milly who carried the news to Nathan the following morning.

Johnathan never arrived at the office until nine or ten o'clock. But he never failed to set the alarm for five-thirty. When it banged off, he called to Nathan and kept calling him until he had the boy awakened and groggily dressing.

Johnathan believed that a proprietor should always be the first one at a place of business in the

morning. It set the proper example for the rest of the "help." So Nathan always reached the place at a quarter to seven. Milly called Nat over behind the paper-cutter. She whispered what her father had seen before she shed her big over-sized cloak for work.

Nathan's face colored queerly.

"Please keep this to yourself, Milly," he ordered. "If it gets out, and the other girls believe it, they may quit in fright and refuse to come back, especially if I should want them to work overtime, nights."

Milly promised. She would have promised "to go seventy miles up the Amazon River, turn to the right and stay there the rest of her life" if Nathan had desired it. So far as her small, commonplace soul was capable, she worshiped the young foreman as the Greeks once worshiped Apollo. Her feminine intuition grasped the difficulties Nathan encountered with his father's twopenny policies. She sympathized with him. Because it had been Nathan's business and Nathan's father, she had remained in her place during the "strike." Once when the boy had been compelled to work supperless until midnight, installing a new motor, she had plodded uptown in a storm of sleet and bought him a basket of lunch.

The boy was not insensible to these indications of interest. He felt rather buoyant about them. He was something in the nature of a lady-killer. But to "let himself go" down into the slough of such a liaison, he could not. Milly was "factory help." Owner's sons didn't do such things. She was preposterously out of caste.

Yet he enjoyed the sensation of being the object of an unrequited affection. It flattered his vanity. Without appearing to do so, he threw favors in

Milly's way. Once when she injured her hand on a jagged box nail, he applied first aid, and second aid and third aid and fourth. He contended such dressings were merely saving the business from the expense of doctor's fees. He was thus forestalling a suit for damages from Milly. It was a matter of business acumen, pure and simple. Once when Old Jake had been abusively intoxicated and taken her weekly pay envelope cruelly in the street, Nat had called her back and presented her with a second envelope, from his own money. It made him feel rather heroic to do this.

Further than these small experiments in fire-playing, there was nothing between them. Of course not. There could never be anything between them. Yet there were times when the two found themselves alone together in the printing room, especially in the summer time when Milly's collar disclosed a generous V of soft chest as white as milk, that the boy's fancies ran riot. They carried him away, back to Foxboro Center days when he and I had first come in contact with the mystery surrounding sex, especially The Sex. She was only a factory girl. Of course. And yet, well, she had shown in a hundred crass ways that she loved him. She would love him more if he would allow it. All in all, it was not unpleasant. Yet the situation was not without its pathos. Milly could not help being one of Old Jake's offspring.

Meanwhile, of course, he was in love with Carol, very much in love with Carol.

III

How much he was in love with Carol only the

heart of a nineteen-year-old could attest.

Having discovered how easy and simple it was to keep nocturnal trysts, Nathan began to show a sudden filial docility which pleased and puzzled Johnathan. The father soon realized that an entire fortnight had passed during which he had accounted for every moment of his son's time—perfect alibis in every instance—and not once had Nathan seen or spoken to the girl. If Nathan had gone two weeks without her, of course he had taken his father's counsel and given up the Sybarite forever. That was only logic. If the boy showed a strange and unaccountable drowsiness around three o'clock each afternoon, or if it became increasingly difficult to awaken him each morning at five-thirty, it was—according to his mother—because he was "working too hard to the shop." To which Nathan amusedly subscribed. Because he had given heed to his father and yielded obedience without that threatened murder being necessary, Johnathan conceived the idea of letting the boy have a week's vacation and take a little trip somewhere, say down to Nantasket. Nathan, however, failed to enthuse. With visible relief on Johnathan's part, the vacation idea was swiftly dropped. The father did not cease from reminding the son of the former's magnanimity, however, when later differences arose upon other matters.

The thing which troubled Nathan in those hectic days was Edith's propensity to be allowed the same nocturnal privilege. It was quite all right for Nathan to spend his nights in the company of a reasonably pretty girl who was treated "cruelly" by her relatives. He was a man. But MacHenry shot too good a game of Kelly pool to make Nathan feel that a duplication

of the stunt by his sister was advisable. His anxiety was ended one morning, however, when Edith fell over a chair in the outer hallway on her return, before her brother knew she had been out. The parents did not awaken but Nathan did. He leaped out to find Edith's hair down and her clothing torn. One sleeve of her shirt waist was slit to ribbons and she was limping painfully.

"What's happened, Edie; where you been?" the brother cried frightenedly.

"Oh, he tried to get too fresh!" was the sister's rejoinder. She went to her room, destroyed the torn waist and slipped into bed. The MacHenry fellow disappeared from town next day. While Nat had never given his consent to Edith's nocturnal absences nor abetted them, he was thankful his sister's interest had waned.

For Nathan, however, no summer was ever quite like that summer. For spring passed and June came, and at least three times a week he left his room as soon as he heard his father's heavy snoring to return in the moist, mystic hush of dawn—dawn broken only by the energetic chirping of countless song birds and the dull knocking rattle of distant milk wagons.

The news which Milly Richards had brought advised him that he was growing overbold, however. For two weeks thereafter, he and Carol took the Gilberts Mills road instead of going down to the box-shop, where the girl spent the night nestled in her lover's arms.

So it was not this illicit tryst-keeping, finally wrecked by its own success, that caused Johnathan's complacency to explode in his face. It was a letter that inadvertently fell from Nathan's hip pocket one

day in the mill and which Joe Partridge brought with a grin to Johnathan.

“Picked up some private correspondence,” he observed. “Guess it belongs to Nathan.”

Private correspondence? Nathan?

Johnathan took the bulky envelope addressed in a woman’s round hand to his son at the local postoffice,—General Delivery. He pulled out the sheets and the opening salutation struck him between the eyes like a brick.

Johnathan was limp all over when he had finished that effusive epistle. The father scarcely had the strength to rise from his chair. He found his hat and coat and went out into the August sunshine. He must think, think.

So they were keeping the asinine courtship alive by correspondence? Fool that he was, he might have suspected.

Yet John had read between the lines of the girl’s letter what was no thumb-nail sentiment between lovesick adolescents. The two addressed each other now as grown man and woman. Fortunately, no references had been made by Carol to their nocturnal rendezvous. Johnathan never knew—and does not appreciate to this day—toward the brink of what precipice he did all in his power to drive his boy. But he knew that Nathan had asked the girl to be his wife. She had accepted him. They were only waiting the saving of enough money on Nathan’s part and the making of enough “clothes” on Carol’s to perfect an elopement.

The father’s imagination and self-pity started on a rampage again. His temper began to growl. By six

o'clock he was a roaring small-town lion, seeking whom he might devour,—principally something in the boy line under twenty-one.

Tact and discretion! Tact and discretion!

Johnathan knew he should employ them, that he *must* control his temper or another time he might break worse than his knuckles. Yet how could he save his son from this horribly yawning pit of premature matrimony? At last he had it! Archibald Cuttner!

It was true that Johnathan did not know Archibald Cuttner only as he sometimes thrust the collection plate in front of him on Sunday mornings, or had brought his Congress shoes to the Main Street shop for resoling—"in the old days", as Johnathan already phrased it. But that did not deter him from going at once and laying his case before the girl's grandparent in a great tumult of hysterical fatherhood.

The Cuttners were finishing the evening meal as Johnathan rang the bell. Old Archibald, a thin little man with queer, humped shoulders, came out with his napkin still tucked in his turkey neck.

They sat down in the porch chairs for a time and Johnathan handed the girl's letter across and Archibald read it.

"God!" was Cuttner's comment as he finished page after page of the "mush." It disgusted him as much as it had angered Johnathan. It had been fifty years since Archibald had been nineteen and in love.

"S'pose we walk a pace," he suggested. "I'd like to smoke. And we'll talk."

The two men left the house and while Cuttner puffed at a long black cheroot, Johnathan narrated

his parental “troubles” from the first.

“Yer right, Forge,” the old man agreed. “Getting a boy past the ‘girl age’ is the hardest job a man can have shoved on to him—and the most thankless. Give ’em a free rein and the young asses go stick their heads in the trap o’ married care. Tighten the rein and it only makes ’em crazier to get at it. So what’s a man to do, anyhow? I’m beginning to think we don’t lay on the harness tug these days strong enough—to begin with—girls as well as boys.”

“That doesn’t save Nathaniel from this misalliance with your granddaughter now. What can we do?”

“What do you want I should do—at the girl end of it?”

“Couldn’t you send her back where she came from?”

“Back to A-higher? Yeah, I can send her back to A-higher? But what assurance you got this balky young colt won’t kick over the traces the minute she’s gone and start after her, dragging the whiffletree?”

“I’ll attend to that. You get the girl out of town. I’ll keep with him and watch him if I have to eat and sleep with him every night from now till the time he’s twenty-one.”

“Won’t be able to help yerself then, will yer?”

“But he’ll be a man grown, then, in the eyes of the law. He’ll know his own mind.”

“Ain’t far from it now, Forge. Nineteen, ain’t he?”

“But two years at this period makes all the difference in the world. Anyhow, if he deliberately goes wrong the moment he’s of age, my hands are clean. I’ll have done my duty in the eyes of the law

and of God. After that, he's got only himself to thank if he makes a foul bed and has to lie in it."

So Johnathan found an unexpected ally in Archibald Cuttner. And the latter returned home to order Carol to "pack her traps and go back to her folks."

IV

Johnathan was especially jovial and agreeable about the house that night. He came in whistling. He cracked a couple of ancient jokes and talked about "sparing the money" to get the hall papered. His family looked at one another in puzzled astonishment. Mrs. Forge asked for ten dollars to spend on clothes and got five, three of which were promptly appropriated by Edith for a waist to wear to a dance that she was going to attend unbeknown to her parents. All of them felt electrically that some extraordinary business was afoot.

The family retired about ten o'clock. The lights went out. Johnathan fell asleep almost at once. He said it was easy for him to fall asleep because he always had a clear conscience.

But Nathan, sitting in his room, heard a sudden familiar whistle on the walk outside, about midnight. He escaped by the usual method to find his sweetheart in tears. They had walked a considerable distance before Nathan learned the cause. Now her grandfather was "cruel" to her.

"Oh, Nathan! I've got to go back to A-higher. He—he—doesn't want me around here any more."

Nathan heard this with a clammy throttling of his heart. Then his mind leaped intuitively to his father's

unusual affability that night.

“Carrie—I’ll bet five dollars my father’s seen your gramp and they’ve clubbed together to bust us up!”

“I’m sick and disgusted with being treated like children by two old bigots!” the girl cried vehemently. “I’m almost ready to quit!”

“Quit?” cried Nathan in alarm.

“Yes—quit! We’re grown up, now! What difference does a couple of years make, anyhow?”

“Let’s risk the box-shop once more, Carrie. Let’s go down and talk it over and—I’ll hold you.”

“Holding her” was eminently to be desired by all witnesses to these presents. So toward the box-shop they headed.

It was a close, muggy night with the heat lightning playing off in the low northwest. Clouds hid the moon and stars. The dusty earth was thirsty for rain. Most of the lamps were already extinguished in the houses en route as boy and girl made their way down toward the “flats.”

They stole into the shadowed factory yard, keeping well out of sight close to the rushes. Nathan unlocked the door softly. On tiptoe they entered. The door was locked behind them. The office was very stuffy. It smelled of musty ledgers and wintergreen library paste. High on the wall a philosophical old clock ticked on through the night.

The boy removed hat and coat. He pulled out one of the cane-seated swivel chairs. Almost before he had seated himself the girl was in his arms and sobbing convulsively on his shoulder.

Nathan pulled out a low desk-drawer for his feet.

He leaned back and smoothed the girl's soft chestnut hair. The lone arc lamp far across the rushes shone weirdly into the room, making a rectangular splotch of light upon the western wall.

"Oh, Natie," the girl sobbed softly, "I love you so! I don't want to go back to A-higher! And they treat me so cruel—so cruel! My stepmother doesn't like me and my gramp doesn't want me. I wish I was dead!"

"You've got me, dear," the boy reminded her. A thousand love-struck swains would have said the same.

"But I won't have, Natie, if I go back to A-higher!"

"Oh, Carrie, I wish I was sure dad wouldn't have our marriage annulled. I'd say let's get married right off now and spite him. But I'm afraid he would. He's just that crazy against me having a girl of any sort, you or anybody. Then again, here's the shop. This'll be mine some day, if I don't run off. I'm making it into a whale of a business. Oh, Carrie, if dad would only be sensible like other boys' fathers! If he only would!"

"Natie, tell me something." The girl's voice was soft. Her face was averted. She picked aimlessly at one of his shirt buttons. "Is that why you've dodged running away and getting married up to now? Because you've been afraid your dad would have our marriage annulled? Because you weren't of age, maybe?"

"Yes, Carrie. That's—the—reason."

A long silence ensued. The girl's weeping had ceased. The night and the world were very quiet, excepting for a light hot wind which was blowing over the rushes in the vanguard of a shower. Some of

the rushes brushed eerily against the box-shop walls. The old building gave off queer creakings and night noises upstairs. A mouse nibbled at something which rattled in a far corner.

"Oh, Carrie!"

The boy drew a thick poignant sigh. The girl turned her pale face up to his for a kiss. She got it. Both sighed. She nestled close. The clock ticked—ticked—ticked——

Suddenly the boy sensed that the girl was trembling. She raised her free hand and smoothed his hair for a moment. Then gradually she dropped it—dropped it down to her own face—held it across her eyes.

"Nathan," she whispered softly.

"Yes, Carrie!"

The girl drew a quick breath—with an effort. She placed her lips close to her lover's ear and whispered.

Young Nat Forge, "incorrigible son," sat with the girl he loved at nineteen,—sat and held her close. And his throbbing eyes stared across fields of romance, down into valleys of *verboten* Avalon where acacia trees grew too thickly at a moment for passage through.

It was a woman who came to the first man in the Garden. She carried fruit of the knowledge-tree of good and evil and bade him eat. Yet perchance she loved him no less on that account.

V

It was a quarter to three. The storm had rolled and

clacked above the sleeping town and countryside. The office had been lighted by swift and vivid whips of electric violence. The deluge of nocturnal rain had washed the earth cool and pure again. Steadily in a corner trough outside, an eaves spout emptied with a singing sound,—even as the deserted streets ran mud and rivulets.

The girl still lay in Nathan's arms. She had not moved. Neither had moved. The boy's muscles ached. The air was horribly stuffy, almost sickish. Morning would come now—was coming—swiftly.

"Carrie," said the boy huskily, "there's a lot we owe to ourselves—to our own—happiness! In fourteen months I'll be of age. Fourteen months can be a long, long time—or awful, awful short. Suppose, dear, you do as your grandfather wishes—go back to Ohio. Stay there—as best you can. Live as I'll be living—for the day I'm twenty-one. On that day you and I'll be married. *That's* how much I love you, dear!"

The girl sensed rebuke in his pronouncement. Her face burned. Unconsciously she shrank away. She wholly lacked the capacity to appreciate the depth of the lad's great affection or the worth of his soul thereby disclosed. The lad went on quickly:

"Go away as if we didn't mind—as if we agreed to the separation. But I'll find some one in town to whom you can mail your letters—who'll slip them safely to me without dad knowing. We can write ——"

"Nathan, are you so weak, so under your father's thumb, that you're afraid to outwit him?"

"No," the other whispered. "I'm not." And he spoke the truth. "I love you, dear. I told you that

before."

"Do you think it's easy for me to go?" The girl's voice was tight with pain. What was it she feared? What had happened that night, affecting them both so vitally?

"No easier than it is for me to stay. It's always hardest for the one who stays, Carrie!"

"You're a man! Such things mean more to a woman than a man." They had both traveled far from the night they had talked drivel in the Cuttner sitting room.

"It seems to me the right thing to do, Carrie. There's really nothing else!"

The girl left his arms. She went to the door. With hands on hips, she stood looking out.

"I see—you don't love me—as much as I thought you did!" she said bitterly.

"Carrie!" The boy's cry rang sharp. "Don't say that! Don't!"

"What else can I say?"

"Carrie! I——"

"Let's go home, Nathan. It must be almost morning!"

He came around in front of her. He laid tender hands upon her shoulders. He forced her to look up into his drawn young face.

She suffered it, yet brokenly. She had lifted back a veil from the vestal treasures of her Inner Shrine and he had mocked those treasures somehow. So she believed.

"Carrie," he promised, "I'll wait for you, I'll work

for you, I'll plan for you, I'll bend all my effort and all my life to make you happy. And it will be very sweet when it comes, dear,—very sweet."

Her eyes blinked at him several times in the dusk. She turned her face away without answering, off toward that distant arc lamp across the acres of rain-washed rushes.

"I'll go!" she said in a strained voice. Then she hung her head suddenly.

Nathan raised her face again and drew her to him. Their lips met. But the perturbed boy suddenly shuddered. Carol's lips were cold, unresponsive.

The boy's joints were stiff. There was a bitter, brackish taste in his mouth. His head throbbed from lack of sleep. But from his finger he slipped a small bloodstone ring he had purchased the week following the "strike" with the first big money he had ever owned. He found the girl's left hand. It was cold, lifeless. But the ring fitted her finger. He kissed it.

"Let it stay there dear—until—until——"

The girl turned away. At the door again she stood looking out. Around and around on her finger she turned the ring.

VI

They stole forth from the building and yard. And vivid to Nathan came memory of another day back in younger boyhood when he had stolen forth so from a wood,—back to a picnic ground, wondering why he was not entirely happy, why the kisses of a girl had become cloying and tasteless. Only with this

difference: there was no father now to meet and flog him.

Carol went ahead. They had to pick their way carefully or sink ankle-deep in mire. The town still slept but it had changed somehow. It had changed.

No further word was spoken until the Cuttner gate.

The girl shuddered when with a proprietary right the boy took her in his arms for the final embrace.

“Oh, Natie!” she cried huskily, “you’ll never, never know!”

“Know what, dear?”

“I can’t tell you! You wouldn’t understand. Good-by, dear! It’s—it’s getting light and some of the neighbors might see us.”

She had never remarked upon this before.

“When will you be leaving, dear?” he asked when he could trust himself to speak.

“On the eleven o’clock, probably.” It was a spiritless answer. “There’s no use for me waiting around—if I’m really going.”

“But, Carrie! Don’t take it that way! Don’t act as if I were sending you off.”

“What else are you doing, Nathan? Good night, dear. I’ve got to go in! It’s getting lighter and lighter.”

“I’ll be at the station to see you off if I have to lock dad in a closet to do it!”

“Your dad! I hope he’ll feel satisfied with what he’s done! He’s made a good job of it—and you!”

Up the steps she crept stealthily and into the

house. Though she waved him good-by at the door, the boy was miserable. But she was gone and nothing remained but for him to go also.

The Forge box-shop was never notable thereafter for any untoward spiritualistic phenomena.

VII

It rained that morning. A steady drizzle continued to fall in the aftermath of the thunderstorm. At the breakfast table Nathan had looked his father straight in the eye and announced:

“Dad, Carol Gardner’s leaving town for Ohio this morning. I’m going down to see her off!”

Johnathan was angered by the way his son spoke. But he decided, after all, he could afford to be magnanimous. A boy Nat’s age ought to begin to have a few privileges.

“I understand,” the father answered. And he prepared to leave for the shop as though it was quite the usual thing.

So Nathan went to the depot to spend a last few minutes—wildly sweet, bitterly poignant—with the first girl he had loved with the maturing affection of a man.

The clouds never dripped a more depressing, groggy rain. The station platform was a long, greasy puddle. Bobbing umbrellas were everywhere as the down train to the junction pulled in.

“Well Carrie—good-by,” he said at last.

“Good-by, Nathan,” she answered.

“Till we meet again.”

“Yes! Till we meet again!”

That was all either had the chance to say. A crowd of rain-soaked travelers bore the girl away from him, into a small umbrella-closing mob around the car steps. Carol managed a last wave from the platform of the coach. Then she had to attend to the business of finding a seat. The train pulled out.

“My God! Have I done the right thing—letting her go?” the heartbroken boy cried hoarsely, as the train drew slowly from the platform, gathering speed as it clicked on shining rails down the yards. But there was no one to answer his heart-cry.

The train had gone. Carol had gone. The town remained—the factory—work—memories!

It rained that morning!

CHAPTER XX

SIDETRACKED

I

The train had gone. Carol had gone. The town remained—the factory—work—memories.

Coat collar upturned, hands deep-thrust in trousers pockets, Nathan slopped through the puddles along down to the shop.

The office chanced to be empty as he entered. He looked around. It was difficult to believe that this was the same room in which just a few hours before he had held the girl he loved in his arms. It was difficult to credit that at this moment a train was bearing her away, farther and farther away; that there would be no more talks and walks and trysts; that she was gone, gone!

Then the reaction came. He passed a hideous day.

The rain stopped around five o'clock, though the trees dripped throughout the evening and pedestrians were grotesque through mist in which the arc lamps were nebulous.

His father was still more affable during supper, even boresomely jocular. He had turned a neat piece of business. Some day on bended knee—Johnathan was strong on the “bended knee” and “kissed hand” metaphor—his boy would thank him gratefully and humbly. It was with a vast relief that the man was able to wave his hand in generous permission when Nathan announced he was going for a walk. Why should not Nathan go for a walk? He, Johnathan, had walked much when a young man. And, thank God, there was no longer any need for nerve-racking surveillance to see that the son kept away from The Sex. Had not he, Johnathan, made certain the girl had left town by watching that departure from the interior of a fruit-store opposite the depot, that morning?

Nathan went out and roamed the streets of Paris. It was inevitable that after ten o’clock he should draw near the Cuttner premises.

In the shadow of the big tree at the gate he gazed at the darkened house. The lonely boy tried to imagine Carol still in the place, awaiting his whistle. Once he did whistle, for at heart he was much of a child. But he was whistling at the husk of a memory. The soul of the Cuttner homestead had departed.

In his loneliness that night, locked finally in his room, the boy’s emotions overpowered him and he sobbed. Johnathan, listening at the door, finally tiptoed back to his own room.

“He’s crying,” the man told his wife. “He’s sorry! But he’ll come to see that his father knew best after all!”

“Poor Nat!” sighed the mother. “He does go into things head-over-heels so—even a little passing

acquaintance with a strange girl."

"Those tears will bring him back to God," opined Johnathan.

"Oh, bosh!" snapped Anna Forge. She rolled angrily as far from Johnathan as she could get and in this contorted position sighed at her own hard lot and fell asleep.

II

The remainder of that summer and autumn and the ensuing winter, when Nat turned twenty, was a time of comment-causing expansion for the box-shop.

The town had been left for Nathan—though a town with its soul gone out, like Archibald Cuttner's house—and the factory had been left—and work—and memories. But the greatest of these was work. The boy threw himself into business with a febrile intensity which alarmed his father almost as much as it pleased him. Alarmed him because he could not exactly account for it. Also he had difficulty keeping up with his son in the matter of handling the business. This aroused his ire.

Nathan, as has been emphasized, had received an invaluable training under old Caleb Gridley. Moreover, after Carol left, in order to anesthetize his loneliness, the boy spent evening after evening with old Caleb. Sometimes this queer pair indulged their esthetic souls in poetry,—Cowper, Wordsworth, Keats, Pope, Browning; Old Caleb would sit in his big chair before the fire, slipper swinging, vest unbuttoned, iron-gray head nodding in approval, as the lad's musical voice rose and fell in cadence of the finer selections.

More often they discussed the box-shop and its affairs. To old Caleb the boy brought his problems, his newly discovered short cuts, his dilemmas encountered with the idiosyncrasies of employees, his tangles of finance. And old Caleb, from a wealth of Yankee experience and common sense, encouraged the boy in the right places and delicately discouraged him when he might otherwise have "flown off at a tangent" and allowed his enthusiasms to go galloping.

Johnathan never knew of these consultations. He never dreamed that Caleb was really running his shop through his son; that Caleb subsequently knew more about the folding-box business than Johnathan himself. The latter only knew that Nathan "did things" and then "consulted him" afterward. That the "things" which Nathan did reduced expenses, increased production, sold goods, brought money from delinquent creditors, cut small figure with the father. Somehow his boy had no patience when time after time the father expressed a wish to "go into conference." There were two great joys in being a business man, for Johnathan. One was opening the morning mail. The other was "going into conference."

The fact of the matter was that Nathan had deftly taken the management of the business out of his father's hands. There was nothing left for Johnathan to do. There was no one to "boss." He worried a lot about it.

This worry often broke out in open rebellion. At such times, father and son quarreled. These quarrels had chiefly to do with supplies. One day Nathan ordered a new cutter-knife. It cost twenty-eight dollars. The father's contention was that while

Nathan might have had to get the knife quickly to maintain production, they had not “gone into conference” about it first.

“But you were in Baldwinsville that day—all day!” snapped Nathan. “How could I consult you when you weren’t here to consult?”

“You could have awaited my return!”

“And shut down the cutter to do it—send Partridge home—make him lose a day’s wages and the business a matter of a hundred and seventy-five dollars—just to ask you if I could buy a new knife which you would have had to consent to, anyway? Where’s the sense in that?”

The economics of the thing were swept aside by Johnathan. He clung doggedly to the contention that they had not “gone into conference” about it first. Thereupon he passed the rest of that day evolving a very elaborate order system. With a needle-pointed pencil and a ruler he laid out an order form. He took it up to the local print shop and ordered twenty thousand blanks printed and finished off in pads. Prominently upon the face of each was the line in big type: “No orders valid without the signature of J. H. Forge, Pres.” The bill for the printing was seventy-eight dollars. The fallacy of the system was that Johnathan had to be on hand to sign a blank every time the business required anything from a bottle of paste to the use of a storehouse for goods waiting shipment. This grew to be a nuisance. Nathan began to “countersign” the orders, as he was “on the job” twelve hours a day. The fourth week the blanks were discarded,—as order forms. The second month the office girls were using them for scratch paper. But they cost seventy-eight dollars.

It was Nathan who made a hurried trip to Burlington one Saturday afternoon and landed the Cudworth and Halstead business for candy cartons. It was Nathan who cleverly “tied up” the output of the Cobb City Pressed Board Mills and diverted it to the Forge plant when prices shot up after the depression of 1907. It was Nathan who suggested scrapping all their old presses and putting in the latest type of power machines then being evolved by a Philadelphia firm. To finance this radical move, it was Nathan who suggested that they incorporate the box-shop and put out fifteen thousand dollars’ worth of its preferred stock. And it was Nathan who, under the clandestine tutelage of old Caleb, engineered that organization and got the money.

Against all these departures Johnathan fought tooth and claw,—all but the procuring of new money. The size to which his thumb-nail business had grown began to frighten him. More and more he wanted to “go into conference.” But Nathan, the load of the organization on his enthusiastic young shoulders, formed the habit of humorously responding, “I’m too busy doing things to talk about them!” That angered Johnathan. It pushed him back into a slough of self-pity, outraged dignity and mocked parental authority. All but the procuring of new capital, I say. It was a vast responsibility, being accountable for new capital. It also worried Johnathan mightily. But it was nevertheless a pleasant sort of worry. He inflated in his own esteem. He walked about Paris as a Somebody. He gave less and less time to the “practical” affairs of the company. He no longer “paid off personally” on Saturday afternoons. Instead, he appeared for the first time in tailored clothes, kept banker’s hours and saw himself as a Capitalist.

A stenographer had long ago been hired to ameliorate the time-consuming process of punching out correspondence with one finger on the old blind calligraph. Johnathan had a bell installed in a "private" office to push when he wanted this girl. He pushed it on an average of twice an hour. He wrote letters soliciting business from firms too far away to permit of freight rates leaving any profit. He answered advertisements for catalogs in the back of *System Magazine* and *The Modern Factory*. Of course important letters about supplies and shipments which Nathan had dictated hurriedly during noon hour, were sidetracked for these dictations by Johnathan. Wasn't he president and treasurer?

Frequently, he made a "tour of inspection" through his factory, especially after the addition was built, the principal feature of these trips being to criticize methods which Nathan had instigated, pick up bits of cardboard and string from the floor on the contention that the only way to get rich is to watch the waste boxes, and left a long list of orders behind which were never executed, which the employees laughed at, and which Johnathan himself forgot within five minutes after returning to his swivel chair.

III

Of course, all this expansion and feverish industrial activity on Nathan's part had but one basis: The day he was twenty-one he was going to marry Carol and he proposed to have a business sizable enough and profitable enough to clothe her in purple and fine linen and make her a Somebody because she was the wife of Nathan Forge.

The first month after Carol's departure, and well along into the autumn, bulky epistles arrived for Nathan on an average of twice a week. Nathan had at once appealed to me to act as clearing house for this correspondence, and I therefore unwittingly kept a finger on the pulse of the courtship.

Johnathan, with small-bored shrewdness, had given orders at the local postoffice that all Nathan's mail was to be saved and delivered to himself. And as no letters with Ohio postmarkings or addressed in feminine penmanship ever arrived in those following months, Jonathan knew the "affair" was over, and, praise the Almighty, "over" successfully. Carol's letters came to me in a double envelope, with Nat's name inside. When he wasn't at Caleb Gridley's in the evening, he was at my house using my desk and typewriter answering them.

Something of the old intimacy between Nat and myself was restored after Carol's departure. I had meanwhile finished high school but been obliged to take a job in the local newspaper office. After work, or on Sundays, we fell into the habit of taking long walks about the town and countryside, while the boy raved to me of the undying affection in Carol's letters or his increasing successes at the factory.

Carol, it appeared, had recovered her aplomb upon her return to A-higher. Her letters were full of minute accountings of her time and activities and how she was "getting her clothes ready" and what house in town Nathan should try to procure for their habitation, and what a boor and a bear Johnathan was, and what a trial and a nuisance he must be to the son generally.

And yet, through all of that twentieth year, and especially throughout the summer, there were days

and nights when the boy's loneliness almost crazed him.

Through the town he wandered, bareheaded beneath the stars. There was one ballad he and Carol had sung over and over until the lad knew the words from memory. Nat hummed the tune to himself on many starlit nights when he walked out toward the old lumber pile on the Gilberts Mills road:

"I am writing to you, Molly, while the fair moon softly shines,
As it did the night before you went away;
When it shone in all its glory
And I told Love's old, old story
And you promised you'd return and wed some day."

It was a sickly, sentimental thing, being sung in all the picture shows and Wednesday-evening courting hours. But it was the second verse which probed the boy's heart and always brought tears to his eyes:

"All alone I'm roaming, Molly,
Down the dear old village lane,
To the wildwood where we strolled with hearts so light;
In the old church they are singing,
Fondest memories it's bringing
Of the girl I love, so far away, to-night.
Some folks laugh and call it folly
When I tell them you're still true,
But you love me, don't you, Molly?
Say you're coming back, please do!"

The boy forgot all about his poetry, unless it was to try putting his loneliness and heart-hunger in words. Yet somehow he could not publish these. He filed them away with Carol's letters. He lived, moved, had his being, in the box-shop.

Johnathan had been elected president and treasurer, Charley Newton who had left an office job at the process works to become the Forge

bookkeeper (and learn how to thwart Johnathan making entries in his books and getting them awry), had been elected vice-president. Joe Partridge, who had arisen to the prominence of foreman, was clerk of the corporation, though Lawyer Bob Hentley did the secretarial work and all Joel had to do was sign on the dotted line. Nathan, not being of age, could not be an officer. His large capacity was “General Superintendent.”

As money flowed into the firm’s coffers, the prospects of the Forge family started looking up.

Johnathan began buying suits of clothes, evolved a propensity for bat neckties and learned to smoke cigars. He was less conscientious about his attendance at church and took long trips off “to keep the trade in line.” Invariably he found, however, that his son had contrived to do this by letter. When his “trade” began discussing deals and discounts of which Johnathan had never heard, it made him feel rather foolish and always angry. He returned grimly determined that he was going to run his own business or know the reason why. But before the first day was ended, he had become so engrossed in some new office contrivance or new set of forms, that he forgot larger problems,—or some quarrel with his boy sent him off to walk the streets for hours and pity himself. The matter of running his own business sagged until it was time for another venture at “keeping the trade in line.”

The Forges left the Spring Street house and bought the old Longstreet residence on Vermont Avenue. Whereupon Mrs. Forge and Edith began to “put on style” and rise to the occasion generally. The womenfolk of a prominent manufacturer had to keep up appearances. Charge accounts were opened at the

leading stores and for the first time in her mortal existence Mrs. Forge's appetite for chocolate caramels was satiated,—the kind with nuts in them.

IV

Nathan was to become twenty-one on the second day of December. I knew, as his confidant, that the original plan was a wedding between Carol and himself on the ensuing Christmas. But as that late summer and autumn dragged along toward the first frosts, I grew increasingly worried. The cause of my perturbation was Carol's correspondence.

The first letters, written in the initial pangs of separation, had come to hand twice a week,—or as often as Nat's reply allowed. From September to the first week in November, no letter whatever came for Nat. Then an epistle arrived which the boy tore open and read with an avidity that was piteous. She had been ill. She would write at greater length when she felt better.

"I'd find an excuse to make a road trip, Bill, and go out and see her," he told me. "But, hang it all, I can't leave the factory. Dad would have things so snarled up when I got back I'd be six months getting the débris cleared away and things going smoothly again."

Worry weighed the boy down. He grew increasingly irritable and somewhat surly. For hours at a time Johnathan would sit and figure. He would prove to Nathan that on some order made and shipped six months before they had lost two mills of a cent on every carton. Thereupon he declared that Nat's obstreperousness was heading his father into bankruptcy. (Johnathan never spent hours figuring

orders where the firm had cleaned up handsomely and absorbed the losses on lesser ventures.) He would arise in the middle of the night and go down to the shop—after the fires had been lighted in late October—to see if old Mike Hennessy, the watchman, was sleeping on the job. He caught him one night fortifying his courage with a short flat bottle and discharged him on the spot. The help came down next morning to find the fires out. It was noon before the plant was again up to standard. Father and son fought out the question of "hiring and firing" in front of the help—which is an extremely effective method for maintaining respect among employees for the principals in any business—and all this sapped Nat's vitality.

"Thank God you're twenty-one in a few weeks and my responsibility is ended!" the father swore as he paced the expansive dining room of the sepulchral Longstreet residence. His eyes were wild and his hair was rumpled. He walked with his hands in his pockets and occasionally grabbed up a book or magazine to hurl at his son whose retorts were always so apt, effective and unanswerable that Johnathan had to vent his feelings in action somehow.

Then the night when Nathan was twenty-one came,—the epochal date when he was free at last.

It was marked by two episodes. The quarrel over Edith and the newspaper clipping I was called upon to give my friend.

It was a Saturday night and Edith was taking part in a church concert on the morrow. She had left the house ostensibly to "practice her part" at the home of a friend. Instead of which she had met the Nelson boy and inquiry developed, quite accidentally, that

she had “skipped off” to a dance in Wickford.

Nathan had taken his sister’s part. The boy, in the exaltation of his majority, had dropped an unfortunate remark:

“You’ll be just about as successful in thwarting Edie as you’ve been successful in thwarting me. You think you busted up my engagement to Carol, dad. But you didn’t. Carol went away simply to get her clothes ready. And you might as well know now as any time that I’m marrying her on Christmas day—in exactly three weeks!”

Johnathan had remained rather wild-eyed for a moment. Then he found his voice and started cursing. Not content with cursing, he waited until his son’s back was turned and then dealt him a blow in the shoulder which sent Nathan smashing against the table. He knocked off crockery with a crash and sent a coffee pot into the front of a near-by china closet.

Mrs. Forge came running, and as usual, joined in the altercation. Johnathan’s cursing included his wife. His wife turned livid at a particularly vile epithet and hurled a plate. Johnathan dodged the plate and it went neatly through a pane of heavy glass. Then Johnathan picked up a chair and threw it. It hit the dome above the dining table and dropped its glass in a shower, leaving the brass shell swaying ludicrously. Mrs. Forge shrieked and Johnathan bellowed.

On the night of the son’s majority a pleasant time was had by all!

Nathan was unhurt. He walked from the room, got his hat and coat. He passed out the front door and left his father and mother having their last quarrel,—while he was an occupant of their house. He came to

me.

“Any mail, Bill?” he asked anxiously.

I was punching away at my typewriter in the sitting room. I recollect that I took a long moment to fill my pipe and relight it before I answered. But there was no way out—for me. I had been working, trying subconsciously to evolve a way to break the news to my friend gently.

“No, Nat,” I said at length. “There’s no mail come for you—directly. But mother gave me a newspaper when I came home—an Ohio paper, addressed to me.”

“A paper!” cried the boy. “What’s the big idea?”

There was no way out, indeed. The paper was lying on my desk. An item in the “Social and Personal” column was marked in red ink. I handed it across.

> COLE-GARDNER
>
> A pretty home wedding was solemnized at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. P. H. Gardner on Temple Street last evening, when Mr. Gardner’s daughter Carol was joined in matrimony to Mr. Blodgett Cole, son of Mr. and Mrs. Roger Cole of Union Place. The marriage was the outcome of a boy-and-girl romance begun in the graded schools of East Gilead, when ...

I don’t think my friend ever quite finished reading that item. The paper dropped through his fingers, through his knees, down with a sharp plop! to the carpet.

“Bill!” cried my friend hoarsely, “Bill!”

“Hard luck, Nat!” was all I could say. “But don’t you let it upset you. If she’s that kind of girl, she wasn’t worth waiting for in the first place.”

V

The boy stumbled down our front steps. By the time I had spoken to my mother and secured hat and coat, he had disappeared.

Where he went no one knows. Anyhow, it doesn't matter. Around eight o'clock he appeared at the box-shop. He unlocked the office door and groped his way inside.

The office had expanded in keeping with the rest of the plant. It now bore little resemblance to the room in which Nat had kept bitter-sweet rendezvous with Carol in those Memory Nights. A private office —two of them, because Johnathan had insisted upon one—had been constructed off on the right. And Nathan stumbled into his own, leaving all doors open and lamps burning. He sank in his swivel chair and his forehead went down in his arms.

"Hello!" called a cheery voice.

Nathan raised his head. His face was the countenance of a middle-aged man.

A girl was standing in the doorway. She was hatless, despite the winter chill. She wore an oversized cloak of heavy green plaid. The sleeves were too long and had been folded back. The cloak was unbuttoned; two of the buttons, in fact, were missing, and a third was due to fall off momentarily. Underneath the cloak was a plain white shirtwaist with an inappropriate low neck. But her hair was done very prettily and her face was flushed with health and the nip of the night wind. It was Milly Richards.

"Hello!" returned Nat lifelessly.

“Why! What’s the matter, Nathan? You’re sick!”

The boy’s hollow eyes fastened upon the girl. Deliberately he looked down her figure as she stood in the doorway, from the pile of brown hair with its marcelled wave to the curve of her neck, the slightly heaving bosom, the ample torso and hips, the stolid ankles.

“Shut the door!” said Nathan.

Milly was puzzled, not a little alarmed. But she shut the door. Across to a chair she moved. Keeping her eyes intently upon him, she raised her forearms, with locked hands, and rested them across the corner of the intervening desk top.

The lad continued to gaze upon her. The color of his lips was gruesome. No word was spoken.

The clock on the wall showed seventeen minutes past eight. The night wind blew some papers from Charley Newton’s desk in the outer office where the door had been left open.

“Nathan! Something horrible’s happened! Can’t you tell me?”

“Milly! You know how much trouble father and I are always having around the shop, here?”

“Yes! ’Course I know! So does everybody!”

“It’s reached the point, Milly, where I can’t stand it any longer.”

“All the fellers and girls would follow you out to a person, if you was to ask ’em.”

“I’m especially thinking—of—home. You can imagine, can’t you, that if dad quarrels with me here, he acts the same way at home. Well, he does, anyhow! And I’m sick of it!”

"Then I should think you'd get out and," she dropped her eyes, adding unsteadily, "get a home o' your own."

"I—haven't—any one—to do it with, Milly."

His face returned to his arms. "I thought I had, but I haven't."

"You thought you had?"

"I thought I had, yes. But the girl went off and married somebody else. I just learned it—to-night!"

"She couldn't have loved you very much to do that, Nathan."

"I suppose not! No!"

"I'm—I'm—awful sorry, Nathan! Sorry for you! If there was anything I could do, you know I'd do it, don't you?"

He raised his face again. His hands wandered around the desk top, as though groping blindly.

Fog! Fog! Or perhaps he was searching for something.

"Milly, I feel like the loneliest chap on God's earth!" Two huge tears brimmed in his hot, hard eyes, blurred his sight, zigzagged down his haggard, unshaven cheeks. He arose, walked to the window. The girl's eyes were riveted on him. When he came close to her, she only tilted her head back to look up into his face.

"Nathan," she lisped, "is there anything I could do to make you—happy?"

It was her soft, ample bosom which he saw heaving that brought that constricted feeling across his own chest and words to his lips.

"I don't know, Milly. Oh, God, I'm tired—tired!"

Milly found the strength to rise. She had seen Nat enter the office and followed to tell him there had been a mistake of ten cents in her weekly envelope. But it was plain she had come instead to encounter, all unwittingly, *her* Amethyst Moment.

She made an appealing picture, standing before the lad with wistful solicitation on her face,—half-frightened, not knowing whether to stay or to flee, held half by morbid curiosity, half by the titanic possibilities of the drama. Everything about her was cheap, but was that not because she had been denied something better—like the boy himself?

Hardly knowing that he did so, groping, the scion of the House of Forge raised his left hand. His fingers touched the fabric of her cloak sleeve.

He did not especially want Milly. He wanted Woman—the solacing, maternal spirit—wanted it horribly in one of life's great disappointments. Milly at the moment only stood for Woman.

The girl did not shrink from his touch. She stood motionless, waiting, with the blood dying out of her face.

The boy's other hand found the girl's other arm. Both his hands crept up toward her ample shoulders.

Nathan took old Jake Richards' daughter to his heart. And old Jake Richards' daughter responded somehow, frightened out of her wits.

It was twenty-one minutes past eight. The town clerk's office would be open until nine o'clock. The day was Saturday and taxpayers came in to settle their assessments and water rents. There was time, then, that night, to get a marriage license.

Nathan had no heart to take his hideous disappointment back to a home where father and mother were still “at it.” Forever “at it.”

Milly thought it a great lark. On the way uptown her head was swimming with the realization.

“I guess Pa and Maw ain’t got the stunning of their lives coming when they see I’ve copped off the boss!”

VI

One night back over the years, Nathan and I had idled down the Green River in the starlight, and the poet had dreamed dreams of his wedding day—fantastic, vague, exotic—the wonder noon of the future all blurred in autumn lights, laughter, love and flowers.

Fred Babcock, real-estate agent and justice of the peace, in the Norwalk Block, tucked a small brown flask hurriedly in the bottom drawer of his desk when he heard somebody coming up the stairs. He threw his “chew” in the stove and nipped his finger on the hot iron door. He was shaking the smarting hand and swearing when Nathan appeared in the doorway. There was some one behind him.

“Mr. Babcock,” asked the boy in a strained voice, “wonder if I could get you to perform a m-m-marriage?”

“Whose?” gaped Fred.

“Mine! Mine and Miss Richards.”

Fred looked from one to the other blankly.

“Well, of course, if it’s bad as that,” he assented. “Come in! Gawd! I ain’t hitched nobody for so long b’darned if I know where to look for the book.”

Milly clung to Nathan frightenedly. Her other hand held her cloak together, for the dangling button had ceased its dangling somewhere en route.

Fred found the book in an empty cigar box that had fallen upon a pile of old overshoes and fishing tackle.

“B’darn! We gotta have a witness!” he declared. “An’ you gotcha license all proper, aincher?”

Nathan could produce a license but not a witness. Fred departed to “scare one out.” He was pleased with the prospect of making five dollars so easily to top off the week,—just like “picking it up in the street.”

While Fred was absent, Milly and Nathan sat stiffly. Dimly in the grief-stunned boy’s mind was a thought that by this he was going Carol one better! Wait until she heard! Then too, he never would have to go back to his father and mother. Milly was all right! As good as the run of ’em! She was The Sex anyhow and had proved that she loved him. Had she not stayed at work during the strike? Had she not gone uptown once and brought him down a basket of supper, unasked?

Fred came back with a colored man in tow,—old Ezra Hassock, janitor for a half-dozen Main Street blocks and tender of their nocturnal fires. He wore white overalls and a dented felt hat. The hat had cobwebs on it, and his hands hung from the length of his arms like smoked hams.

“Well, stand up, and we’ll have the agony over,” was the cheery way the justice of the peace phrased it. “Gotta ring?”

“Yes,” said Nathan thickly. “I bought one when we

came across the square just now."

"Well, grab her left lunch-hook and hang on," was Fred's equally jovial way of directing the ceremonies. "You, Ezra! Take the cotton battin' out your ears and look like a witness!"

"Ain't got no cotton battin' in mah ears!" rejoined Ezra. Thereat all present laughed. It was an excellent joke.

"*In the name of God, Amen!*"

A knife ran into Nathan's heart. Where was Carol this moment and what was she doing? The paper must have been mailed a week before—she had been several days on her honeymoon already.... Carol had wanted him to get the Harvey house in Pearl Street.... Milly's hand was very sweaty and hard, calloused from the pasting of many boxes.... Where had old Ezra got so many cobwebs on his hat?... Where would he take Milly that first night?... Where was Carol and what——

"Yes! I mean 'I do!'" he answered anent keeping, loving and cherishing this female in sickness and in health and all the rest of it, whatever it was.

He was dimly conscious that he was trying to get the ring on Milly's finger; it didn't fit half so well as it had in the jewelry store. Ezra was grinning—showing ivories like an enameled picket-fence—it was fourteen minutes after nine o'clock—Carol had said she wanted the living room furnished in Mission ——

"... I now therefore pronounce you man and wife and may God bless your union, Amen! And it'll cost you five bucks."

Nathan and Milly came down into Main Street. It

looked quite like Main Street on a hundred other Saturday nights.

"Where'll we go?" asked Milly, as they paused on the top step in front of the Norwalk Block so as not to be jostled by the grocery-bill-paying, Sunday-meat-buying crowd. She clung to Nathan's arm with one hand and in the other held her marriage certificate as though she didn't know what to do with it. Which she didn't.

"I dunno!" said Nathan vaguely. "What do you want to do?"

"I want to go home and tell Ma and the kids," returned Milly honestly. "To think when I left the house to-night, I was coming back *married*! My Gawd!"

They descended the four stone steps and were obliterated at once in the serpentine sidewalk traffic of hopeless mediocrity.

BOOK TWO

SUNSHINE GLORIOUS

CHAPTER I

TOO EASY MONEY

I

Regardless of the chagrin the reminder often cost its womenfolk, the foundation for the Ruggles family "Money" had been laid in the junk business. Junk. Exactly. Junk!

Jasper Ruggles, the grandfather, had started life as one of those peddlers who drove about New England in a cart resembling a small-sized circus wagon of flaming scarlet. He swapped tinware with farmers' wives for rags and old metal and never got cheated. From gathering old metal was but a step to melting it. From melting was but another step to finding a manufactured product. So an iron works had flourished following the Civil War and canny investments had done the rest.

Amos Ruggles, Gordon's father, called himself a barrister,—not a lawyer, but a barrister! He maintained an expensive suite of offices in one of the most prominent Springfield buildings, but no one had ever heard of his trying a case and among his

fellow attorneys he was considered more or less of a joke. He looked after the family “investments” and dabbled in politics. Six months of the year he spent traveling, principally in Europe, where he demonstrated what Americans are not like at home, even at their worst.

In appearance, Amos Ruggles was a tall, ample-girthed immaculately clad man with a certain over-clean whiteness about him, a whiteness that looked unhealthy. He suggested he had been kept away from sunlight until his flesh had become bleached. His thin, silky-fine white hair was combed from the back of his head forward, and he had a perpetually surprised look in his eye as though forever startled at finding himself alive and asking, “Bless my stars! Where am I, anyhow?” He had another look on his face, a look of always being on the point of saying something tremendously important but never quite bringing himself to do it.

His political experience to date had been but a single term in the legislature. Certain questionable “interests” who wanted a “perfect dummy” in the place had been responsible, not Amos’s solicitude for the welfare of the laboring classes and his brilliant defense of the Constitution, as he had always assumed. During this single term, his Bills were versatile if not always feasible. Among those especially demonstrating the man’s brilliance may be cited (1) A Bill—to mitigate social conditions by making it a penal offense for laborers earning less than a thousand a year to have more than two children; (2) A Bill—making it a criminal violation to alight from moving street cars while facing in the wrong direction. His bills were quietly killed in committee. Still, they were good bills and if they had

gone through, Amos felt that he would not have lived wholly in vain. His intentions were good, at any rate, even if the execution of his legislation may have presented difficulties insurmountable.

Margaret Ruggles, his wife, was a Theddon and even as a girl had been so wealthy she could afford to be homely. She came from “Boston and Rhode Island,” as the local society reporters quoted it, making it sound like a railroad.

In later life Margaret Ruggles’s nerve was iron and her *savoir faire* flawless. Rumor had it that she instructed Amos how and when to do everything, from selling United Fruit Common to changing his waistcoat. And a local grocer had a yarn about having sent a special team out to the Ruggleses residence to deliver three lemons, and Margaret had ordered the man to wait and take back two of them because cook had discovered there were already two lemons in the house. She was a close buyer and a difficult customer and yet young Gordon—only child of these two—was allowed, from earliest boyhood, to spend money like a Monte Cristo in knickers. At three he cried for the moon but was given the earth instead, and found it so absorbing that he never gave it back. Not even when other people wanted it.

Gordon had never gone to school three consecutive years in his life. He had never shown interest in anything for two consecutive days, in his life,—except fighting. Yet he even refused to make fighting a business, or he might have turned out a notable pugilist or worked his bellicosities off to some good purpose in the Army.

Amos and Margaret absolutely refused to credit their son with faults. They looked at him and beheld that he had a body, a brain, a temperament and an

appetite. But faults? Not a one! He committed indiscretions, irresponsibilities, sowed a few wild oats, perhaps! But that was to be expected. Why should he work when the Ruggleses already had more money than they could ever spend? Besides, why should he work when he wouldn't work and they couldn't make him work, even if they wanted? That he would ultimately "go in for something" as his father had "gone in" for law—and foreign travel —was vaguely understood. But the insinuation that Gordon was one whit worse than a million other boys they would not tolerate an instant. The Ruggleses—second generation—had a queer outlook on life, one which it is perhaps difficult for *hoi polloi* to understand: The world was their personal bootjack and any one who essayed to question that fact was a "disturbing element" and "a menace against established institutions."

Nevertheless, Gordon at twenty-six was giving Amos not a little anxiety. While a few wild oats were expected of a boy to show that he was a boy and virile—in fact, Amos had rolled in a wild oat or two himself when a boy or when his wife was occasionally elsewhere—it didn't necessarily follow that the son should turn wholesale agriculturist and rear elevators with the family money in which to house his disturbing grain crops. Not that it offended Amos's sense of decency—the things he had to pay for, from broken china to broken women—so much as it affected the family prestige. It was time the boy calmed down, and the boy gave no symptoms whatever of calming down. He had, in fact, calmed upward considerably of late and grown a little out of hand,—if indeed he ever was in hand. Thereat Amos, like most of his type, looking into his own experience for solution, hit upon the brilliant idea that what

Gordon needed most of all to straighten him out was a brainy, strong-minded wife. The very thing. Gordon must have a wife. Then a baby or two. If a baby or two couldn't tone Gordon down then nothing could tone Gordon down. Amos would speak to his son about it.

Which, on a winter's evening in March, 1915, he did. Gordon was talking about going to France and "guttin' Fritzies" for the fun of it, and that must be nipped at any cost. Why, the boy might get shot. Amos was especially peeved at the Germans and the war, anyhow—it was making a continental colander out of all his favorite watering places and spoiling his annual trips abroad by filling the seas with submarines that actually blew people up. Not that Gordon cared anything about the moral aspects of the war. Such a venture merely promised a new thrill.

Amos called his boy into the big Ruggles library, had a Scotch and soda with him, lighted a big cigar and assumed a place on the hearth rug with one hand behind his coat tails. There he rocked on his toes and heels and became the Declaiming Parent.

II

"Marry!" cried Gordon. "Who the devil will I marry? Those I might marry I don't want—I can have 'em any old day. And those I do want I can't have, because they won't have me. So damn all women, anyhow."

"Tut, tut, sir!" cried Amos. "Your mother is a woman, understand!"

"Gad, so she is! Well, well! We'll make an

exception of her. Damn all the others—excepting ____"

"I'd like to know," declaimed Amos grandly, as he had expounded his two-child-a-family bill before the legislature, "I'd like to know, sir, where the woman is you might want that you can't have? Tut, tut, sir! Do not let us fritter away our time with nonsense."

"If you want to know straight, Pop, there's only one skirt in these whole United States I could ever care two hamstrings for. But she's about as interested in me as that Frances Willard dame would be to sit in on a bock-beer convention."

"Ah! Then you have felt the possibilities in the grand passion? And may I have the lady's name, sir? We shall see what can be done about it."

"It's that girl of Aunt Grace's—Madelaine!"

"What, sir? What? The brat from the orphanage?"

"Believe me, Pop, she's a long throw from being a brat. I guess you haven't seen her lately."

"Not for half a dozen years, sir, I haven't seen her. Went to college, didn't she? To be a lady doctor, or something?"

"She's in Medical School now. She graduated from Radcliffe this past June. And you can take it from me, Pop, she's *there*!"

"But, my God, sir! Do you mean to sit there and insinuate that a brat from an orphanage—a Nobody! —refuses to look with favor on the suit of a Ruggles? She cannot understand who you are, sir! You cannot have asked her seriously. Have you asked her, by the way? Have you? Seriously?"

"No. And I haven't asked the King of Belgium to

come over here and take a job driving my Stutz, either. There are some things that simply aren't done."

"But what has she against you, especially? Doesn't the girl realize she's a Nobody? Doesn't she see how she could improve her social position by marrying my son—a Ruggles?"

"She doesn't give a hoot for anybody's social position. Not even her own. She's class, Pop, with a capital C. If you could see her as she's grown up now, you'd understand and close the door softly as you go out. I've got as much chance of making a hit with her as the Czar of Russia stands of being elected recording secretary of the Forest Park Home Improvement and Loan Society."

"Do I understand you to say, sir, you want this girl —that you'd marry her, and settle down if she'd have you?"

"Will a duck swim?"

"We are not discussing ducks, sir. We are discussing women! This is most interesting and enlightening. We will look into this matter. Yes, we certainly will look into the matter. At once!"

Which Amos Ruggles at once set about. As John Alden for his boy, he was one of the most efficient steam fitters who ever tackled a job and had to go back for his tools while a boiler exploded.

III

Having nothing of larger consequence to attend upon, that week, Amos took a mighty trip to Boston to interview the "brat from the Orphanage" on behalf

of his beloved offspring.

Madelaine, strange as the statement may appear, had never met Amos Ruggles. Rising hastily now from her book-littered desk, she beheld her maid admit to her outer sitting room a very carefully groomed, white-faced, fastidiously caned and perfectly spatted elderly man who wore a red carnation in his buttonhole and a Facial Expression prepared for the worst.

But Madelaine's interest was not to be compared with old "Am's" stunned surprise when he raised his owlish eyes and saw "the brat from the Orphanage" confronting him from the opposite doorway. Subconsciously Amos had failed to conceive of that brat as anything but a brat. Certainly not a woman grown to maturity. Up to the moment of admittance he had looked vaguely forward to interviewing a knock-kneed child in pigtails and a gingham apron. He had once visited an orphanage while on a legislative committee. He had come away impressed that the crying need of the institution at the moment was to have its individual and collective nose wiped.

Instead of such a mite of parentless humanity whom he might pat on the head and suggest peanuts to, the man confronted a tall, perfectly poised, athletic young woman whose calm eyes made him wonder if he had rumpled himself anywhere in that hectic two-hour trip on the Boston and Albany.

For an instant Amos felt petulant. Persons unknown had tricked him. For Madge Theddon was grown into a "goddess." The metaphor is Amos's. And she "had a way with her." Yes, she had very much of a way with her. One of her fellow students had described her: "Calm as a mountain thinking aloud; ineligible for analysis as moonlight playing on

a nocturnal waterfall."

"I am Madelaine, yes!" she announced in response to "Am's" suggestion that there was a mistake somewhere. "You are my mother's brother-in-law. I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Ruggles." She moved forward, extending a lithe, cool, capable hand.

Amos took the hand and kissed it, or he believed he kissed it, at the same time annoyed that she had called him her mother's brother-in-law instead of her own uncle.

"Madam, charmed!" And Amos made another bow. But he was not charmed. He was bumped. He was badly bumped! There was not a doubt about it.

With an amused smile, Madelaine's maid withdrew. Amos produced a billowy silk handkerchief and began patting various exposed portions of his anatomy. He ran out of exposed portions and then accepted the chair Madelaine indicated, still in his imbecilic daze.

"Y-Y-You may think it strange that I have called, Miss Madel—Miss Madel—Miss Theddon—it is about my son. You two have become quite well acquainted in the past, I understand."

"Quite," returned the girl. Her tone was a trifle ironic.

Amos was at a loss.

"Yes, yes! True, true—very true." Came another distressing pause while Amos considered. "You see, it's like this, Miss Madel—Miss Madel—Miss Theddon—getting along famously, are we not?—nothing could please his mother and myself just now more than the knowledge that he is married and—

safely in the hands of some good and firm-willed woman. And so—beautiful apartment you have here! —I decided I would come down and talk it over with you."

"I see," Madelaine responded. "You've come to enlist my aid, perhaps, in finding a wife for Gordon. Or my advice as to how to proceed; which is it?"

"Well—er—in fact, a little of both and none of either." Amos was happily growing more at ease. He stored his handkerchief in his outside breast pocket, left a couple of inches exposed, put his pink, manicured finger tips precisely together between his knees.

"The idea is this, Miss Madelaine. The boy is—well —the boy is—deeply impressed by yourself and—purely as a father—with a father's paternal interest, understand—I have called to appraise for myself the extent of the gulf between you and—get you to consider the matter for—er—early negotiation."

"What matter? Just what do you mean?"

"The matter, Miss Madelaine, of—er—becoming his—wife!"

Amos breathed once more. The worst was over.

Madelaine could not control the flush that crept toward her temples.

"Did Gordon ask that you do this?" she demanded.

"Not at all! Not at all! The idea is my own entirely —absolutely my own!" Amos inferred that as an idea it certainly had its points and on the whole he was rather proud of it.

"Then Gordon knows nothing of it?"

"Not a whittle, Miss Madelaine, not a whittle."

The girl sat for a time in silence. Her emotions were resentful. They wanted to riot. Her lips twitched once or twice. Then came a saving sense of humor.

"Just why should I consider a marriage with your son, Mr. Ruggles? On what basis do you rear that contention?"

"I—er—I——"

Madelaine pitied his sudden distress. For the first time in his life Amos Ruggles appreciated that any reference to the Ruggles wealth would be crude and insulting, before such a woman as he confronted now.

"He's a—he's a—mighty fine boy, Miss Madelaine!" was the father's compromise.

"I apologize if I seem rude, Mr. Ruggles. But that must remain a matter of opinion."

"You mean—he isn't a mighty fine boy?"

"Must we discuss him—his good points and his bad?"

"But he has no bad points, my dear lady. Of course, during adolescence he has been virile and erratic and perhaps indulged himself in some few indiscretions common to all boys. Why, I have even passed through such a stage myself. But there's nothing really bad about him—nothing but what a characterful wife could eventually eradicate."

"Mr. Ruggles, has Gordon ever recounted how very ungentlemanly—in fact, grossly insulting—his conduct toward myself has been consistently—from the moment of our first meeting?"

Incredulity, a flick of exasperation, now passed

over Amos Ruggles's features. There was a certain trick of intonation in Madelaine's voice which quashed irrevocably any argument that Gordon had not been ungentlemanly and insulting. And yet Amos was not quite willing to subscribe to that. And argument was cheapening.

"Just how has he acted—what has he done?"

"You really wish me to tell you?"

"I should consider it in the light of a very great favor, my dear lady."

Madelaine considered. She leaned back in the chair and put two slender fingers of each hand at a temple, her dark eyes fixed appraisingly upon her foster-uncle.

Then she told him.

She began with Gordon's conduct and language the day ten years before, when he had violated the privacy of her bedroom. That was insipid, however, beside the later indignities she had suffered. She gave a truthful account of each situation when he had taken her at a disadvantage, forced himself upon her, defiled her lips or tried to compromise her still more seriously. The night of the bogus auto accident became but an incident in that sordid recount. The most brazen piece of insult and effrontery had been a night in a Boston hotel when Gordon had followed her, secured a room next to her own and bought a mercenary night clerk to let him scratch the girl's name from the register and substitute "Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Ruggles" instead. He then added the consecutive room numbers as a suite. Cheap witnesses had been procured to substantiate that Madelaine had apparently gone to Boston, met Gordon clandestinely and shared an apartment with

him for a night. With his citadel of crazy folly thus garrisoned, the foster-nephew had brazenly offered the girl the alternative of marriage or exposure, and only an astute lawyer had contrived to squelch the scandal without publicity.

Amos was dumbfounded. She waited for him to comment. But he held his peace. Then Madelaine laughed good-naturedly.

“And after such persecution—I hope you’ll permit me to call it that, Mr. Ruggles—ten or twelve years of it!—you come to me and suggest I marry your son because he’s really ‘not such a bad fellow, after all!’”

“Don’t you believe—a good woman—can reform a man?” Amos demanded quickly.

“That all depends on the man. In some cases, absolutely not. The material must first be there to work upon. As a general proposition, I consider it thankless nonsense. There may be some good men who have been bruised and buffeted and almost wrecked by life’s cruellest vicissitudes. They may have lost their moorings and their faith in human nature. All they require is kind and loving care, and tenderness and proper ministration to bring them back to normal. In so far as that is ‘reform’, I believe it possible and admirable and well worth the effort. But taking a man who has never had a care or worry and whose career has been one long fling in self-indulgence, and endeavoring to make a man of him —the woman who will waste her time trying it displays evidences of imbecility.”

“Then I take it—there’s no hope—for Gordon?”

“I haven’t said so. I’ve said that Gordon, or any man who wants my respect and ministration, must prove to me first that, in popular language, he’s ‘got

the stuff in him.' I'll say this much: When your son Gordon has proved to me he's sincerely penitent and made of the material that perhaps hasn't had a fair chance to develop, he stands as good a chance to gain my favor as any man. That's all the 'encouragement' I can give. Just now I've too much to occupy my time to think of matrimony, anyway. It doesn't enter into my plans. I'm studying to be a physician."

"Yes, yes, I know! Very commendable. I wish Gordon had some interest in life—some——"

"I'll even go further, Mr. Ruggles. I'll say that all the vulgarity and insult which I've suffered consistently from your son will not handicap him if he turns over a new leaf and shows he's really made of stuff worth while. In fact, I'd be inclined to count it in his favor, strange as it may sound. For it will be a criterion of what he has overcome."

"Thank you," said Amos. "Thank you very much!"

IV

All the week that call of Gordon's father perturbed Madelaine. Or rather, it accentuated emotions which the nature of her activities and the demands upon her time were forcibly keeping latent.

She had reached twenty-four and was still heart-free. Yet there were times when she distrusted herself. She wanted to shed tears without exactly knowing why. She felt herself groping out for a Something she could not give a name? Was it love? It troubled her.

She had met men, all types and varieties and temperaments. She had golfed with them, danced

with them, ridden with them, crossed social swords with them at house parties and on yacht cruises. She had looked at them frankly and fearlessly; assayed them; asked herself with a cold brain if she could think of herself as wife to any of them,—with all which wifehood, to a girl like herself, implied. The answer had always been negative, from repulsion or indifference. She mothered them, she sistered them, she heard their troubles, she even allowed a few of the elect to flirt with her,—in a harmless, blue-blooded way. But as for meeting a man in whose personality she could abandon herself, whom she could tolerate beside her always, in every situation that life might hold, most of all in its great privacies, there had never been such a man. She wondered at times if there would be.

The young architect had gone to the Argentine. For a time he had corresponded with her. She felt a queer little pang and breathed a sigh when news came back one autumn of his marriage to the daughter of an American consul. There had been a young artist whom she had met in Paris. He had grasped her roughly in his arms one night and covered her face and throat with kisses. Strange to relate, she had felt neither insult nor repulsion. But she had discovered him a week later doing the same with another woman. She had laughed a queer little laugh and considered herself the butt of a rather good jest.

She and her mother had completed their world trip; had come back across America; and she had begun her college studies. She had counseled other girls' love affairs. She had been bridesmaid at many weddings. She had beheld love in all its wealth of tenderness and idealism; and she had seen it defiled

and degraded to brutish lust. She knew what love could do, that it was very beautiful and much to be desired. Yet she had a feeling that when she loved, it would be with a force and passion that would melt down the world—her world—and recast it. She must proceed carefully and tolerate no blunders.

The name “Old Mother Hubbard” still clung to her. She could not always approach her medical studies in that cold, impersonal way she felt was necessary for professional success. Human beings were always human beings, never biological cases for the application of abstract logic or the working out of a theorem. At times she wondered if she were constituted to make a success of medicine, particularly obstetrics. She almost believed a course in nursing would have supplied that hunger in her heart to alleviate suffering. But there were so many nurses—the life was at times so proscribed and mechanical——

It was queer that Amos Ruggles had chosen that particular time to make his call. Because a month before, her roommate of the past year had suddenly abandoned her studies to become a wife, had written back from Japan how much her life had been changed and enriched, contending that the course which Madelaine had elected was unnatural and would never wholly bring her Woman Happiness. That hurt most of all. Because of late Madelaine had begun to doubt it herself. And yet, marrying Gordon! Anybody but Gordon!

The fellow had a dread influence over her. She could not describe it. It was cruelly mesmeric. It seemed to have persisted, in spite of all the man’s behavior, since the first day she had beheld his hot young gaze upon her. He had challenged her foster-

mother that in the end he would win her, by fair means or foul. Consistently through the past decade he had kept in touch with her. Something in his eyes declared, “Fight as much as you wish, my pretty lady; I’ll have my way in the end.” Now it was plain that Gordon wanted her, as a man; he must have conveyed that desire to his family or Amos never would have made his call. If Gordon persisted long enough, would he break through her defenses and bear her away in spite of herself? No, no, no!

Romance! What was romance?

The girl went back to her study table and tried to continue her thesis. It was banal and lifeless and drab.

Romance! What was romance!

She threw down her fountain pen and cupped her cheeks with her hands.

Straight before her on the wall was a long, narrow, copper-hued frame. Inside it, a liberal expanse of brown mapping. In the center of the mapping was a faded strip of news-print.

Why was she saving that poem? Who was Nathaniel Forge and why should he write such a poem?

Unconsciously she read over the lines again. And when she had come to the name signed at the bottom, Madelaine Theddon did a strange thing, for Madelaine Theddon. That wonder who Nathaniel Forge might be, and why he should have written such a poem, started her thoughts romancing. That romancing crystallized in a concrete decision. What harm could there be in making a trip up to this Paris, Vermont, in the week of vacation beginning Monday,

and learning what she might of Nathaniel Forge—even looking into his face, perhaps—provided she did not declare her identity or divulge her errand?

The more she thought about it, the more the novelty of the proposal grew upon her. She had saved that poem so long, it had meant so much, that she wanted that wonderment answered.

Could it be possible that Kismet had ordained that the poem purposely should find its way into her life for a beautiful purpose? She would see. Why not?

She put away her ponderous books with their long, italicized words and abstruse meanings. She would go to Paris, Vermont, that following Monday, telling no one.

V

Madelaine arrived in our town at four o'clock of a drab, depressing winter's afternoon. The weather was treacherously balmy. The snow was thin, hard-packed and dirty. Paris in no other season of year looked less attractive or more mediocre. She alighted from the Junction train and walked down the length of the station platform with a little dread. Did she want to know about Nathaniel Forge, after all? Did she really want to see him? Suppose he was hopeless, that the poem had simply been a trick of circumstance and coincidence? Would it not be better to let him remain ever as she had idealized him, whoever and whatever he was, perhaps the One-Who-Might-Have-Been. Then she condemned herself for an emotional, sentimental little weakling, afraid to face facts. She wandered up Depot Street to East Main, carrying a light traveling bag, looking for the hotel.

In her trim tailored suit of green worsted and small mannish hat, she resembled a hundred traveling saleswomen or demonstration women of the better class. Half a dozen drummers so “placed” her before she had been in the Whitney House ten minutes. With a room secured, she started out to see the town.

The town! She wandered up one side of Main Street and down the other. She saw a jumble of drab, discouraged, discordant, chaotic blocks and buildings such as border Main Street in every town of ten thousand inhabitants from the Presidio to Plymouth Rock. Its people were a painfully self-conscious, muddy-shoed procession of everybody not mentioned in Who’s Who and never likely to be mentioned in Who’s Who. The sky was smothered with depressing mist. It shut out the distant mountain sky line. The sordidness and commonness of the community grated—horribly.

A single-track car line wound through Main Street, not much caring whether cars went over it or not. The People’s National Bank, the Bishop Jewelry with the sidewalk clock that was never correct, Joe Service’s News Room, Edwards Brothers’ Cigar Store, The Red Front Grocery, the Michalman Misses-and-Ladies-Suits, the Bon Ton Millinery, the Woolworth Five-and-Ten, the *Daily Telegraph* office with bulletins about the latest developments on the Somme, the Masonic Temple, the Y. M. C. A., Williams Clothing Emporium,—a thousand towns had them and would always have them until America ceased to be. She was glad she possessed a sense of humor. And yet what a dispirited, uninteresting, plodding sort of existence. The plainness and crudity of everything bothered her. It was piteous.

She saw a greasy barber shop next door to the Élite Lunch Room with a fly-speckled sign in the window of the latter: “Eat Here or We Both Starve.” She caught glimpses of rakishly barbered heads moving about pool tables behind a foggy window filled with wrestling-match placards and announcements of dance carnivals. A basket of eggs marked “Fresh at 17c” was set down close to the glass in the window of the Metropolitan Drug Store. A small boy with an enormous fur cap clanked the iron tie-ring in front of a gift shop with a torn awning. A washed-out woman in a hideous hat waited in a sleigh while her husband smoked a five-cent cigar and then came to untie the huge-rumped horse with his big fingers and take his place beside her beneath a ponderous buffalo robe. A long curb-line of carefully groomed young bucks with no place to go but home assayed her figure as she passed in front of the Olympic Movie and commented about her ankles.

She stopped in front of the hotel again and tried to decide what one thing was the keynote to the place and its people. She finally decided it must be the dilapidated Ford truck with a torn and dirty horse blanket thrown over its radiator. The truck was left, headed into the curb in a hay-strewn gutter, in front of the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Store. A flock of pigeons about it were being extremely bothered by the sidewalk traffic.

Madelaine was neither prig nor snob. Yet she wondered how people could possibly pass all their lives in such a place. Especially she pitied the women. She went inside the hotel at last and found that the “Ladies’ Parlor” overlooked the street. Before she made any inquiries as to Nathan, she sank into one of the rockers. As she meditated, with a

little ache of excitement in her heart, other scenes came to her,—scenes she unconsciously compared with the lot of the town's women here. The first lamps of evening blinked on and found her still meditating.

The shape of a hansom clopping through the London fog; a careless laugh floating back on a French boulevard in the hush of a soft, spring night; evening on the Grand Canal with the eternal slap, slap, slap of the water and the memory of a weird song mixed with the musty decay of old palaces; blue-toned Greece where the landscapes were as clear and sharp as far-flung cameos of mountain size; the heat-soaked Holy Land; Sunday morning from the Mount of Olives; breakfast in a Persian camp; noon on a Chinese river; twilight and a Japanese moon riding mystic above eucalyptus trees,—what did the women of such a landlocked little town know of the world's beauties and its far places? Or the men either? The men! Who was Nathaniel Forge and why should he have written such a poem? She wondered if she was beginning to understand.

She had no appetite for dinner—they called it supper up here, she supposed—at least in the dining room where all the first arrivals would leer at her. She went back down to the lobby and approached Pat Whitney, the proprietor.

"I wonder if you could assist me," she said, "in finding a certain type of person in this town for whom I'm looking,"

Pat did not remove his two-inch toothpick. He did try to button his vest.

"Shoot, lady!" he answered.

Madelaine smiled to herself, then "shot."

"I'd like to be directed to some elderly man or woman who has lived a long time here and is acquainted with most of the town's people. Especially those who lived here about ten years ago. I'm hunting a friend. Yet I don't want my business made public. I'd prefer some elderly, accommodating man——"

"That's a cinch!" returned Pat. "Skin around the corner and see Uncle Joe Fodder."

"Uncle Joe Fodder?"

"Yeah; he runs the livery stable. He knows everybody from way back, who their grandmothers was and what the family et for supper the night they was born."

"That's very good of you," returned Madelaine. And she thanked him.

"I'm all yours, Missie," was Pat's rejoinder. He meant no offense. He dealt so with all the "lady drummers".

Madelaine picked her way into the puddle-dotted, straw-strewn livery yard. A single light burned over the big stable door. Another shone through the murky windowpanes of a tiny office at the left.

Three men were in that office with a kindly old fellow who looked exactly as William Cullen Bryant might have looked if William Cullen Bryant had conducted a livery stable in one Vermont community for half a century. He wore a blue gingham shirt, patched trousers and soiled suspenders. But Madelaine liked his eyes.

"Mr. Fodder?" the girl asked.

Three jaws lowered. Three pairs of eyes stared.

Three pairs of front chair legs clumped to the floor. Taking their cue, three specimens of bewhiskered humanity “hoofed along ’bout their business.”

“Mr. Whitney at the hotel sent me to you,” Madelaine declared when they were alone and the soft-eyed old philosopher had dusted a chair and pushed the “spit-box” from sight. “He said you were well acquainted in Paris and could assist me in getting information about a particular person who may, or may not, live here at present. My name is Howland—Allegra Howland—and I come from Springfield, Mass. But my visit here and my business must remain unknown. I’d like you to assure me you’ll keep it confidential before I go further.”

The old man stroked his whiskers gently and his blue eyes smiled.

“Pat claimed I knowed everybody, did he? Wal, wal! He does manage to tell the truth once in a dog’s age. What is it you want to know, daughter?”

“It’s about a man named Forge. Has such a man ever lived here in Paris?”

Madelaine caught the startled expression which for a moment chilled the kindly laughter in those lackluster eyes.

“Which Forge, daughter? Nat or the old man?”

“There are two, then?”

“Nat and Johnathan. Nat’s the boy. Johnathan’s the dad. Which you want to know about?”

“The one called Nathaniel. He—he—several years ago—he—wrote a poem. It interested me greatly. So much so I thought if I ever happened up this way, I’d stop and compliment the poet.”

“Pshaw, now! That’s too bad!”

“Why is it too bad?”

The expression of trouble deepened on the old hostler’s face.

“It’s been quite a spell since Nat writ poetry. His dad sort o’ discouraged it. Nat give it up.”

“He’s a young man, then?” Why did the girl’s heart leap?

“Let’s see, Nat was ten or so when he come to Paris from over Foxboro way. That was in ninety-nine. Now it’s nineteen-fifteen. That’d make Natie ’bout twenty-six at present, wouldn’t it?—yaas, twenty-six!”

“He’s still living here, then?”

“Yaas—he’s still livin’ here. Just now, we’re sort o’ sorry to say, he’s livin’ in jail.”

“In—*jail*!”

It was a diaphragm blow. Madelaine could hear, see, feel, but she could not move. “Why is he in jail?” she asked faintly.

“It’s a long story, ma’am. ’Tain’t exactly a pleasant one. You see, Nat come down here from Foxboro and his old man started a shoe place over next to the Red Front Grocery. Him and his woman always had trouble and I guess ‘twa sort o’ hell for the Forge kids. Nat went to school here a piece, and then was pulled out and set to work for Gridley to the tannery. Old Cal took pity on him, the boy bein’ a good sort o’ kid, and put him in the office. Nat writ poems just after leavin’ school. They tickled old Gridley. He got Hod to print ’em in the *Telegraph*.”

“Gridley? Why, I know a girl named Gridley! And

she came from up around here, too. She went to school with me at Mount Hadley."

"That's the one! Bernice! Went abroad for a spell, didn't she? Then married a millionaire feller from somewhere out Chicawgie?"

"Yes," said Madelaine faintly. "Please go on! It was her father, then. And what about Nathaniel?"

"Well, Johnathan got sick o' cobblin' folkses' shoes. Had a chance to buy Dink Campbell's box-shop. Didn't do very well till young Nat got stuck on a girl from A-higher. Commenced workin' like the devil then, Nat did, to get a stake so's he could marry her. Caleb coached him, I guess. Leastwise the town says so, and Cal ain't never denied it. That was 'fore his woman, the Duchess, died, and Cal started travelin'. Anyhow, Nat worked like sixty down to the box-shop and planned when he was twenty-one he'd marry the kid from A-higher. It was sort o' too bad. She give him the Grand Bounce, married another feller. Pore Natie got it square between the eyes the night he turned twenty-one. He was plannin' on marryin' her the comin' Christmas. Rotten deal! Hurt him awful!"

Madelaine's throat was dry. She nodded.

"Care if I smoke, daughter?" the old man asked.

"Please do," begged the girl. He was that type of picturesque old fellow who looks at a loss without a corncob pipe. Uncle Joe pulled a package of black shag from his hip, took his cob from off his desk and for several moments meditated as he applied the shag to the bowl and tamped it hard with a gnarled forefinger.

"'Course," he went on, as the match flame leaped

several times upon being applied to the top of the pipe, “it’s only natcheral that Natie should ‘a’ been sort of upset and all. Still, we didn’t calculate he’d turn so quick and crazy-like, and pull off the stunt he did. I s’pose he was just homesick for a woman, his Ma being pretty much a jawbones and the home life at sixes and sevens. Anyhow, that very night when Natie learned the other girl had married another feller, he goes plumb to work and marries ‘Cock-eye’ Richards’ eldest girl, Milly—the dumpy one that was always sloppy ’bout her shoes.”

“Married! He’s—married—then?”

“Oh, yaas, he’s married. Got a kid—girl kid! Been married—let’s see—been married better’n five year now. Kid’s pretty good size. Goes to school, I think.”

“Go on,” said the girl listlessly. “You said he was in jail.”

“Yaas—box-shop’s busted—high, wide and handsome.”

“Just how do you mean?”

“Well, Nat got going pretty good there, for a piece. He was working for a stake to marry the A-higher girl like I said, and when a kid’s got his back up to do something big for a girl, there’s times when a team o’ hosses can’t hold him. He was keen enough, too, for a kid. He’d probably come out all right if he hadn’t been sidetracked by marryin’ that dumpy Richards thing. Anyhow, he’d had the business incorporated and hittin’ the high spots and it was making so much money for a spell that lots o’ folks hereabouts bought stock. Bought some myself! But it reached its peak the first year o’ Nat’s marriage. Guess the boy lost heart. Then again, his old man give him trouble. What John didn’t know about

business, any kind of business, would fill a dam' big book. So they pulled and they hauled and they sawed, and with a baby comin', the boy couldn't very well break away. Then him and Milly didn't get along—him bein' a poet and she bein' a cow. Taken altogether, the box-works commenced to slide."

"And now it's reached bankruptcy?"

"'Twouldn't have gone into bankruptcy if old John hadn't had one last walloper of a fight with his woman, and one mornin' showed up missin'. The girl Edith—that's Nat's sister—she holds out for marryin' a feller by the name o' Dubois—French feller from Montreal. Folks objected, her folks. They objected so much she ran off with him one night and the old man couldn't have the marriage busted 'cause there was a fambly comin'. John's woman got scrappin' and blamin' him for makin' a mess o' things generally and so, well—last week he simply pulled his stakes and blowed."

"But why should they put the son in jail?"

"Wal, seems Johnathan got the idea from somewheres that because he was president and had started the business, it belonged to him, 'specially the funds. He forgot there was stockholders been interested. He gets peeved and draws out a rotten lot o' the company's workin' capital. Cripples it so it can't pay its bills. He takes it with him, and God knows where he's gone. The bank folks here certainly'd like to. The stockholders get together and bein' pretty hot under the collar and all, they thinks Nat might blow too, and they claps him in the hoosegow. The bank puts figgerers ont' the books and they found the shop's been losing money for most three years—just eatin' into its capital and eatin' and eatin'. John's skippin' out sorter pulled

down the temple. The boy's helpless, 'cause they set his bail so high there won't nobody go it, though they do say old Caleb in California, or somewheres, has wired he'd come back and lend a hand to straighten things out. But there ain't much hope o' re-openin' the business. Won't pay fifteen cents on the dollar. Feel like a fool about it myself. Had in fifty dollars."

"And how does his mother and wife take it?" Madelaine asked. Not that she particularly cared, but she had to say something.

"Oh, John's woman's mad at the boy; she and Milly don't get along. Then agin, Nat got into the mess by bein' in business with his father—and Anna always did hate his father. She owns the Longstreet property up on Vermont Avenue—leastwise it was put in her name a while back and the courts can't get it. She could go Nat's bail if she would. But she won't. She says it's 'good enough for him.' Let him rot in jail a piece and think it over. Good revenge on John, Nat bein' his son. It's makin' a heap o' talk 'round the village. Milly—Gawd, she ain't got brains enough to boil water; all she can do is wring her hands and weep. Folks say a chap named Si Plumb is shinin' around her—used to be in love with her before she married Nat. But I'm thinkin' that's talk. No, the boy ain't got much help from his women folks. Never did have, for that matter. Sad case, sad case!"

"What became of the sister?"

"She's off up to Montreal. Dubois got a job up there in a paper mill. Ordinary sort o' feller—makes two-seventy-five a day, maybe."

Old Fodder puffed on his pipe for a time.

Madelaine could hear his horses munching their evening oats out in the low-studded stable. Finally she drew a deep sigh.

"Then I guess it would be somewhat embarrassing for me to congratulate him on his poetry just now, wouldn't it? Satisfy a woman's curiosity, Mr. Fodder. What sort of looking man is he? I've drawn a picture of him from his poem and I'd like to know how far I'm correct."

"Fair-lookin' chap!" Uncle Joe poised his shining pipe-stem in mid-air. "Had a fight with this Plumb who they sez is sashayin' round his wife, just now—long time ago. Got a busted ear. Used to have fifty million freckles but them sort o' faded out. Been goin' about the village sort o' seedy-lookin' lately—guess his woman spent a pile, thinkin' he had gobs o' money. Got fair eyes, but sort o' hounded-lookin'. Yes, fair sort o' feller but kinda ordinary. Feel sorry for him myself."

Madelaine laughed. She affected an indifference she did not feel.

"I'm awfully obliged to you, Mr. Fodder. This information has forestalled an awkward situation. And you'll forget I came to see you, won't you?"

"Sartin! Sartin! Stoppin' in the place long?"

"No, I'm going down-country to-night."

"Well, glad to metcher. Ever stoppin' here again, look me up. Want me to say anythin' to Nat 'bout you callin', if he wins out all right?"

"No, no! It was only idle curiosity. He doesn't know me anyway and never will."

"Well, good night. And watch the ice in the yard.

Mare broke a leg there Thursday. Dam' nice mare, too. Had to be shot. Got twelve dollars for her hide. Good night."

Madelaine went out again to Main Street. She strolled about for a time in thought. Her walk brought her in front of the Court House. Nathaniel Forge, the man who had written the little poem that had meant much in her life, was down in a basement cell at that moment—two hundred feet away—ten thousand miles.

She entered the hotel and found she still had no appetite for supper. She asked what time she could catch a train back to the Junction.

"Find yer man?" demanded Pat Whitney.

"Oh, yes," Madelaine answered cheerily enough. "The person I hoped to find isn't here any longer."

VI

Twenty-four hours later she stood in her apartment and took down the copper frame from the wall.

"Married!—A wife and little girl!—*In jail!* And all the time I might have asked Bernice! Oh, well!"

She laughed and called herself a silly fool. She ripped off the backboard of the copper frame and extracted the poem. She found a photograph of her mother and cut it to fit. The frame restored, she picked up the mapping with the slip of news-print pasted thereon. She started to tear it. She did tear it once across. She had started another tear when she stopped. She smoothed the torn pieces out. She found an envelope that would hold them and tucked it away in a bottom drawer.

"Oh, why did I go?" she cried, as she turned once again to her work. "I shot my Bird of Paradise!"

She fell to thinking,—dry-throated, hard-eyed. So Gordon Ruggles wanted to marry her, did he? The rotter!

Romance! What was Romance?

CHAPTER II

GROPING TERRIBLY

I

Into the town lock-up came Caleb Gridley. And Caleb Gridley was one mad man.

It was four-thirty of a gray afternoon in March. The local police force tilted back in its chair with its feet on its desk and perused the day's issue of the *Telegraph* with the official corncob of the department exquisitely odoriferous and the atmosphere of headquarters suggesting gas masks, cheese knives and quickly lowered windows.

"So this is how you earn taxpayers' money!" snarled the tanner. "Where's young Forge?"

The police force lowered its paper and blinked at old Caleb in stupefaction. The last known address of the tanner had been Los Angeles.

"Where'd you come from now?" it demanded weakly.

"None o' your damn business where I come from now. What's the idea o' jailin' an innocent youngster

like Natie Forge for his old man's cussedness? That's what I wanner know and I'm gonna find out. Somebody's goin' to answer for this—and they're goin' to answer to me!"

The police force gradually recovered from this astonishing levitation of the Gridley corpus across three thousand continental miles. It became human and a servant of the public, meaning Caleb.

"You needn't blame me. I ain't got nothin' against him. All I do is carry out the law."

"Well, carry it out now and never bring it back. Where's the boy? Got him here?"

"Sure I got him here. Wanner see him?"

"What the devil do you think I'm here for—to gaze at your homely mug, maybe?"

Gridley followed the police force out into the rear corridor and down the twin rows of steel cages until they reached the last on the left. A drawn-faced figure looked up anxiously.

"Got visitors, Nat," announced the department. "Friend o' yours! Gridley!"

Caleb walked into the cell—as big-bodied, small-headed, beefy-jawed as ever—derby on the back of his head, big hands in trousers pockets, fully prepared to make hamburg of the entire penal system of the State of Vermont.

"Well, bub," roared the tanner, "what sort o' fumi-diddles is this, anyhow?"

"Mr. Gridley!" gasped the young prisoner. Then repeating the department's question: "Where'd you come from now?"

"California! Got a wire from your old-maid

schoolteacher—the Hastings female—one that learned you poetry writin', remember? Come east to see what kind o' horseplay they're puttin' over on you, anyhow." To the department: "Mike, you get air in the space you're now occupyin'! Me'n Nat may wanner discuss poetry. And poetry's somethin' just natcherly outter your class."

The boy rose unsteadily. Inability to exercise had left his muscles flaccid.

The tanner was a trifle shocked by the changed appearance of the young man's face. Every spare ounce of flesh had disappeared. The skin was drawn tightly over the bones. Every turn of the jaw and depression of the cheek was sharply defined. Yet for all its leanness, it was the countenance of a young man grimly determined to find himself; not to give way to weakness and self-pity. It was growing into a strong face. The lips came together with exquisite precision. The muscles on each side the mouth were cable-heavy. Only the eyes showed his true state of mind. They were hollow and hounded.

"You came—from California—to help *me*?" The boy put out a hand.

Suddenly Caleb opened his gorilla arms. They encircled the lean young torso, pulled Nathan tightly to the tobacco-daubed vest. Those huge arms squeezed half the life out of him and then began belaboring him crazily on the back.

"Ain't got no license to go hoofin' all over the dam' planet when I might better be seein' to things right here in Paris! Bub! Bub! They been takin' pounds o' flesh away from your heart. I can see it in them eyes!"

"You heard how I landed here?" the boy asked

gravely, evenly, a moment later, when Caleb had released him. Caleb had to release him, else Nat could not have said it.

Caleb did something to his nose with a handkerchief. The noise of it suggested he would blast Nat from his confinement with one terrific explosion.

“Yeah! Fodder told me, comin’ up on the ’bus. But to hell with how you got here! Point is, how we goin’ to get you out.”

“Judge Wright set my bail at ten thousand dollars. My old chum Bill did everything short of hocking his interest in the *Telegraph*, trying to raise it. Seventy-five hundred in cash-money was the best he could do. So I’ve just had to wait here—and wait and wait and wait. It’s been horrible. For the first time in my life I’ve found out how long an hour can be—or a day—or a week. That terrible helpless feeling—being shut up like an animal in a cage, powerless. It’s done for me.”

“Naw it ain’t done for you! You’re good as you ever was, and a darn sight better. But that’s neither here nor there—as the feller says when he was chasin’ the hen. Point is, you gotta get out where you can do some fightin’. How much’d she bust for? The box-shop?”

“Counting liabilities to stockholders, twenty-two thousand.”

“How much is the bank in for?”

“About twelve.”

“How much’d your old man swipe?”

“Close to ten.”

“B’damn, we’ll fix this lock-up business, quick enough! But why the devil didn’t your Ma come forward with her house?”

“She said it was all she had to show for a life of hard work. She was afraid of losing it,” responded Nathan humorously.

“But it was only leavin’ it as bail.”

“I know. She doesn’t understand.”

“Does she think more o’ that damn property than she does of her boy?”

“Apparently! No, that’s unfair. She thinks I should be punished a while for keeping on with father. She wanted me to oust him a long time ago. But I couldn’t, even if I’d wanted. He had control of the stock. I can’t blame her. It’s hard to blame people who haven’t the capacity to understand.”

“Trouble with you, young feller, you’re too soft-hearted for your own good. You need to cultivate a little healthy selfishness. Never mind! Maybe if you was selfish so, I wouldn’t love your dratted young hide like I do—always goin’ and landin’ in scrapes. Well, just thought I’d call in on my way to give Hentley hell, and tell you I was here on the job. You wait a few minutes till I’ve fixed this bail stuff. Then we’ll go out somewheres and assault food and talk it over. Down to the box-shop, maybe, and have a look-see round.”

“We can’t go down there. The shop’s in charge of the sheriff. They won’t let us in.”

“Won’t they, though? I’d like to see the goofus-brained pie-eater in this tank-town as would stop me. I’d pull out his nose a coupla feet and tie a knot in it!”

II

It was after ten o'clock when Nathan reached his home. He had eaten with Caleb and then gone to the box-shop. Milly did not know of her husband's freedom until he admitted himself into their cold front hall and opened the sitting-room door beyond.

"You!" she cried, springing up. "Have you broke jail, or—what?"

"Caleb Gridley came back from California this afternoon. He bailed me. You needn't worry, Milly. It's coming out all right."

"You mean the shop's goin' to start again?"

"It's too badly smashed for that. But they won't blame me—I mean to hold me responsible for anything that father——"

"But the disgrace! Oh, my Gawd! Think o' what this means to me!" The wife turned angrily. "And little Mary!" she snapped over her shoulder.

"I couldn't help it, Milly. I didn't know dad was going to loot the business."

"Seems to me you oughta been smart enough to stop it—somehow. I used to think you was awful smart, once. But you certainly fooled me, Nat. You fooled me good."

"Thanks!"

"Don't give me none o' your cheap lip!"

Nathan stood with hands clasped behind, face sadly downcast, looking at his wife's back.

Milly was stouter than when she had worked in the box-shop. She had also coarsened. Her washed-out hair was gathered in a hasty knot at the back of

her neck. “Scolding locks” stuck out at wild angles. The back of that neck was flat and homely. She wore a gingham house dress that was torn in the front and she could have materially improved her appearance by discarding her apron.

“Well,” she demanded, without looking around, “if the shop ain’t going to start up, what you aimin’ to do?”

“I haven’t thought that far yet. Get a job, probably. Go to work!”

“S’pose old Gridley would set you up in somethin’?”

“I wouldn’t ask him, even if he would.”

“But what about me, I say? What about Mary?”

“You won’t starve. I’ll see to that.”

“You’ll see to that! Huh! You couldn’t even see yourself out of jail! Gridley had to come clean from California and see it for you!”

“Milly, don’t let’s have any argument to-night. Please! I’m nearly all in.”

“So am I all in! You never give a thought about me!”

“Is there anything to eat in the house?” was Nat’s way of turning the edge of the altercation.

Milly shrugged her shoulders. Nathan went out into the cluttered, odorous kitchen and hunted around for food.

He found a stale frankfurter and a piece of soggy pie. He drew a glass of cold water and sat down to satisfy his hunger with the indigestible mess.

“Mary cut her finger this afternoon,” announced

the wife. “I had to get Doc Johnson to see to it.” Milly, it had developed, was one of those persons who summon a doctor for every indisposition known to medicine from plain old-fashioned stomachache to falling off the roof and breaking a neck.

“I’ve got something else to think about now, Milly, besides Mary cutting her finger.”

“Yeah! I s’pose you have. You’re just like your father. A devil of a lot you care about your women folks!” Milly rammed the fire angrily and poked most of the live coals through into the ash-pan. “The fire’s out!” she snapped. “And there ain’t any wood.”

“But I gave you money to buy wood only last Friday.”

“Dad’s out o’ work. Nellie’d have to give up her pianner lessons if Ma didn’t have money from somewheres till dad’s took on again. I loaned it to her. Blood’s a little thicker in our family than it is in yours, Nat Forge!”

The food Nat had eaten failed to digest. He was tired and distraught and broken. But he kept his temper.

“Let’s go to bed and talk it over in the morning,” he begged. “I told you I’m nearly all in. Can’t you see it?”

“No, sir! You don’t go to bed, Nat Forge! Not till you’ve made this fire outta somethin’. You don’t catch me crawlin’ out into a cold house when Mary wakes up in the mornin’ and buildin’ no fire like your mother used ter. Not while you lie abed and enjoy yourself. Besides, it’s so cold to-night the pipes’ll freeze. Go down and smash up the piano box, if you can’t find anything else.”

Nathan lighted a lantern, went into the cellar and found kindling. When he had the fire negotiated, Milly was in bed with the little daughter,—a small bed in the side room.

Nathan had to go into another bedroom, where the hoarfrost was furry on the glass, and crawl between icy sheets alone.

He thought of many things that night, for sleep refused to come. Most of all he thought of Carol. He wondered what had become of her, where she was living and if she was happy. Then his thoughts turned to his father, and he wondered how easily Johnathan was resting that night, with his theft on his soul and the desertion of his family on his spirit. He thought of his mother up in the big ark on Vermont Avenue, crazed by the possibility that the court might wrest away her property by that iron process known as The Law. He thought of his sister, married to a French laborer, with a baby coming, up in Canada. He thought of Bernie Gridley and her father's report of her satisfactory marriage to a Chicago millionaire. He thought, step by step, back to his boyhood and his days with me in Foxboro—happy, care-free days.

"Oh, God," he whispered in the dark. "Why do things happen so? Where's the reason behind it all—for there must be a reason? Do events and experiences come hit-or-miss—by chance—in this world? It can't be!"

Nathan asked himself if he were doing right, living thus with Milly when he seemed to have nothing in common with her but their child,—when he did not love her? Marriage? What was marriage? Did it mean merely living in the same house with a woman, eating at the same table, sharing the same bed? Or

did marriage mean something finer and higher and better than that, something which he had missed? Something which his father had caused him to miss. What was that Something? Where should he go to look for it? What must he do? He had to confess he did not know. He had no standards by which to judge, no training to help him. Even Caleb Gridley could not help him there. He remembered that Caleb had seemed vaguely relieved when the Duchess had passed on.

Out of the ruck of all the fellow's bittersweet memories, his present perplexities, the foggy blur of the future, one fact stood preeminent, however.

He must go on. Somehow he must go on. Perhaps time would solve the problem, supply the great answer. But——

He must go on.

III

The night Fred Babcock married them, there had been no place for Nathan to take his bride but the local hotel. He would not take her to his father's home; he did not care to go to Milly's. They had separated for an hour, each going for their "things", pitifully meeting at the Whitney House later to set sail on the tempestuous seas of mismated connubiality.

Nathan had found his father pacing the same room, wild-eyed, wild-faced, wild-haired, hands thrust deep in trousers pockets. The room was in wreckage. His mother was in an adjacent apartment, eternally rocking, rocking, rocking, considering her troubles in the dark. Father and mother quickly

forgot their differences, however, when they beheld Nathan coming down the front stairs, suitcase in either hand.

"Where you going?" demanded Johnathan sharply.

"To the hotel."

"You're going nowhere of the sort. Put those valises back upstairs. No story'll go 'round this town if I can help it, that the very night my son turned twenty-one, he packed his traps and scooted."

"Do you think I'm going to bring a wife into this?"

"Bring a what?"

"A wife!"

"Wait till you've got a wife before you talk about bringing her into anything. Put those suitcases back upstairs!"

"But I've got a wife. I married one at nine o'clock."

In the darkened room Mrs. Forge's rocker went over with a bump, she sprang from it so quickly. Johnathan reached out a hand and clutched the banisters.

"You married one at nine o'clock? Who have you married?"

"Mildred Richards. Good night!"

Nathan left his apoplectic parents standing side by side.

"*Oh, my God!*" groaned Johnathan. He staggered to the stairs and sat down flaccid, his face buried in his hands. He remained that way for half an hour.

Mrs. Forge walked slowly back into the wrecked dining room. She stood looking out one of the

windows, with clenched fists pushed against her hips, face twitching, biting one corner of her upper lip so nervously it was difficult to discern which was twitch and which was bite.

After that first tragic half-hour, Mrs. Forge's thinking amounted to this: Nathan had packed his clothes and gone to a wife and those clothes were not in a very happy state of laundering. She had put off her wash that week until she could get a new wringer. She still did her own washing. Laundries mangled clothes so.

It would be hectic to follow on into the week, the month, the year which followed, in so far as Nat's marriage affected his father. A competent psychologist might have explained Johnathan, but explaining him would have availed Nathan little nor lightened his load. Johnathan's ultimate attitude was:

He had preserved stainless the morals and directed successfully, though thanklessly, the spiritual education of his son for twenty-one wasted years. The lad had turned out incorrigible. That did not alter the fact that Johnathan had done his duty. His conscience was now clear. He had discharged his obligations to God and State. He was a free man.

The attainment of his majority and the acquisition of a "helpmeet" left Nathan to be treated as a man. And the chief incident in that treatment was a deliberate campaign soon started for a show-down to determine who was to be manager of that box-shop.

The effect on the business did not seem to occur to Johnathan. Or if he thought about it, he told himself the business was so large he could afford to lose occasionally for the sake of winning a principle.

Not once did the man realize or admit the rights of stockholders, or consider them on a par with himself in the matter of ownership. Stockholders were but a step raised above “help.” They had merely been privileged to share in a small portion of the company’s annual profits. Fiddlesticks with stockholders!

Nathan had kept the firm “right side up” and always progressing in the right direction. Johnathan had thereby gained the idea that businesses—at least manufacturing businesses—once established, ran themselves. By sheer force of organization! He now set out deliberately and maliciously to checkmate his son and retard him in every way he could conceive. The business was a bit beyond Johnathan’s grasp. So he decided upon a policy of “retrenchment.”

“Retrenchment” became his slogan and the motto on his ensign. Refusing to order necessary office and factory supplies was “retrenchment.” Turning down requests for quotations on new business on the ground that the company already had business enough was “retrenchment.” “Docking” a little flaxen-haired stenographer a half-day’s wages when she went home ill at three in the afternoon was “retrenchment.” Anything and everything that could discount Nathan, discredit his administration, get the employees dissatisfied with the boy’s management, curtail production so to show a loss which could be triumphantly charged to Nathan—all this was “retrenchment”—most commendable “retrenchment.” Nathan grew to abhor the word.

At such times as the father succeeded in his policy and the boy was humiliated and stopped, Johnathan waved his hand grandly and said: “You see! Some day you will grasp that your father is older and

therefore must know better!" To beat Nathan and get his word doubted or his ability discounted among employees or stockholders pleased Johnathan more than declaring a twelve per cent dividend.

Nathan had flouted his father, deliberately plunged into matrimony in spite of all his father's threats and admonitions. He had made his bed. Now let him lie in it. But in addition, Johnathan, as the mocked parent, intended to see that the bed was as hard, knotty and acanaceous as the father knew how to make it.

If Nathan didn't like all this, let him quit. He, Johnathan, had managed to exist a considerable time before Nathan came into it; he guessed he could take care of himself and his business "for a while yet."

But Nathan had made a discovery which comes ultimately to many organizers and builders,—that there is a point where the human creator may become slave to the thing created.

It was easy enough for people to declare wrathfully that Nathan should leave the box-shop and strike out for himself to teach John a lesson. They did their thinking superficially. Nathan had built that business under old Caleb's coaching. He had a thousand details at his finger tips. Large numbers of humble folk had invested in the company's stock, and there were the bank loans. The boy knew his father could not run the plant, that chaos and failure would follow swift and sure upon his retirement. And because of this knowledge, practical experience and large bump of moral responsibility, the boy believed he had obligations which he could not entirely sacrifice to self-interest. The business owned him. He must go on, not because of his father, but in spite of him. Perhaps Johnathan

might be persuaded to drop out or dispose of his stock. Better still, he might die. Or the bankers and stockholders might some day learn the truth in a way that would not jeopardize the business. In that event, merit and loyalty must be rewarded. But nothing of the sort happened.

Johnathan had controlling stock in the company, and he saw to it that he kept controlling stock in the company. He would no more have considered making Nat a present of a block than he would have considered making the boy a present of his severed hand. He had worked hard for all he possessed, Johnathan had. His father had never helped him. Besides, Nathan had proven himself incorrigible. He had married against his father's wishes. Therefore let him suffer the full penalty,—or get out and hustle and cultivate the acquisitive faculty for himself.

Anyhow, Nathan received no stock and he continued in the large capacity of General Superintendent. The most he could screw from the business was thirty dollars a week, and Johnathan constantly reminded him that this was far more than any boy of twenty-two had any title or right to expect. At twenty-two, he, Johnathan, had drawn only eight dollars a week; why on earth should Nathan receive more? Because he was married, with an establishment of his own? What a reason! Johnathan had wasted the best years of his life thwarting Nathan's propensity toward just that dilemma. Why recognize and regard incorrigibility by turning over profits to a young upstart, even in the form of salary? Beside, he was committed to a policy of vigorous "retrenchment."

This situation at the shop was something Mildred could never understand. She and her family had

assumed that marrying Nathan meant marrying Millions. Both had believed that with the Monday following the nuptials, it was to be Milly's delirious destiny to dip her red, paste-bedaubed fingers into the Forges' golden pile and exist forever after in castles in Spain. The realization that she must keep her domestic budget inside of thirty weekly dollars came as a blunt shock. "Why, that's only ten dollars more than father makes; it's just like Ma's had to do all her life!" cried the angry, astounded girl. Nevertheless, it was the truth, the brutal truth. And early she made Nathan feel that he had buncoed her.

Nathan's subsequent estimate of Milly was no more satisfying. He had met her at the hotel that first night, convinced Pat Whitney they were properly married and been given one of the lower front rooms. It was Milly's first contact with a real bathroom, and "a regular tub" as she expressed it. In fact, the whole experience for a time was not unlike a glorious entrance into marble halls of which all heroines daydreamed in the Elsie books. The two features of their apartment which most interested and impressed her were the globular receptacle on the washstand which, being inverted, spilled liquid soap, and the hemp rope with handles on it coiled on a hook beside a window for use in case of fire. She rather hoped there would be a fire. It might be interesting, going down that rope. Milly had heard that vaguely mystic phrase, "Hotel life." She decided she liked "hotel life." Everything was so convenient and "classy" and modern.

Nathan's first disillusion came when the girl started boldly to disrobe and toss her clothing about on the chairs and the status of her undergarments was disclosed. There were many disillusions that

night and the day and week ensuing. Milly had never before seen pyjamas at close range. “Gawd, Ma,” she confided awesomely next day, “he goes to sleep in white pants! You oughta see ’em!”

Nathan awoke first, the following morning,—that cold, much celebrated dawn commencing the “day afterward.” He looked upon the features of his still-sleeping wife as a man coming from *metempsychosis*. She wore a heavy flannel nightgown which had once been pink, buttoned to her throat with Chinese chastity. Her marcelled pompadour was shoved over one ear. Her mouth was open and several teeth needed immediate dental attention. A shudder ran through the boy. He was in bed with an utter stranger, with whom he had nothing in common,—a female of whom he knew little excepting that she had always lived on the edge of the “flats” with multitudinous brothers and sisters, and that her father skinned cows. And he had promised to love, honor and cherish her until death! He suddenly wanted to flee Milly, his parents, the business, Paris, everything,—in a panic.

Yet he could have forgiven his new wife many deficiencies, perhaps, if she had supplied that thing he had most expected: Sanctuary in her arms.

Milly had supplied no sanctuary in her arms. If Milly had arms, they were far from the purpose of solacing distraught masculinity. Milly’s arms were very necessary connections between her paste-bedaubed hands and her ample shoulders. Nothing more. What else did he expect them to be?

Nathan was shocked. She was a Woman, wasn’t she? He had made her his wife. She had said that she loved him and asked him if there were anything she could do to make him happy. What, then, was

wrong?

A small-town Pygmalion waited for the conjugal Galatea he had created to be struck with divine fire and return his embrace gloriously. But divine fires, alas, rarely impregnate dough pans.

Nathan had made the sickening mistake that millions of poor youngsters make piteously every day,—that keeps divorce mills grinding to the horror of sanctimonious religionists: He had mistaken Sex for Ladyhood.

Instead of Milly inviting Nathan into Carmel, it was the man who descended to the girl as though she were a coarse-grained child.

Milly in propinquity with her suddenly acquired husband was the charwoman who had found a wounded demigod by the wayside and did not know what to do with him, nor exactly how to treat him, after his bruised hulk—Olympus ostracized—was hers for the taking.

Nathan and Milly, however, were married. In *metempsychosis* or no, the lad had assumed obligations he felt he could not retract. A home might solve the problem. So Nathan set about acquiring a home. With an eye to the limitations of thirty dollars, he rented the Mills cottage on Pine Street,—a six-room structure of poor sanitary equipment and no furnace. His first purchases were two stoves,—one set up in the kitchen, the other in the "sitting room." Milly, her first shock of disillusion over, proceeded to make the best of a bad bargain.

IV

It quickly developed that she had a passion for

soap clubs and a dangerous propensity toward buying from agents. The former was the more harmless for some deliberation was usually given to premiums. But those agents!

Milly bought a twelve-volume set of encyclopedias “on time” before she and Nathan had found a bedroom carpet. She bought several “shrieking” rugs from Armenian peddlers and a banquet lamp in anticipation of domestic equipment to be requisite when the Forges had attained to banquets. She was imposed upon for patent mops and cheated on carpet beaters. She laid in enough stove polish to shine all the baseburners in Paris County. Nathan came home one night and found himself in debt for an upright piano, twenty dollars down and five dollars a month until death. Milly thought it was “just simply grand” and contracted to begin music lessons before she had sheets enough for her beds.

But her wildest orgies were carried on in the depths of the local “five and ten.”

Milly swore by F. W. Woolworth as by a savior. Nathan gave her fifty dollars to temporarily furnish her pantry, more money than she had ever held in her hands at one time in all her past life. Twenty-five dollars she “slipped” to her mother to get all her younger brothers and sisters some shoes. With the other half she “descended” on the five-and-ten.

She bought all her dishes and pantry ware from the five-and-ten. She bought ribbons, pictures and three cardboard wastebaskets. She bought flour sifters that wouldn’t sift and tack pullers that wouldn’t pull. She procured a huge cambric bag and came home each night, straining beneath it or with a young brother pulling it on his sled. Saturday afternoon she had twenty-five cents remaining. She

hunted the five-and-ten anxiously for five articles of a nickel apiece which “might come in handy around the house.” Her last purchase was a half-dozen lead pencils. They slipped from her moth-eaten muff before she reached her gate however.

The Forge home became a jumble of nothing in particular but in character somewhat weird. A mahogany rocker, a mission center table, a golden-oak what-not (secondhand) and a gilt corner chair were exhibits A, B, C and D in the front room. The walls of the house not hung with small ten-cent pictures were spattered with colored postcards on big pins,—from Savin Rock or Nantasket Beach. The chaotic total of all this shabby gentility shocked Nathan when he beheld it. He decided it was a lack of money. He didn’t possess enough to furnish a home like the Seavers of previous mention. But he did make a start the first Christmas by surprising Milly with a quartered-oak Victrola to harmonize with the mission center table, the idea being to unify eventually the scheme of the room as more bizarre effects could be culled out. But three things happened to the Victrola with lamentable swiftness. First, Milly decided it wasn’t the center table she wanted the Victrola to match; it was the installment piano. So without consulting Nathan she went as usual to the “five-and-ten” and bought a half-dozen cans of “paint” whose outer labels bore some resemblance to the color of the piano. The effect on the beautiful, dull, mission finish was not at all what Milly had anticipated; in fact, the Victrola looked as though it had weathered a bad attack of cherry measles. The painting was still a *casus belli* in the Forge “parlor” when Jake Richards’ youngest child pulled out most of the records one Sunday afternoon and broke them; they “cracked with such a nice

noise!" Lastly, young Tommy Richards decided during an after-school visit to his sister that something ailed the "works" of the Victrola and they emphatically needed fixing. So he dug out an alarming array of "five-and-ten" tools, everything in fact but an ax, and proceeded to "fix" them. The novelty of it palled on him after he had pinched a finger, and he deserted the science of melodious mechanics entirely when he unscrewed a mysterious metal compartment and the mainspring exploded in his face. Mechanically speaking, he got beyond his depth. He discreetly vanished and the Victrola sang not again.

Nathan's first quarrel of note with Milly resulted from the appropriation of the married sister's home by the Richards tribe as an extension of their own. My friend made the additional discovery common to many men who have wedded Sex instead of Ladyhood, that he had also married the girl's family. As soon as Milly had sorted out her Woolworth dishes and run up a thirty-dollar bill at the Red Front Grocery, she affected to demonstrate her housewifery by inviting all of that family to dinner,—Sunday dinner. And her family came. Great was the coming thereof.

Nathan held a dim idea there had been various brothers and sisters in the Richards house across the "flats." But that first Sunday dinner was a revelation —likewise the alarming quantities of food it required to satiate them. The Forge larder reasonably resembled "a land overflowing with milk and honey" before they came. After they had gone, that thirty-dollar commissary had been attacked as by a plague of Egyptian locusts. Nathan, however, had not begrudged the food. What bothered him most was

their methods of assimilation. There had been little or no table etiquette at Johnathan's house. But such as it had been, it was courtly beside the demonstration in "manners", or lack of them, revealed at that first Sunday dinner as well as in many hectic repetitions.

When the Richards tribe recovered from their awe of Nathan, discovered him quite a mortal being with two arms, two legs and a propensity to consume food at conventional intervals like themselves, they "pitched in." The younger children squalled and fought over smaller delicacies. Two of them enjoyed a pleasing altercation with pieces of baked potato. Mother Richards held the baby against a moist breast and allowed the little barbarian to pull a plate of soft squash pie into her lap. This was lamentable but cute. Undoubtedly Nathan had pulled a plate of soft squash pie into his mother's lap at "thirteen months."

Nathan took issuance with old Jake one Sunday, however, for producing a flat, brown hip-flask and using copious draughts therefrom to "give him an appetite." Thereafter old Jake "made his vittles set right" with more. The lad, sick of the whole Richards tribe, at the frayed end of his patience generally, advised old Jake in hot phrases to work up his appetites and make his vittles set right with alcohol elsewhere,—never to repeat the disgusting performance in his home again. A dour time followed. Old Jake had imbibed enough to be quarrelsome. Milly took her father's part. She called Nathan a hypocrite because "he couldn't stand the sight of a little hooch." It was her house as well as Nathan's and if Nathan didn't like it, she guessed she knew what he could do. Which Nathan did. He grabbed old Jake by turkey neck and trouser seat

and threw him out into the mud. Old Jake's flask and hat followed. So did the Richards tribe, though they went voluntarily and sidestepped the mud. They swore they had been insulted; they would never set foot in Nathan's house again. But a month later they were back; old Jake had apologized, he had said "blood was thicker than water" and it didn't pay to hold grudges. And they descended on the large assortment of table delicacies purchased the previous evening at the Élite Bakery and ate until the boy wondered if sheer hunger hadn't driven them back. He thought they must conserve their appetites during the week to distend their stomachs on Sunday noon at his expense.

The same superficial logicians who would acclaim Nat a weakling for not leaving his father to learn his lesson at the box-shop would undoubtedly have the boy kick his way out of the domestic slough in which he had slipped now, get divorced and make a fresh start elsewhere. Very good indeed for those able to see the situation in perspective or whose enlightenment permits them so to decide the matter for their own gratification. Nathan could not see the situation in any perspective; he had little training and less enlightenment to help him decide any matter; he only knew that in his heart was a blind, piteous groping for something higher and better, knew instinctively that this sort of thing was not for him and that he had blundered, blundered horribly. But how to correct that blunder was quite another question.

There was a baby coming!

The lad couldn't bring himself to cast aside or leave a woman "in Milly's condition" as Mother Richards sighed over it. One narrow mistake, made

far back the day Mrs. Forge had whirled on her small son and scared him so badly anent sex, had been followed by another and another. As he grew older, blunder after blunder had rolled up, like a ball of soft snow juggernauting down hill. Now he was about to become a father, temperamentally a pathetic mixture of half man, half boy himself. No, he could see no self-justification in separating from Milly. Not then. And things went from bad to worse.

The baby was born and any neatness and housewifery which Milly may have shown before its arrival were quickly dispensed with, “caring for baby.” Milly apparently spent whole days and weeks “caring for baby.” Her floors went unswept and her dishes went unwashed. Nathan subsisted on various sticky pastries procured from the Élite Bakery. With increasing frequence he was advised frankly to “go up town and get his supper” because “care of baby” had so preoccupied the shining hours that Milly hadn’t even had time to do up her hair. Which was self-evident. If she “did up her hair” twice a week, she performed the extraordinary. She “twisted it up for comfort” in the morning and it was still twisted up for comfort when she retired at night. And Milly was always overworked, frightfully overworked. She said so. Nathan had to listen. All this, while Johnathan was doing his utmost at the factory to show his son that he was wrong in everything on general principle and all the trouble between father and son was Nat’s conceit, incorrigibility and inherent animosity against “retrenchment.”

Nathan had heard somewhere about the queer, constricted twinge which comes to a father who feels the tiny fingers of his first-born grip his own. Nathan felt no such twinge. The baby was born at the

Richards' home across the "flats." Nathan had wished his wife to go to the local hospital but Milly was shy of hospitals. She called them "butcher shops." Nathan ate his meals at the Élite the week preceding the great event and slept in an unmade bed in a slovenly house. Then one mid-afternoon young Tom burst into the box-shop office. Excitedly he accosted Nathan.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Yer kid's come! An' I lost my bet with Mickey Sweeney. I said it was gonna be a boy and the darn thing's cost me thirty cents!"

Nathan went at once to the "house across the flats." The baby was much in evidence, or its lungs were. Nathan thought it sounded like the Victrola when the needle ran off and played one horrible sound over and over.

The child looked like a worm and was hideously homely. Mrs. Richards refused to let him take it. He could see Milly "sometime to-morrow."

He went back to the shop. Six men had "walked out cold" because Johnathan had seized upon his enforced absence to insist they load a freight car his way and in the defiance of a method Nathan and the men had spent months in perfecting.

"Huh! Father, are you?" sniffed Johnathan. "And the milk isn't wiped off your own chin yet. A father! Fiddlesticks!"

Five years of this, incredible as it may seem, and now the box-shop had gone the way of all flesh.

Nathan slept in the dark, old Caleb and myself the only sincere friends he had on earth.

Oh, Mediocrity! What crimes against youth may be committed in thy name!

V

The evening following Nathan's release from custody, my mother met me as I entered our home, the hour about seven-thirty.

"Nathan's ill," she declared. "I met the Doctor's wife at the missionary meeting this afternoon and she told me. He ate something last night that disagreed with him and had a bad case of acute indigestion along toward morning. But the Doctor says what really ails Nat is a general nervous breakdown and collapse. You'd better go over. If there's anything I can do, let me know. I'll keep your supper in the fireless cooker."

I went to the Pine Street cottage.

Milly had always distrusted me. She said Nathan "carried tales" to me about herself and her folks. Therefore she was customarily surly when she admitted me.

I found Nathan in a side room, the place warmed by a stinking oil heater. He was lying on his stomach in a rumpled bed, his fevered face buried in his arms. He turned over when I entered. He smiled grimly. Milly stood at the door for an instant and then said—to Nathan:

"Guess you'll live till I get back. I'm going down to mother's. Ruth's having a party and——"

"Yeah!" shrieked little Mary, "and they're gonna have ice cream!"

So Mildred and the child slammed out of the house. I scooped an armful of miscellaneous clutter from a chair and swung it over to Nat's bedside. But first I lowered the window and changed the air.

“I’m glad you’ve come, Bill,” he said huskily. “If it wasn’t for you and old Gridley, there’s times it seems I’d be almost ready to quit.”

“Buck up, old man,” I told him. “Nothing’s so bad that it can’t be worse.”

“Yes, I know! And God Almighty hates a quitter! But I’m so muddled and antagonized and shot to pieces physically that I’ve almost lost my grit to go on. I’ve lost it, Billy, because somehow I can’t see much incentive for going ahead.”

We talked then as men will talk. We were not choice as to metaphor or idiom. We discussed The Sex with relieving frankness; we did not refer to spades as long-handled agricultural implements used to turn over the sod to find fishworms or for the digging of graves.

“Bill! Bill!” my friend cried feverishly. “Tell me what it’s all for! Tell me why it’s happened to me like this! Tell me where I’ve erred! Tell me how it’s all to end! What’s the constructive meaning in it all, Bill,—and is there any constructive meaning?”

Tell him? How could I tell him? How could I make him see that his present predicament was as simple a dénouement of causes set in motion years back as it was natural for a field of waving corn to follow the dropping of potent yellow kernels in the spring.

Married to a cheap woman who “guessed he wouldn’t die” before she returned from a party where the chief item of interest was ice cream, lying in a slovenly claptrap of a home, excoriated by thoughtless local people, facing a court hearing and possible disgrace, laden with domestic obligations from which there was no escape in honor, as a man of his type conceives honor,—all harked back, I say,

to the first day he had sought enlightenment about sex from the place he should have sought it, his mother, and been shocked instead into vicious repression. That childish “shocking” was an epilogue of all the sordid method of training him. For what? For exactly what Nathan was as he lay this night upon his bed.

The intolerable vileness and injustice of the whole miserable business lay in the fact that the father and mother responsible not only went scot-free from the penalty son and daughter must pay, but saw absolutely no blame for themselves in that dénouement. Blame for themselves? They actually believed themselves wronged.

Nathan rolled feverishly on his rumpled bed.

“Bill,” he rambled on wistfully, “remember the walks and talks we had when we were kids—the nights under the starlight—the boat rides down the river when I looked into the future and the world seemed so beautiful and wonderful, it hurt? I dreamed of a future then, Bill, in which I was affluent and successful—a wonder-time when all my dreams were coming true. And have a look, Bill! I’m loaded with the disgrace of the box-shop failure and half the poor people in town, it seems, weeping over their lost savings; married to a wife I don’t seem to get along with—with a baby that isn’t being brought up at all the way I’d like to see her brought up—paying the bills of a home where I can’t even get food cooked to eat nor a bed made to sleep on—less than a hundred dollars to my name——”

“I’ll loan you whatever money you need, Nat! How much——?”

“Oh, it isn’t that, Bill, it isn’t that! I dreamed of a

wife who'd be a mate and a pal, Bill; one who'd be in a woman all that mother and the rest of the women I've known were not—who could work with me and play with me and laugh with me and love with me—and—and—I've gone to work and tied myself for life to a poor girl who writes her name like a seven-year-old and doesn't know whether Bacon was a poet or something you buy for twelve cents a pound at the butcher's and comes from a hog. I dreamed of a home, Bill—fine and rare and restful and rich, where all my treasures were to be gathered, where lights were seductive and every hour a golden moment—what was that line I quoted to you once, Bill—about 'art drawing-rooms softly shaded at midnight?' And look what I've got! Six rooms cluttered with junk, one step removed from squalor in a mud hut! This is my life, Bill, and I'm only twenty-six! They say America may get drawn into the war. Maybe—maybe—that's going to be my way out. Only somehow, going to war in that spirit and leaving a foul nest behind seems weakness, Bill, not a whole lot different than putting the muzzle of a shotgun into my mouth and pulling the trigger with my foot!"

As I remained silent, he went on:

"Bill, remember the day I told you something about life being a fog—in which I groped blindly? Who's responsible for that fog? Am I responsible, Bill—because I can't find any way out?"

"No!" I cried wrathfully. "Your folks are responsible! Damn them bringing kids into the world and thinking they've done their whole duty by simply giving them food for their bodies and clothes for their backs! Damn the assumption that parents are under no obligation to supply as much protection and training for a child's mind and spirit as the law

demands shall be supplied to its body!"

"I'm groping, Bill! Groping, groping groping! Will I ever find my way out? I wonder? It's too late now to damn father and mother. Poor souls, I'm just beginning to see now they didn't know any better. And the hopeless part of my predicament is that now I'm the father of a child in turn—although somehow I can't feel like a father!—and if I don't play out my hand, the day's coming when my child is going to turn around and execrate me as cordially as I feel like execrating my own folks to-night!"

"The trouble with you is, Nat—you're too darned conscientious for your own good. You've got a great bump of moral responsibility and it fills the whole of the inside of you. What you lack is a good healthy selfishness that would make people—especially your own relatives—quit playing you for a sucker!"

"Easy enough to say, Bill. That's what Caleb Gridley contended. But if I acquired such a selfishness, where would I start in to exercise it? Father? He's gone! Mother? Lord! She'd run shrieking through Main Street and probably end up in an asylum. Besides, after all, she's my mother! Milly? I've married her and burdened her with a child. She's no different than she was when I married her. In so far as she's been given the light, or had the training in turn from her parents, she's doing the best she knows how. No, the trouble with me is, Bill, I'm cursed with the type of mind that unconsciously turns back to causes for every result. And when I analyze those causes, I can't do anything that savors of injustice. I don't think I'm pitying myself when I say that I've known so much injustice myself that I can't find it in my heart to pass more along to others. Folks who have suffered are quicker to detect

suffering, I suppose. They shrink from passing it along. I don't know! Somehow I've learned to judge folks, not by their conscious acts or the results they get, so much as by their motives. But it's got me in a devil of a mess, Bill. And I'm a poor hater—a rotten poor hater. There's dad now, I don't hate him half as much as I did a few years ago. I'm beginning to pity him—for his narrowness and weakness and the things he couldn't understand."

What can be done with a chap like that? I give it up. The predicament simply had to work itself out.

"John and Anna Forge are only types of lots o' parents, William," said Uncle Joe Fodder when I went to the old philosopher for counsel later that week. "Not all of 'em are so narrow and vicious as John and Anna. It isn't always the girl question that gets 'em all het up so they raise Cain with their kids. But most parents is nuts over somethin', and their kids has to take the backwash. And most growed folks don't make theirselves much trouble forgettin' their own kidhood or how they felt about life's big problems while they too was growin'. But the worst sin they're guilty of, William, is bringing kids into the world, raisin' 'em to sixteen, eighteen or twenty-one, maybe—then turnin' 'em loose to shift for theirselves and lettin' the devil take the hindmost. Among all the animals, Man, the highest in development, is the only one that don't take much trouble to show their young how to hunt a livin' or dodge life's traps. And more's the pity! Why, even a woodchuck does better'n that!"

"Oh, well, Nat," I said, as I finally arose to leave that night, "if the allotted span of human life is seventy years, as Holy Writ contends, and you're only twenty-six now, you've got forty-four years

ahead of you yet. And forty-four years can bring many changes, old man. Perhaps all this is only education and training for something finer and grander and sweeter than you've ever dreamed of yet. Only being down close to it and going through it right now to-night it's rather hard to see it."

"You really think so, Bill?" Nathan asked almost piteously.

"Who knows, Nat?"

"I've been studying my Bible a bit, Bill. I'm not ashamed to admit it. Not dad's Bible—*the* Bible. Men in perplexity have been going to the Bible for a long, long time, Bill. And I've been doing a lot of thinking about the words of the psalmist: 'Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth.' I've never forgotten how you and I prayed that poor little kid's prayer that night in the alders after I'd tried to kiss Bernie Gridley. I've done a lot of praying, Bill—I mean to do more. I've wondered if it's true, 'Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth?' Is that the reason I must grope for a time in a fog before finding a hill top where the sun's shining gloriously—and Someone—is waiting for me to come up? I wonder if there is a God—if the world is anything but a little fleck of gravel, twirling off in space—if the hairs of our heads are not numbered—if the sparrows aren't seen when they fall? I wonder, Bill, if the Almighty perhaps—does—love—me? And —that's—the reason?"

My throat grew thick at the way he said it. Nathan on the bed blurred before me. There was nothing maudlin about it.

VI

Nathan was ill two weeks. The affairs of the box-shop were wound up. Nathan was exonerated from any criminal complicity in his father's felony. The fiasco passed into small-town industrial history.

My friend secured a position in the sales department of the knitting mills. A month later he started off on the road. His salary was two thousand a year and a generous bonus in commissions. I think Caleb Gridley was responsible.

VII

Milly considered herself left a widow without a widow's privileges. One night she met Si Plumb on the street and let him take her into the Olympic picture show.

She knew people were commenting and was defiant.

The film was, "Her Right to Happiness." There was a travelogue and a current pictorial beforehand. However, the travelogue and current pictorial didn't count.

CHAPTER III

GOOD RESOLUTIONS

I

Madelaine Theddon had returned from a matinée one spring afternoon when she was met by the announcement that a gentleman had been waiting an hour. Gordon Ruggles arose to greet her.

Madelaine's first feeling was one of extreme annoyance and defiant exasperation. She looked at Gordon, however, and realized in an instant that a change had come over the fellow. What had happened?

"Don't be angry, Madge," he pleaded respectfully enough. "All I want is a few minutes—to talk."

Gordon was clothed differently. His rakish, sport suit had given way to sober black. He stood erect and not with a leering slouch. Most of all, he had visited a surgeon-dentist and that disfiguring front tooth had been corrected. It had been cut off and a crown put in its place which gave his mouth and the entire front of his face a different appearance. Yes, Gordon had changed.

“I’m not angry, Gord. Why, you’re looking fine! What’s happened?”

“Maybe I can explain—if you’ll give me the opportunity. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately, Madge.”

She laid her street wraps on the bed in the adjoining room and came back, patting her hair.

“May I smoke, Madge? It would help what I want to say.”

Might he smoke? It was the first time Gordon had ever made such a request. Formerly he would have smoked whether it offended her or not.

“Certainly,” she replied.

He did not produce his familiar gold-plated cigarette case. He lighted a cigar. Then, having accepted the chair she indicated, he leaned back and put a half-inch of ash on the tip of the fine Havana before he started.

“Madge, I’ve been an awful cad, haven’t I?”

“Yes, Gordon,” was the girl’s candid answer. “You have!”

“I know! I’m sorry!”

“You’re sorry! And how long have you been sorry?”

“Dad came down here to see you, didn’t he—a few months ago?”

“I’ll be frank. He did.”

“Yes. He went back to Springfield. And do you know what he did?”

“What did he do?”

"He gave me the darndest thrashing—the first—he ever gave me in his life. I never suspected he had it in him!"

"What?"

"He did. I wish he'd given it to me a dozen years ago. I had it coming."

Madelaine sat astonished. This from Gordon!

"Yes, he did—and I had it coming, I say. Not only that, he stopped my allowance; I haven't had a cent from him for weeks—months! Four of them!"

"Where—what—how are you supporting yourself?"

"I went to work, Madge. I've been working since the last of February."

"Gordon Ruggles!"

"I don't want any credit. And don't compliment me. I don't deserve it."

"What sort of work are you doing?"

"I got a job in an iron foundry. I make forty dollars a week. And did you know, Madge—honestly—it looks bigger than the whole thousand your mother let me have the day we first met."

Madelaine could not keep her pleasure from her voice.

"That's simply fine, Gord! And what do your father and mother think about it?"

"Pop doesn't say much. He's too riled. You must have given him a pretty bad jolt when he came to see you. He always thought we Ruggleses were so absolutely perfect—it certainly took him down a peg, you bet. Mother—well, mother thinks I'm crazy—or

at least father is. She thinks it's pretty much another lark I'm on and in time I'll get over it."

"That's not the right attitude, Gord. You're doing a splendid thing."

Gordon shrugged his shoulders.

"Mother's got her notions. They're pretty high-flown. We don't see much of each other. I'm not living at home. I'm boarding with a fellow who works in the same office."

"And you did this because your father thrashed you?"

"Not exactly, Madge. The fact that father—as much of a fop and a prig as he's always been—could do it, started me thinking. Besides—anyway, Madge—honestly, I was tired of searching for thrills. I'd tried all the thrills till only one remained—Work. I wonder if you can understand?"

"Perhaps I understand, Gord, better than you think."

"Madge, I'm going to tell you something else."

"I'm sure I'm delighted to hear whatever you've got to tell me—along this line. It's perfectly splendid!"

"Madge, I'm going to tell you something because I've got to tell you. Madge—*I love you!*" He said this last in a whisper.

It was silent in the apartment for a moment after that. The manner of the fellow's declaration was different. This was not the hoyden who had tried to compromise her. His eyelid didn't flop, either. Madge noticed that.

"I love you, Madge," the man went on before she

could frame a suitable reply. “I’ve always loved you. I loved you from the moment I set eyes on you that day I banged into your bedroom, although I didn’t know it was love—not then. You’ve always had a peculiar influence over me, Madge. I’ve been a rotter. I’ve done things for which I can’t look myself in the mirror—to say nothing of you. But—well, if a chap can be sorry, then I’m sorry. I’m trying to show I’m sorry by straightening out. I’ve met other girls and I’ve raised blue hell with them. But they’ve been incidents in my life; they’ve come and they’ve gone. You haven’t come and gone, Madge. Always you have held the same place in my feelings and emotions. You’ve seemed steady, sure, something just a little above me, waiting for me to come through clean. I say I love you, Madge. I’ve come down here to tell you so. I had to tell you. I wanted you to know and understand.”

“You’re paying me a great compliment, Gordon,” the woman managed to articulate at last. “But—but—I can’t marry you, Gord. Somehow—I can’t.”

“I’m not asking you to marry me, not yet, Madge. In a lot of ways I’m my same old self. But I want you to know that I’m working for something, even if it’s only your regard and esteem and respect, Madge. That’s been the big trouble with me, all my life. I’ve never had an incentive—any goal ahead to win. From as far back as I can remember, there’s been no occasion for me to work and win anything. Everything came easy—or rather, it was at hand for me to sample by simply reaching out and taking it, even other girls and women, Madge. You’ve been the only thing that’s been denied me; that piqued me because I couldn’t have you by bawling for you or ‘rushing’ you. Pop and mother let me have all the

money I wanted from the day I could reach up over a counter and hand some one silver coins. Nothing was ever too good for me. I got a rotten idea of my own importance. And I've known I had it for a long, long time. There's a lot of it left yet. But I've reached the place where I'm tired of having everything handed to me. Honest-to-God, Madge! The world and everything in it was beginning to go stale. I'd explored everything I'd seen to explore; I'd had everything I caterwauled for; people had gone and come the moment I set up a tantrum or showed fight. And life was going stale, I say. It was the same old thing, over and over and over. I might have a better motor-car or a prettier woman. But still it would only be an automobile and a—a—some one to play with. I looked into the future and saw nothing different until the day I dropped. And then Pop banged me in good shape one night in the library. He used a razor strop—yes, he did. I'm tall as he is, and I thought I could lick my weight in anything human that lived, male or female. But he showed me I couldn't. We made an awful mess. But he trimmed me properly and sat on my chest. When he'd shown he could do it, he started talking to me. Among other things, he made me promise I'd come down here at the first opportunity and humbly ask your forgiveness. I vowed for a time I wouldn't. But I found a new thrill and a new interest in work and I wondered if I wasn't cheating myself by not playing the gentleman —with you—with—everybody. I don't mean as a policy," the fellow added hastily. "I mean because it was what I ought to do. And so I've come, Madge. I've got to be back on the job Monday morning, but I want to go back feeling I've got a new interest in life —something worth while. That's the whole story in a nutshell, Madge. And I'm telling you frankly I love

you and—I'm sorry—terribly sorry!"

What could she do? What could she say? Her reply sounded trite and inadequate.

"That's manly of you, Gordon. And—well, I'm going to tell you exactly what I told your father—if you prove the stuff that's latent in you, you stand as good a chance of winning my friendship permanently —and maybe more—as any man I know now or ever will know. In fact, you've got a bit of advantage, because I know you will have overcome more handicaps."

"Madge, is there any one else who——"

"Who loves me? I don't know, Gordon. I have many men friends and go about much."

"Is there any one whom you love? It's a rotten thing to ask but—hang it all, I'm—jealous!"

What was the little heart-pinch that came to Madeline then? Why should her thoughts flee secretly to some torn pieces of paper in an envelope in her bottom dresser drawer?

"Not enough to marry, Gordon. That's as far as I want to be interrogated."

"Madge! Have I got a chance?"

The girl smiled, a wonderful smile.

"All the chance in the world, Gordon. Go through with this thing and you'll prove yourself a man!"

"Madge! There never was a woman like you. There'll never be another."

"Fiddlesticks! The world is filled with women like myself!"

"Then they don't move on the strata where the

fellows who need them most can contact them."

Madelaine left the contention open. She was thinking about Gordon's language. He had always talked like a street gamin despite his home culture. Now his vocabulary was more refined, far more careful.

It was an hour before he arose to go.

"Madge," he said at the door, "you're never going to practice, even if you graduate from medical school."

"Why not, Gordon? What makes you think so?" She was amused.

"There are too many men who need you in a slightly different capacity than doling out pills!"

She was glad when the door had closed on him that he had not said, "Because I want you and intend to marry you myself!"

Poor Gordon! Perhaps he too had been more sinned against than sinning.

Madelaine went back to her chair and remained for a long time in thought.

"I can't let myself drift into it—I can't. I can't! Oh, dear, where can I go, what can I do, to escape it? Will I marry him after all? Will his persistence win in the end?"

Tears filmed her eyes. She had felt that strange pinch in her heart again, remembering the envelope in the drawer.

"I want a man who has won out in spite of everything!" she cried. "Never mind how Gordon wins out, he will not have won out over enough!"

She wondered while dressing for dinner that night if Nathaniel Forge had come through that jail scrape “with a clean bill of health.”

CHAPTER IV

POOR SOW'S EAR

I

We hear much comment about Genius in this clay-and-paint age. Mediocrity is amazed that there can be persons capable of doing many things and doing them exceptionally well. It fails to grasp that the same brain power and caliber which makes a success of a specialty can be turned with equal success into any line of endeavor and approximate the same general result.

Nathan had gone on the road for the Thorne Knitting Mills as a traveling salesman. He had business experience; he had brains whetted by dilemmas in the box-shop. But most of all he had imagination. And that same imagination, whether applied to poetry, paper boxes or the sale of union suits, brought the same satisfying result.

My friend started at "two thousand a year and commission." His territory was eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and a portion of middle New York. At the end of his first year he had realized four

thousand dollars and Milly wondered if her prospects were not looking up and she hadn't been a bit wrong about that business of being buncoed? Four thousand a year is nearly eighty dollars a week. The Forges left the Pine Street cottage and took a better house on Preston Hill. And Nathan did a manly thing. He started the task of making the poor mill girl he had married into a lady. He began by taking Milly with him on some of his trips and letting her see life outside a drab Vermont country town.

New York was a revelation to Milly. She had always been a frump in her dress, but Fifth Avenue kindled a spark of incentive in her, and under Nat's gentle encouragement, she honestly tried to make something of herself. She came back to Paris full of ideas and aspirations. And give her credit. The first thing she did was to junk all the jumble of assorted furniture, get rid of her Woolworth trimmings and try to Be Somebody.

Try to Be Somebody! Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to—try to be somebody!

Anyhow, the Forges refurnished their house and Milly's pride in its altered appearance was such that she put down her foot on all her relatives treating it like their personal ash box. Thereupon the Richards family, individually and collectively, turned up their noses and averred that Mildred was trying to be tony and put on style and be a snob. Her mother "just ran up" one spring day and asked to borrow ten dollars. For the first time in their lives Milly demanded to know what the money was wanted for. When Mother Richards announced that as usual Popper was out of work and Sarah wanted a new dress to wear to the Knights of Columbus Dance on St. Patrick's day,

Milly told her mother that if Sarah wanted a new dress let her stick to her job in the Bon Ton and earn it, not get peeved at Miss Morgan and quit whenever the proprietress wanted her to work overtime. Mother Richards departed, fully persuaded that in her case also, no serpent's tooth is sharper than an ungrateful child.

The fact of the matter was, Milly had found some *House Beautiful* magazines with "classy interiors" illustrated therein and was straining Nathan's pay envelope to get the wherewithal to buy a set of Hepplewhite furniture for her dining room. It was no especial consideration for her husband that made her turn down her mother. Her motive was entirely selfish. Also I learned later that whereas I had lately taken unto myself a wife, Milly wanted to awe me with the "class" in her home and prove to Nathan he had annexed a more aristocratic helpmate than had been acquired by his lifelong friend.

II

Anna Forge, as usual, had not found life any bed of roses. She had managed to retain the property on Vermont Avenue but at a disturbing price. For she discovered that whereas property was property and the house was appraised on the tax list at ten thousand dollars, yet even a ten-thousand-dollar house did not stand for the epitome of worldly wealth and affluence when there were no funds forthcoming to pay those taxes, keep up repairs, heat the place and give her the wherewithal to feel and clothe herself so she could reside therein. She had to sell the house and furnishings, retaining only enough of the latter to make two rooms livable in the top of

the Norwalk block where she finally sat down in her loneliness and meditated darkly on the ingratitude of all flesh.

In July an alluring oil prospectus fell into her hands. Without consulting her son, fully expectant of realizing a fortune within three months—the prospectus inferred that she would—she gave up all but a few hundreds of dollars for some sheets of beautifully lithographed paper delivered by a well-dressed young man who had “a nice face.”

Edith in Montreal had presented her husband with triplets! The husband had seen no advantage in triplets, however, and had been inclined to act peevish. Anna sent Edith five hundred of the remaining nine hundred dollars “to help out dear daughter.” And dear daughter’s husband had commandeered the money, played a bucket shop and taken a better job down in Pennsylvania.

In September Anna Forge was reduced to seventy-nine dollars. Where the balance had gone the Lord only knew. Thereupon her thoughts turned to her better half who had “skun out and left her to starve” and she brought her troubles to Nathan, the idea being that Nathan should get the law after his father and have him brought back and made to support his wife.

But threescore wrathful stockholders and two national banks had also voted that Johnathan should be apprehended and brought back, quite a time before. The difficulty in both cases had been that neither knew exactly where to go to apprehend Johnathan and bring him back. So Johnathan had not been brought back and the matter languished.

By October, unbeknown to Milly, Nathan was

mailing his mother a few dollars a week for her food and room rent. When he came in off the road he occasionally brought her new clothes. Mrs. Forge was grateful for the clothing but felt it would have been "nicer" in Nathan to give her the money and let her buy her clothes herself. But Nathan wanted the money to go for clothes.

She talked quite a lot about it, and not within the immediate family circle, either.

III

In November, when the Forge house was furnished after some of the most gorgeous and least expensive plans in *House Beautiful*, Milly and Nathan sent my wife and self an invitation to "come up some night and have dinner." Mary Ann had made a wry face. But for Nathan's sake—with whose vicissitudes she had become more or less acquainted—she finally consented.

Milly had acquired a certain middle-class pride in her establishment by this time. But it was the narrow, pathetic, provincial, poorly bred sort of pride which is ofttimes the worst vulgarity, since it admits a knowledge of the existence of etiquette but refuses to reason it out or work out the finesse of detail which makes living on a certain well-mannered, soft-toned, fine-grained plane an existence of beauty and a joy forever.

Milly's idea of serving a perfect meal was bulk—attuned to brilliance. But in the fine epicurean points of housewifery, she was as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. She was careful to procure a three-dollar roast, cook it to the best of her ability (and Farmers Cook Book) bedeck it with pretty garnishes,

and,—let it set around somewhere until it was clammy and greasy as cold-storage goose and about as delectable. She worked hard to get the appropriate flowers for a centerpiece and forgot the butter plates. She would spend half an afternoon preparing a lavish dessert, and by the time it came to the table the hour was so late and so much that was over-hearty had gone before, that her guests could only nibble at it. Then she accused them of not liking it or finding something the matter with it. She wept angrily when she was finally alone and declared “she wouldn’t get up another feed for nobody” if the whole world starved. Poor Milly! It was a hectic thing,—Trying to Be Somebody!

Well, Mary Ann and I went up to Nathan’s. Little Mary, their child, was about six years of age at the time, a red-cheeked, obstreperous little bumpkin who meant well enough but never knew exactly what it was she was supposed to mean. Immediately we got into the house, Milly and her child viewed us as “company” and acquired that same old agonizing woodenness of the lowly-born known as “remembering their manners.”

Milly came to greet us cordially enough, then excused herself to oversee preparations for her dinner in the kitchen. Nathan led us into the living room. Through the archway into the dining room I could not help noting a profusion of white linen, silver, cut glass and flowers. But the savor of the forthcoming meal was strong through the house, along with something which has scorched acridly. To close the door between dining room and kitchen never occurred to Milly. It was her house, wasn’t it? What did a door or two matter? From my position at table when we were subsequently placed, I sat

throughout the meal with a kitchen vista before me in a chaotic mass of pots, pans, kettles and paper bags, all but the bags greasy and sooty and piled in the sink in plain sight over Milly's shoulder.

In the interval before dinner, however, regardless of the fact that we were ostensibly there to visit her parents, little Mary assumed that it devolved upon her to entertain us. Which she did in all childish innocence and utter good intention, but which became quickly embarrassing even to the point of wholesome exasperation.

We had not been in the place four minutes before she dug up dolls, doll carriages, toy houses and games and insisted that we interest ourselves in all of them. Again and again Nathan reprimanded her or sent her out. Back she would come in a moment with the utmost self-assurance. "Mamma says I can!" she explained to her father each time and finally shoved a primer in my face with the persistent demand, did I want to hear her read? Now I like youngsters and so does Mary Ann. But God knows there's a time and place for everything, even children. And little Mary soon got on my nerves. Nathan tried to "save his face" and send her out as patiently and kindly as he could. But Mary continued to run appealing to her mother and demanded to know if "Uncle Billy couldn't hear her read?" and I overheard Milly retort "Certainly!" as though astonished that any one might not want to hear a first-grade reading lesson as prelude to a five-course dinner. So back came Mary, poked up into my arms, conveyed kitchen flour all over my clothes and started to out-talk her father with such asinine twaddle as, "I see a cat. Can the cat run? Yes, the cat can run. It is a black cat. Oh, see the pretty kittens." Etc., etc., etc.

Nathan colored, grew grim of lip, ordered the child from the room in no mild tone. And little Mary started for the kitchen with a sudden, high-pitched, heartbroken bawl. In the kitchen she stayed permanently this time, to bounce back a few moments later, loll at the corner of the doorway and announce:

"Ma says to come and eat while everything's hot because food ain't no good when it's cold." On the strength of this startling information, we went into the dining room. Thereupon we had more Child. "I wanner sit side o' Uncle Billy! Ma says I can! Pa, I wanner sit side of Uncle Billy!" And when she had ascertained for a certainty that she could sit side of Uncle Billy, she danced around the table, pointing out each of our places and then dragged a high chair noisily from the opposite end of the room over between Nathan and myself. There was also some confusion about the transfer of a patent-rimmed infant's plate, a mug, a spoon, a napkin.

Nathan sent an appealing glance at his wife.

"Oh, leave the child alone!" cried Milly wearily, in front of her guests. "You're always picking on her; she never does anything that suits you." And so Nathan "left the child alone." But it was noisily incumbent on me to lift her into her high chair and tie her bib. Thereupon little Mary started to "make music" with the cutlery on the edge of her plate and announce to us of what the forthcoming meal was to consist.

"Start right in, folks," Milly invited. "I've got some things to see to upstairs before I can eat," and she went above to dress, leaving her husband and guests to await her return or eat without her, also leaving a little girl who suddenly remembered her "manners",

sat with her hands folded school-fashion on the edge of her plate and alleviated the distressing pauses by entertaining us with choice bits of household information, such as: that Ma had on all her best dishes; such as: that the green pitcher came from the five-and-ten; such as: that Ma came near not puttin' on that pickled preserve because when she opened the jar and smelled it, she thought it had spoiled; such as—oh, bother!

Poor Nathan! He sat with the steaming food before him and then said thickly, "She'll probably be a considerable time. Perhaps we hadn't better wait." But I knew he was wondering why his wife could not have negotiated her wardrobe before our arrival and thrown off a mere apron or something of the sort, to do the honors of her table.

Little Mary cried shrilly above my wife's attempt at sympathetic conversation with Nathan to inform her father what particular portion of the roast she desired and what vegetables and what drinkables. Finally Nat could stand it no longer. Milly being out of earshot, he frankly apologized for the child. But I read behind his apology the heartache of a tired man who did his best to train his child as opportunity offered and he himself had enlightenment. But a man at business ninety per cent. of the time may easily have much good work discounted by a child's propinquity with an unbred mother. He ended finally by telling the child that another word from it would earn instant dismissal from the board. That worked admirably until Milly's appearance when the roast was almost finished. Little Mary then recounted to her mother what her father had instructed her, etc., etc.

I will forbear a detailed account of that dinner. It

was an ordeal. The table was crammed with dishes, there was no one to take away emptied plates and nowhere to set them. Nathan had to arise and take them away himself. Twice little Mary scrambled down and followed him into the kitchen, leaving Mary Ann and myself alone and feeling rather foolish.

Mary Ann settled down into an hour of agony. Little Mary pushed her food upon her broad fork with her fingers. She threw back her head and sucked the last drop from her water glass. She arose in her high chair, would have stood upon it and reached for her own butter if Nathan had not stopped her. Milly was in her place by this time and Nathan asked her if she couldn't "see to little Mary." Whereat Milly smoothed back the child's hair, fiddled with a hairpin to twine the hair up from the child's eyes, patted it and said bless her, she was mother's little daughter, wasn't she, and was remembering her manners, wasn't she, too; and little Mary agreed that she was remembering her manners and demanded to know if mamma had yet "let on" to Uncle Billy that they had ice cream among other items for dessert.

The dessert came at last, about the time when I was wondering if Mary Ann were going to live to partake of it.

"We've got some cheese, that horribly smelly kind that Nat likes so well, if anybody wants any of it but him," was Milly's final comment anent a most delectable Camembert.

"Yeah!" piped up Mary. "And it comes in a wooden box and when you take the cover off it, you could almost think there was sompin' dead inside it!"

We got away from the table.

Mary Ann went home and to bed, and if I could have spared the time, I would have had Doctor Johnson “fix me up” too.

What was it Nathan had told himself that night in the office when he had gazed upon Milly after the Carol Gardner disappointment?—Something about “one woman being as good as another?” Sex versus Ladyhood.

“The trouble with most young colts who fly into matrimony with the first exhibit of the sex that sashays along, is that they seem to forget they’re gonna have thirty to fifty years of it,” comments Uncle Joe Fodder, when he hears of some particularly rash marriage about the village. “If a feller can’t be good, b’dam, why can’t he be careful?”

IV

Milly gave it out that Mary Ann was snobbish and “stuck up”, that she couldn’t be sociable and neighborly if it cost her a leg—because she never accepted another invitation from Milly—and her personal opinion was that Nathan’s bosom friend had married a “quince.”

Mary Ann gave a dinner party for a number of the summer colonists on Preston Hill shortly afterward and neglected to invite Milly.

“After me about breakin’ my neck to give her that swell feed to our house in March!” lamented Milly. “She’s a cat and I hope she chokes on her own cream.”

Nathan never referred to the dinner thereafter,

however.

CHAPTER V

ALWAYS JUSTIFIED

I

The Grand Hotel in Yokohama, Japan, is built close to the edge of Tokio Bay. Only the width of a macadam street separates it from a walled embankment with a twenty-foot drop down to the harbor water. It is a long, red building with a wide portico running the entire length of the eastern side. Tourists from the seven corners of the earth sit before the great, opened windows and gaze across the blue waters where outgoing liners are heading for home.

In a wicker lounging chair before one of those great windows at twilight of an August day in 1916 sat an oldish man with weak, watery eyes and a petulant mouth. He was dressed in white pongee, somewhat rumpled, and in his lap he toyed with a wide-brimmed Panama hat. His eyes were far away; he too was thinking of those liners, outward bound, heading for home. Home!

Johnathan Forge had never had a home. Or so he

told himself. A house, a wife, children, expense, all these, yes! But a home, never! It was his wife's fault. She had never been a home-maker from the beginning.

His thoughts turned backward this August afternoon back to America—New England—Vermont! He wondered about the people he had known so long and so intimately there. What had happened after he left them? How had they fared? What were they doing—now—this afternoon—this moment?

Johnathan Forge believed that life had given him a scurvy deal.

His father had made him work from earliest boyhood and he had turned over his wages to his parents until the day and the night he was twenty-one. That following year he had married—married Anna Farman. She had clerked in the same store where Johnathan had been a sort of all-around handy man and shipping clerk. He had been very much in love with her, or thought he was. Yet almost from the first night he had discovered that between his mother and his wife a gulf existed as wide as China. His father's life had been happy because his mother was a conscientious Christian woman. She knew how to keep her place.

His father had been absolute lord and Czar of the Forge family fortunes. No one ever presumed to question that such was not his right. His mother had never scoffed at St. Paul's injunction anent wives submitting themselves unto their husbands as unto the law of God. Mrs. Forge, his mother, had taken note of St. Paul and rather approved of him, following his domestic admonitions without question. The result had been peace and happiness;

at least there had never been any disgraceful quarreling or contention between wife and husband in the home of his father. The husband had laid down the law and the wife had obeyed. It was simple. Was he not the husband and father? Why shouldn't she obey? Happy? What greater happiness could a woman desire than obeying her husband, submitting to him as unto the law of God? At least, when women did that sort of thing, domestic peace and connubial bliss resulted. Anna Farman had not done that sort of thing and showed she had not the least intent in the world of doing that sort of thing. She had married and then promptly declared she intended to preserve her own individuality and do as she pleased. It was plain therefore what chaos and misery ensued when any one—especially woman—flouted the decrees of the Almighty, His seers, His prophets and His saints.

Not only had Anna refused to obey her husband but she had early shown herself extravagant and impractical. At first she had wanted shoes, clothes, hats for every season of the year. Think of a woman with four hats! Or four pairs of shoes! Why, his own mother had worn one hat three years, done it cheerfully, thought nothing of it! Anna had quarreled with Johnathan over the subject of clothing so bitterly that the young husband might have left her the first year, if a baby had not been coming. After that he was in for it. There was no hope, no escape. And for twenty-five years he had endured it. Twenty-five years! A quarter-century! To think of it! What a fool he had been! What a fool!

A year of foreign travel—illicit though it might have been considered in certain obnoxious quarters—had changed Johnathan in many ways, however.

For one thing, it had radically revised his ideas about God. The myriad millions of Asia, in their sordid, gnat-like existence, had caused him to wonder just how “personal” God really was. Anyhow, his conscience was clear about leaving home in so far as God was concerned.

In the first place, he had done his full duty by his children. He had given them a home, food for their growing bodies, clothes for their backs. He had made them attend divine services, he had kept their morals clean and their minds pure. It had been an awful ordeal to keep Nathan away from The Sex. Still he had managed it. That Nathan had promptly married at twenty-one had nothing to do with Johnathan. Johnathan had only been responsible for the boy until maturity. Not one moment after! The boy had become a man then. He had passed out of the father’s jurisdiction. If he had made a hard bed, let him lie in it, indeed. It only went to show he should have taken his loving father’s counsel to heart.

As for leaving his wife, they had nothing in common, with the children married. Why, then, should they live together? Beside, had he not left her in undisputed possession of a ten-thousand-dollar house? Let her sell that house if she so desired and live on the money. Ten thousand dollars should keep her the rest of her life. In fact, Johnathan flattered himself he had done rather handsomely by his wife. No cause for self-execration there! Then how about the box-shop? Ah, yes! The box-shop!

Well, it was this way: In the beginning he had saved eighteen hundred dollars of hard-earned money in spite of his wife’s spendthrift habits, and bought the box-shop. He had obligated himself for thirty-two hundred dollars more in notes. And, thank

God, somehow he had paid them. But it had been with his own money, before he turned the factory over to the corporation and accepted stock.

He had been very clever in that transfer. He had taken thirteen thousand dollars' worth of stock for the five thousand equity he had originally held in the business; well, it belonged to him. If he was cute on a trade, it was the other fellow's fault if the other fellow didn't watch out and found himself cheated. Then had come those hectic years when his boy's ramifications had "grayed his hair."

Johnathan never thought of them but what he grew angry, even in his exile. What he had suffered from that boy—his crazy ideas, his impertinence—his insolence, his refusal to "go into conference" with his father for the good of the business—his hot-headed, know-it-all, don't-give-a-damn attitude toward the one in all the world who had done so much for him! How had the father ever "stuck them out"—those years? But he had stuck them out. And he had only left the whole miserable mess when it was self-evident that the unnatural son's bigotry and business inability were going to pile his beautiful business on the rocks at last. That was only the first law of nature,—self-preservation. Even rats desert a sinking ship, and how much more sensible and intelligent should grown men show themselves than rats! Yet what had he taken from that business that was not due him? That was not his own? He had sold his five-thousand-dollar concern for thirteen thousand dollars. Very good! All he had withdrawn at the last was ten thousand dollars. Not a penny more; ten thousand dollars! Three thousand less than the value of his stock. And to show he had no criminal intent, he had duly made out and endorsed

his certificates back to the company—back to the corporation's treasurer—and left them on Nathan's desk for transfer. Very good, then! He had simply decided he would rather have his money than the stock and made the swap. Nothing crooked about that! If he had carried away the certificates with him and the money—ah, then he would be a criminal in sight of God and man. But he had simply been shrewd. If his boy was so tarnation smart, let him sell the father's stock to some one about the village and use the money to reimburse the company for what Johnathan had taken. That the "Board of Directors" had not sanctioned such a purchase from the treasury was nothing to Johnathan. Who were the "Board" but Nathan and Charley Newton and Peter Whipple of the Process Works and one or two others? They never would have understood Johnathan's domestic position anyhow, or appreciated why he should want to leave home forever. How could they know the indignities and quarrels which had been his portion for twenty-five dreary years? What was the mere technicality of recording such a transfer on the books, anyway? If he had told them first, they would only have objected; and he would have had to hold a meeting and use his stock-control to club them into it. That would have aroused the banks and "pulled down the temple," making the stock worthless.

No, Johnathan had only exercised ordinary Yankee shrewdness. And yet——

The great, bothersome, indefatigable fact remained that the banks and Paris investors would never see the deal in the light in which Johnathan saw it himself. He could not go home!

Not that he wanted to go home, of course. But still,

he could not go home. And it bothered him.

Likewise there was the Carlysle woman. Great, fine, much-to-be-desired romance had come into Johnathan's life at last.

And if he married her, still more emphatically than ever he could not go home. He would be guilty of bigamy, and the authorities in the States—who could never appreciate what a hard time Johnathan had endured through twenty-five hectic years—had very strict ideas about bigamy. And some day Mrs. Johnathan Forge, *née* Carlysle, might want to go home. Then how could he explain? What could he do?

Johnathan sighed and sloughed down in his chair. After all these years, happiness was within his grasp and he could not grasp it. The world was very hard. Hard! Hard! Hard!

There were other crosses in it, after all, besides Nathan.

II

Nathan went up to the desk and the Yates Hotel in Syracuse and asked for his key and his mail.

He received a postcard from Milly—asking him to send her money—a telephone and a gas bill which had been forwarded for payment, a letter from young Ted Thorne, his sales manager, and a long narrow envelope with a queer stamp. Nathan was puzzled by that stamp. It was a ten-sen stamp. What foreign country had sen among their coinage and who should be writing him from one of them?

He slit the envelope at the cigar counter while the

clerk waited for him to select his smokes from a proffered handful. Then a queer, hard surprise smote him as he read:

Yokohama, Japan,

August 2, 1916.

ɔrge, Paris, Vt., U. S. A.

Dear Sir:

I write to you from a foreign land, afar from home, and an exile from all I hold most dear. My life almost wrecked by a brainless woman and thankless, unnatural children, here I sit in the forty-eighth year of my age, trying not to see the awful past, only to pierce the unknown future, and give you one last chance to redeem yourself and call down upon your head your father's blessing.

You are perfectly aware, Nathaniel, of what my domestic life was, for twenty-five fearful years. You, grown now to man's estate, realize that your father showed the mettle and stamina to endure blindly for conscience' sake and from his sense of great, grim duty. If your rattle-brained marriage has turned out happily, you know what your devoted father missed. If it has turned out unhappily (for which you have no one to blame but yourself!) you are tasting the fruits of all the wormwood and aloes that was my potion since the first day I looked upon your baby face and hugged you to my bosom with a father's pride.

In either case, you should be in a position to sympathize with me and at last pay your great debt to me by exerting yourself there at home in a trifling matter in my behalf.

Nathaniel, I may say I have broadened mentally in many things since leaving Paris and altered my views on many matters, principally the subject of divorce. Against my will, after all your mother has done, I am compelled to believe in divorce. Now that you children are grown and we have completely fulfilled our duties, responsibilities and offices as parents in every way,

there is no longer need for your father and your mother to pull against one another and fight disgracefully till stark death closes down in the peace which passeth human understanding. Therefore, Nathaniel, as one who has reached man's estate, I write to you and make my last request. Then I shall give you my blessing, go my way and never trouble you again—only to remember you in my prayers. Nathaniel, I want you to help me get a divorce from your mother. Moreover, I want it at once. This much is not only my right but your duty. Never mind how the vast reaches of earthly distance may separate us, remember I am always the father who gave you birth.

I am not ashamed to write why I want a divorce. The fact is, an enforced exile in a foreign land, charged with a crime which was not a crime if my position could only be understood, I have met a lady who is all which your mother never has been, is not now and never can be. Beautiful of face and form, talented, poised, brainy and cultured, I would turn over a new page in life, redeem the past and live as God intended every man should live—normally, happily, at peace with his wife and the world. This is my right, I say. This phase of it you have no license to question.

So I desire you to engineer a divorce at once. The grounds of course, would be incompatibility. Your mother must not know of this—that I wish it—or she will show her inherent meanness and cheapness at once and oppose it simply because I desire it. You alone have influence with her. And I am not unprepared to make it worth your while.

The lady I want to make my *real* wife is very wealthy. She is a widow living with her father who is in trade out here. I met her coming across nine months ago and for the first time in my life the cup of happiness is held to my lips. It remains to be seen whether the son for whom I sacrificed twenty-five of the best years of my life will dash it away.

The day you forward me a copy of the court's decree, assuring me I am a free man, I solemnly promise to pay you one thousand dollars and no questions asked. Of

course all this, including my present whereabouts, is strictly confidential.

I await your reply with interest. In fact, I think I should like you to cable me an answer—that you are working on the case, that within the year I may be free. Free! Free! Free!

Your hideously wronged father,

JONATHAN H. FORGE.

Nathan crossed to one of the lobby chairs and sat down. He lighted one of his cigars absently. Once or twice he smiled bitterly. Then he picked up the several sheets covered on both sides with his father's weak, pothook penmanship and read them again. When his cigar had been smoked to the end, he went upstairs to the writing room, laid aside hat and raincoat, lighted a fresh cigar and at twenty minutes to nine o'clock started his reply. It was ten minutes after one when he signed his name.

For the first time in his life, Nathan unleashed his righteous wrath and told his father what he thought of him. For the first time, devoid of religious fetish or mawkish "respect", the son drew forth the whips of his scorn and laid them without stint on his father's naked back. He had nothing to lose which he cared for, and nothing to gain that he desired. With a maturing understanding, a cold brain and a righteous anger, he gave his father to understand in no uncertain terms what he thought of his "twenty-five years of sacrifice" and his "right to happiness"—with a strange woman.

"I am not interested in the lady," he concluded; "not because you want to shelve mother and take up with another woman but the method you essay—a rather contemptible method from my standpoint—to go about it. God was mighty real to you and a hard

taskmaster when Edith and I were growing, reaching out and demanding that nature be answered with the most natural and normal things of life. Apparently He's taking a vacation when you arrive at the place where you want them yourself. I'm not calling you a hypocrite. If I could, that would explain much. But I am saying that I'm not made of the stuff to take money for freeing my father from my mother, that my father may gratify his own happiness while mother trims hats in a small-town millinery for a handful of dollars a week. In fact, if it wasn't coarse, I'd feel like telling you to take your self-pity, your twisted outlook on life, your belated love affair and go to the devil. That's crude. But it would express the state of my feelings with neatness, conciseness and dispatch."

Nathan read over the packet of pages he had produced. Then he jogged them with ink-daubed fingers and folded them into an envelope. With a consciousness of good work well executed, he stored the addressed envelope away in his pocket and went back downstairs.

He went out into the city and down Salina Street. He found the all-night Western Union office open.

He despatched a cable to his father—four words.

"Letter received. Not interested."

He went back to his hotel, ripped his evening's work to shreds and dropped them in his waste basket.

III

Nathan was at home a month later when another

letter arrived from Japan. Milly was down to her mother's and he was dining from a corner of the kitchen table when the bell rang and the postman handed it in. Nathan read it while finishing his lunch.

Tokio, Japan, Sept. 10, 1916.

Nathan Forge, Paris, Vt.

Dear Sir:—

Your cable has reached me, saying you got my letter giving you your last chance to do the square thing by your father and repay him for all he has done and suffered for you—and you are not interested.

I might have known. You are that kind of a son. I am done with you—done, done, done!

Carefully through my things I have searched and culled out all that pertains to you; every reminder of you. Out of my heart and my life I am blotting you. Henceforth my son is dead. I never had a son.

Certain things which I have carried in my wallet, I am returning herewith. Cherish them! Save them for the dark hours, the melancholy twilights, the haunting midnights. Sleep with them beneath your pillow and take them out in dreams and say: I am cursed by my father! I am a son outside the pale! I have desecrated God. I have damned my soul!

Your cable and its unnatural message cuts the last ties binding me to the past. Henceforth I go alone, a wanderer on the face of the earth, the cup of happiness dashed from my lips, life an inferno of What-Might-Have-Been—made so by the boy whom I gave the breath of life and who now brings down my gray hairs in sorrow to the grave.

Where I go and what becomes of me, you will never know. You will wonder after your dear father but the winds shall return no answer where he has gone—the hideous ingratitude of the course you have elected to pursue will arise and point taunting fingers at you. All

your joys and happiness shall be blighted. The rain shall patter down and the night winds whine in the casements. And to you they shall say—"I am accursed!" I am accursed! My father has accursed me and nowhere on earth is there peace for my throbbing head!"

Therefore, farewell! When you look into the faces of your children, may your crime and ingratitude sear you to madness. In the midst of your laughter may you be sobered and the nectar of joy in your glass turn to vinegar. And if in the last great day, pursuing my right to happiness, I stumble and fall, on your head be my sin!

Already in the lowest depths of hell (in unhappiness and misery of spirit) I point my awful finger at you and I cry: "Curse you! Curse you! Curse you!"

Good-by forever!

JONATHAN HADLEY FORGE.

Nathan looked through what his father had so dramatically enclosed: A lock of Edith's baby hair tied with a tiny pink ribbon; a small tintype of himself and Anna Forge taken at some street fair back in the Nineties; two snapshots of Nathan taken the year before moving to Paris from Foxboro Center; a picture postcard of Main Street, Paris—lacking none of the features which had so depressed Madelaine Theddon—a newspaper clipping containing the first of Nathan's poems copied by the *Sunday Globe*—the cablegram of Nathan's last message as Johnathan had received it in Japan.

Nathan soaked a half a doughnut in his lukewarm tea as the pathetic assortment lay before him. Then he read his father's letter again and smiled. He had to smile.

He gathered up the envelope's contents a quarter of an hour later. He jogged them together and for

want of interest and a better place, slipped them between an ammonia bottle and the wall at the end of the shelf above the kitchen sink.

Next noontime Johnathan Hadley Forge, in the lowest depths of hell, was smeared with copious gobs of whisker-flecked lather from Nathan's razor.

Nothing else being handy at the moment, Nathan used the letter for shaving paper!

CHAPTER VI

INFINITE PATIENCE

I

It was the day of the Harvard-Pennsylvania boat race. Madelaine Theddon had come from Boston to cheer for the crimson. Gordon met her and after the races off Court Square they went to The Worthy for dinner.

Springfield was holding open house whether it wanted to hold open house or no. Groups of college boys paraded the streets. Banners were rampant; bands played. In early evening large numbers of Harvard undergrads descended upon The Worthy dining room and commandeered the place for their personal mess hall. It was a hilarious, happy, boisterous crowd,—and atmosphere. In another year the grim hand of war would grip the vitals of the nation. Let academic masculinity eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow most of it would be slopping in trench water or dodging shrapnel.

Madelaine and Gordon had entered the room early. They had secured a table beside one of the

Worthington Street windows. The day died and evening came. The air was balmy and the windows were open. Madelaine felt light-hearted. The vacation was welcome and she abandoned herself to that carnival spirit.

Gordon had “straightened out.” There was no doubt about it. He had likewise straightened up. He was sleekly barbered at the moment, almost distinguished in his dinner clothes. He acted and talked like a man with a great life purpose. He spoke of the iron works, swollen with munitions orders, as he spoke of his pocket. Yet not in conceit or brag. He had been placed in charge of an important department and was pursuing that business as though it were his own. And the end was not yet. Gordon so contended, and had found the biggest thrill of all in building, creating, producing, doing some great, useful thing, the results from which he could see with his eyes and touch with his hands.

In the interim between race and dinner, Madelaine had hurried home and changed her frock. She was now a dream—a vision—in black tulle lightened with silver, her cheeks flushed, her calm eyes unusually merry, the inverted lights of the big dining room shining on raven hair massed high above a wide, brainy forehead. With Gordon in his new incarnation across the snowy linen and a tiny candle-lamp with a red-mulled shade at her right wrist making the dinner rendezvous cozy, despite the noise going on in the room, Madelaine almost fancied she was in love with Gord and the world a bit nebulous with glorified mist.

Wine flowed freely at the college tables. Glitter went in hand with horseplay. A big tin horn was much in evidence. At intervals, its blare cleft the

tumult with nerve-jolting suddenness. Ever and anon, amid the tinkle of tableware and the popping of corks, there was song.

The boys sang “Fair Harvard”, “There’s a Tavern in the Town”, “Little Brown Jug”, and that latter-day classic, “Mary Ann McCarty, She Went Out to Dig Some Clams”, and they kept time to Mary Ann McCarty’s vicissitudes in the clam-digging vocation with cutlery, wine bottles and feet. An especially hilarious group of fat boys off in a corner originated new yells. Colored waiters sweated and hurried and dodged bits of food hurled at them and made themselves as agreeable as possible at the prospect of many bowls filled with tip money to be left behind for distribution when the festivities were over.

The waiter who served Madelaine and her escort asked about wine. Gordon raised an inquiring eyebrow. Madelaine named her preference. Gordon ordered an elaborate dinner but no liquor—for himself.

“What?” the astonished girl exclaimed.

Gordon laughed as he slid the big menu carefully under the base of the lamp.

“I’ve had enough of that stuff in the past—enough to last me all the rest of my life. It’s time I let it alone, Madge. Besides, I don’t feel I can afford it. Oh, I don’t mean the cost in money. I’m swinging a big thing, Madge, and I can’t afford a muddled head.”

A queer thrill burned at the roots of the girl’s fine hair.

“Well, you have changed, Gordon! I’ll give you credit!”

“You’re responsible, Madge. If you hadn’t given me

an incentive, I'd still be blowing around western Massachusetts dodging traffic cops and breaking glass. You know that, don't you, dear?"

He reached his hands across the small table and covered her own.

"Don't, Gord! Not here!"

"Don't you, Madge?"

"Don't I what?"

"Don't you know it—that you're responsible?"

"Do you mean by that, if I were suddenly removed from your scheme of things you'd go all to pieces—back to the kind of chap you were a couple of years ago?"

The man's face fell.

"Perhaps, Madelaine," he said solemnly.

"That's weak, Gordon. You must play the man for the sake of playing the man, not because you want to court the favor of a certain woman."

"I hoped you'd take it as a compliment, Madge."

"I do take it as a compliment. But the responsibility isn't reassuring. I don't want to feel that I'm a man's—goal. There's so much worth while in the world as a goal beside the mere winning of a woman."

"Not when a fellow's in love, Madge."

"Let's not talk about love. Let's just enjoy ourselves."

Gordon felt he was annoying her. He changed the subject.

"All Springfield seems to be divided into two

camps to-night," he said. "Those who are college people and those who are not." The remark was occasioned by the stream of people passing along the walk outside, at shoulder-height below them.

Madelaine turned to watch the crowd. At the riot of hilarity from within the big dining room, many paused and smiled. Others appeared annoyed. Still others looked wistful. Notably among the latter was a young fellow who stood on the edge of the Worthington Street curbing and stared up into the dining room. He was a pale-faced, grim-jawed, plainly clothed chap with hungry eyes. Madelaine was conscious that he had been standing opposite their window, staring up for several minutes.

"What's that fellow doing?" demanded Gordon. "Is he staring at you and me—or merely trying to snitch a chunk of this room's boisterousness free of charge?"

"Poor fellow!" returned the girl. "He looks as though he belonged in here but for some reason knew that he'd be ejected if he tried to enter—and what a peculiar ear he has. Mercy, I wish he wouldn't stare so! His expression will haunt me in sleep to-night."

"I'll send some one out to tell him to move on!"

"No! No! Don't do that! Let's just ignore him. Maybe he'll go away."

The waiter came with iced blue-points. When Madelaine next glanced sideways out the window, the fellow with the wistful face had gone away.

II

Nathan wandered the streets of Springfield's business section and his heart was heavy within him. The college boys jostled him from the walks. The band music and the blaring horns hurt him. He lamented the coincidence which had brought him to Springfield on a day's sales business while this alma-mater joviality was in progress. It mocked him with all of that youthful heritage of which he felt himself cheated.

The windows of The Worthy had held an especial fascination. It wasn't altogether the care-free college singing, the Mardi-Gras spirit, the *esprit de corps* among all college men in town that night. It was a sense of his own inability to attain to what these things stood for without hurting some one to do it. He would have liked to be dining in such a place, across a snowy table from a beautifully gowned woman,—like it very, very much. But probably the fellow whom he had watched with that princess in black tulle thought nothing of it. That was his life. He placed no value on the delights of high-caste living because he had never known anything else. He disclosed it by his poise and easy familiarity with his environment, his graceful behavior and carriage in juxtaposition to his charming companion. Economists and peanut politicians might rail that America has no classes or castes. What a mockery! Between the lowly-born and the purple must ever exist a gulf as wide as the planets. It was not something to be attained: it was a heritage. At least he believed so.

Nathan went to his hotel down near the railroad arch and tried to get solace from a cigar. It was a very expensive cigar. It had cost him thirty-five cents. But it was Job's comfort. He might make a fortune, he might buy clothes that cost thousands

and smoke thirty-five-cent cigars by the bale, but that would never give the provincial the easy grace and the utter lack of self-consciousness displayed by that fellow and girl outlined in the Wonder Window. For it was a Wonder Window to poor Nathan. It opened in a Castle Wall where the tatterdemalion crowd passed underneath to wend their clodhopper turkey tracks to mud huts out on the edge of the moor.

“And I suppose, if dad had only been minded that way, I might have worked my way through college and been in such a place with a crowd of revelers and such a woman across from me to-night,” he said bitterly. “Yet my problem is how to overcome that handicap now. How can I? What must I do? Some one ought to write a book on how to climb out of mediocrity and Be Somebody!”

Be Somebody! That was Milly’s code now. But what a mess she was making of it! Some one ought to write a book to help women to be somebody, also. Hang it all, what was the matter with life, anyhow? Where in it all was the great constructive purpose?

Nathan never forgot that night in Springfield when all unwittingly he had beheld Madelaine Theddon above him in the hotel window. Not because he had seen Madelaine and remembered her, but because of the events which followed swiftly.

He had just retired to bed and pushed the button extinguishing his lamp, to lie and ponder on the problem of how he could Be Somebody, when two sharp taps came at his door. He arose and opened it a crack.

“Telegram, sir!” said the lad outside.

Nathan reached for his vest and gave the boy ten

cents. Then he sank down on the edge of his bed and tore the end of the flimsy yellow envelope.

COME AT ONCE URGENT ACCIDENT MILDRED

Nathan tried to get his home in Paris on the long-distance. There had been a bad thunderstorm above Brattleboro and the wires were down. He arose and dressed but could not get a train to take him through to White River Junction before six-thirty in the morning.

III

At my wife's suggestion, I went down the line to meet Nathan. Mary Ann drove the roadster down to Gilberts Mills. I boarded the shuttle train there in order to ride up into the town with him alone. I found him in the vile-flavored smoker. He jumped as I laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Bill!" he cried. "Where'd you come from now?"

"Just getting back from the Mills where I had to chase a news story," I lied. "You haven't been home yet, I take it?"

"I'm just getting home. I got a telegram from Mildred. Do you know about anything happening to her or my folks, Bill?" he asked anxiously.

"Move over, old man," I requested. "Let's smoke a cigar—a good one."

"Do you, Bill?"

"Yes."

"What is it? In God's name, what is it?"

"Nathan, it's a darned long lane that doesn't have a turning sometime," said I. "And some of the turns

are pleasant and some are hard. The mystery to me is why most of the turns for some people seem to be hard ones."

"Bill,—cut out the suspense. You're trying to prepare me for bad news. And I think you're lying about that news story. You came down a purpose to meet me. Let's have it—the worst. I've stood a lot. But I—well, anything's better than suspense. What's happened?"

Once before I had been called to break bad news to my chum. I had done it crudely, tossed him a paper with a red-inked item which had aborted his whole life. I wanted to do a more artistic bit of work now. But I'm afraid again I messed it.

"It's your little girl, Nat," said I. "She's—gone away."

"Gone away? You mean she's run off—she's lost?"

"Run off? No! Lost? Yes!"

He gripped my arm.

"You mean little Mary's—dead?"

My cigar tasted like tar and ashes. I simply proffered him a short clipping from the *Telegraph* of the previous evening.

AUTO KILLS CHILD

——

SMALL DAUGHTER OF MR. AND MRS. NATHAN FORGE HIT BY
RED FRONT GROCERY TRUCK IN MAIN STREET

The community was shocked at four o'clock this afternoon when it became known that little Mary Frances Forge, aged six years, had been struck by one of the delivery trucks belonging to the Red Front Grocery in East Main Street opposite the Catholic

Cemetery.

The little girl was on her way home from school when the accident happened. One of her companions chased her and she left the sidewalk and darted into the road to escape her pursuer. The truck was coming from a westerly direction....

Nathan passed his hand across his eyes. He took a long breath, held it, released it raggedly.

"Takes grit to live sometimes, doesn't it, Bill? Just grit!" he said.

Little more was spoken on that ensuing two miles before the train drew alongside the Paris depot platform.

IV

It takes grit to live sometimes—just grit!

Milly naturally was the more grief-stricken of the two in the hectic days which followed. But it was Mrs. Anna Forge who shed the most tears and acted generally as though the bottom had dropped from the universe.

She gave up her job in the millinery store—just why it was necessary to give up her job under the circumstances is difficult to explain, but she did—and moved to Nathan's house, bag and baggage, "to help." That her help had not been solicited was immaterial. That there was nothing especially to "help" was likewise passed over. She had not visited Nathan's home a dozen times since his marriage, not being able to "get along" with Nathan's wife. And the child had once blandly commented that its grandmother "had starin', ugly eyes," which had prejudiced her from intimacy with Nat's youngster

and convinced her that Nathan's wife and family were somehow in league against her and had put the child up to it. But now that the forked tines of death had struck near home, and tears being right in her line, she insisted on a bed in the front room, and no paid Semitic mourner ever gave greater satisfaction for services rendered than Mrs. Forge before that ordeal was ended.

Incredible to relate, Nathan's loss called up all her own losses a hundredfold and the distressing period was aggravated by the mother's worry because the oil-stock salesman had stopped answering her letters as to just when she was to get her dividends of three thousand per cent., and the cold, stark presentiment began to dawn on the woman that perhaps her investment was in jeopardy. It being a time of general sorrow, her own worries and troubles were right in line and she bunched them together. Nathan heard about them for the three-hundredth time; what the oil-stock salesman had said to her, and what she had said to the oil-stock salesman, and what he had promised and what she had expected, and what Johnathan had said to her apropos of her value as a wife during twenty-five years of incompatibility, and what she had retorted to Johnathan,—till Milly exploded and declared if she said another word, she, Milly, would shriek; which Mrs. Forge did and which Milly did, and Nathan had to act as peacemaker and keep all hands as reasonably pleasant as possible until after the services.

I slept with Nathan the night before the funeral. Milly had sent for her own mother and was sleeping with her, the wife characteristically preferring the solace and companionship of her mother to her husband, and my presence being proffered to

mitigate my friend's load as much as I could. And Mrs. Forge wept for her lost grandchild and oil-stock —or oil-stock and grandchild—and would not be comforted.

I marveled at my chum's moral fiber and mental strength. Once I caught tears streaming down his face, when alone for a moment. But he smiled courageously through them and seemed grateful for my sympathy. His lips were very firm through that ghastly ordeal and his patience was infinite.

On the night before the funeral, as aforesaid, Mrs. Anna Forge walked the upper hallway outside our door, thought of all the indignities, injustices and sorrows she had ever experienced and gave the two of us a full account of them. Whole hours passed thus and time slipped on into deeper night. At intervals Mrs. Forge's haranguing voice stopped or she was compelled to stop because of her sobbing. But she soon started in again. Then it dawned upon her that Nathan might not be listening. When she called to him and he failed to answer—though he was wide-awake enough—she planted herself in front of the bedroom door and gave Nathan to understand in high-C language that if Nathan didn't come down in the parlor and hear all about his father and the oil stock and "what she had suffered", she would come in there and talk to him even if there was a strange man in the bed. She didn't propose to go on talking when he didn't show any more "respect" for his mother than to go to sleep.

"Nat," said I, "may I take a hand and settle this? You can't listen to this harangue all night. You've got to get some sleep or you'll go crazy."

"No, no, Bill," he answered. He sighed and stretched wearily in the bed. "It's only mother and—

well, she can't help it. She's built that way, and I suppose her own troubles have sort of unbalanced her."

"Nathan!" came the mother's stringent demand. "I'll not stand here talking all night! Will you come down and hear what I've got to say, or will I come in?"

"Nat," I cried angrily, "for God's sake let me settle this!"

"You couldn't, Bill. You'd only make her worse. And I don't want her to run screaming down the center of the street at this time of night, arousing the neighbors and telling them all her troubles. I'll go down and talk with her."

And he did.

I lay in the bed alone and heard the clock strike two and three. And still the mother kept the son downstairs and recounted things that Nathan had heard a thousand times,—what Johnathan had said and what she had said, and it would have been better to have death in her own house at such a time, wouldn't it, than to have "put up" with what she "put up" with, and would Nathan see a lawyer in the morning and get him after those oil-company rascals, and where did Nathan think his father had gone and was there any prospect of making him suffer for deserting her? So on and on and on and on, into the hours of morning.

But the poor fellow did not lose his temper, did not oppose her or argue with her or treat her in any way but with the same kindly patience he had shown toward every one since the tragedy happened.

Mrs. Anna Forge literally talked herself out. A few

minutes after four o'clock she assented to being tucked in on the front-room sofa and demanded that Nathan should kiss her good night, for he was all she had, wasn't he, and did he love his dear, dear mother and who had done any more for him than she had done? Then Nathan came back to bed, tossed his bathrobe on the footboard and crawled in beside me.

"Cut out the hero stuff, Bill," he snapped. "She's simply a mental invalid and should be treated as such. Anything otherwise would be cruel."

There may be those who have felt out of patience with Nathan at certain periods in this intimate biography. They may have execrated him for an "easy mark." They may have wanted to kick him, grab him by the shoulders and shake some spine into him. I confess I have felt so myself. But speaking for myself, away down deep in my heart of hearts, there's something about a fellow who could do what Nathan did, the night before his baby was buried, that has my humble admiration. In the parlance of my newspaper office, I've got "to hand it to him." He's the sort of man the world needs more of. He's far from being a weakling. He's big!

And so the Forge baby was buried.

CHAPTER VII

FINE FEATHERS

I

One feature of that funeral I'll be a long time forgetting was the unexpected appearance of old Caleb Gridley.

Old Caleb had traveled much since he lost his Duchess and disposed of his tannery. He had made money and knew how to make more money, but for the first time in his life he had begun to enjoy a little of it himself. He spent several winters in Florida and a couple in California. He was absent much in New York and Boston. Between times he turned a quick dollar wherever opportunity presented,—in timber lands, wood pulp, short-term notes or sure things in the stock market.

Nobody knew he was in town until the hour for the services. He came to the front door and rang the muffled bell. He was duly admitted and for the first time in my life, I truthfully believe, I saw the old tanner without his derby hat. He looked nude without it,—horribly nude. He held it, old style, by

the brim in the crook of his left arm, at the same time proffering Mother Richards a little bouquet of pink rosebuds with his right.

“Bought ’em myself,” he announced in a husky whisper, “fer the baby.” He said it like an apology. “Babies always seemed to me like pink rosebuds. Just gimme a seat next the door. I’ll be goin’ presently.”

But the old man did not go presently. He sat through the entire services and when Nathan had helped his hysterical young wife away, it was Caleb who gave the undertaker what assistance was required.

“Come up and see me, bub,” he invited Nathan, meeting the young man when that distressing afternoon was a thing of the past and Milly had gone home to her mother’s. “Now and then I hanker for the old days when you an’ me used to read poetry.”

Nathan went. No place other than Caleb’s room in the hotel could have been more appropriate or consoling for him at the moment. Gridley loosened his vest and clothes, a process he designated as “easin’ up for comfort”, and the queer pair sat down together, it being several moments before either broke the silence. Finally the old man, with his massive chin thrust deep in his shirt, one big leg thrown over the other and a slipper sole swinging, cleared his throat. With his eyes averted, he declared huskily:

“Bub, you an’ me always liked poetry and read a heap o’ the stuff, ain’t we? And some of it was mighty good, specially Tennyson. But do you know, I made a discovery t’other day. I come across a copy o’ the Bible down to Bosting where the Psalms was all laid out, poetry-fashion. I never seen ’em that way

before and it struck me they was the best sort o' poetry I'd ever stumbled over. Specially the Twenty-third Psalm. Ever read the Twenty-third Psalm like verses o' poetry, bub?"

"I don't know that I have, Mr. Gridley."

"Wonder if they gotta Bible here? I'll show ye!"

There was a Gideon Bible in one of the dresser drawers. And the tanner resumed his seat. Then whether by design or no—but I rather suspect it was by design—old "God-Damning" Gridley, as some folk called him, tried to heal the wound in the boy's spirit by the beautiful cadences of that masterpiece of all poems:

"The Lord is my shepherd," he began, "I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
He leadeth me beside the still waters,
He restoreth my soul.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
Death,
I will fear no evil.
For thou art with me, ...
Thy rod and Thy staff—they comfort me."

Nathan said afterward it would be impossible to repeat the infinite pathos and tenderness in the hard-boiled old business man's voice as he intoned the lines, his dangling slipper swinging time with the rhythm.

"Bub," said the old man finally, "I lost a boy when I was 'bout your age. Nobody in Paris ever knew about it. It was them lines helped me most of all. Great stuff—poetry!"

II

Through Caleb's maneuvering it was, some time later, that Nathan was called one afternoon into Ted Thorne's offices at the knitting mill.

"Nat," announced that young commercial dignitary, "the old man and I have been talking you over. Gridley was in here the other day—you know who I mean—old duffer who used to run the tannery. Well, he owns a rotten lot of stock in this mill. Put it in when dad first started. And the old man goes by Gridley's advice a lot. Seems old Gridley's scraped up an interest in you somewhere and first father and I knew, old Caleb was cussin' like a Malay pirate and laying down the law about how we ought to reconstruct our sales force. But it looks as if we might get drawn into the war and we're watching our step."

"Yes, it does look like war," returned Nat gravely. "I just read the President's message to Congress this morning."

"It's this way, Nat. Mosely, who's been running our New York offices, is unmarried. He'll probably go if they call for volunteers. He says he wants to go, anyhow. You're married and have your wife and mother to care for, and probably you'll get exempted, if they resort to a draft. So dad and I put two and two together—Mosely's going to war and Gridley's cussin' in your behalf—and I'm prepared to make you a proposition."

"But why should Mr. Gridley do any such thing? I've got a fair position already."

Ted smoked a moment in silence, loath to prod into Nat's personal affairs. But apparently it had to be.

"Nat, you married old Jake Richards' oldest girl,

didn't you? I remember her as a kid in school—she sat across the aisle from me in a couple of the early grades."

"Yes. But what of it?"

Ted suddenly decided to be frank.

"Nat, according to Caleb, he thinks you're unhappily married because your wife has never had much of a chance to see other kind of existence but life in a little town like Paris. Old Cal believed that if you and Mildred could settle in some place like Boston or New York, where Mildred could get out among people, it would change her so much and broaden her so, that you and she might be drawn closer together. Don't take offense. We might as well talk things frankly."

"What's your proposition?" asked Nathan.

"I've told you! Running our New York office in Fred Mosely's place."

"That's quite a step from my present job, Ted."

"We think you may be more adapted for it; you had a great knack of handling help while you and your father were in business here. There's a salary of eight thousand a year attached to it but in New York you'll find you'll need it. And of course dad will always expect you to earn it. But it'll be a complete change and give your wife a new interest in—things. How about it?"

"Whew!" cried Nathan. "I don't know what to say!"

And he didn't.

Three weeks later, however, he and Milly went down to New York, Nathan to "look over" the New

York office of the Thorne Mills and decide whether he felt capable of filling the position.

III

Mosely, manager at the time, was some five or six years older than Nathan,—a typical young New Yorker. His people were wealthy. His mother was somewhat of a society woman. Her son had “taken up” the woolen business and secured his present position through the influence of his father,—a retired banker and semi-invalid who was intimately acquainted with the Thornes.

“Wife with you?” asked Mosely, as one afternoon’s consultation drew to a close. “Fine! Mother has a dinner affair on to-morrow night—not very big—just a few friends. Say, you and your wife run up and I’ll introduce you to a few fellows you’ll be doing business with if you get my place.”

With the limitations of the provincial, Nathan was at once panic-stricken.

Mosely did not add or explain that he intended to ask his mother to lay two more covers because he wanted to discern how far Nat had the ability to associate with certain metropolitan types which would be absolutely requisite to his success in the contemplated position.

Nathan reluctantly accepted and hurried to the hotel to advise Milly.

Milly was panic-stricken also,—but worse, far worse. She went weak all over and had to sit down. Then she declared it was impossible for her to go, she didn’t have a thing to wear. And when Nathan said she could have what money she desired to get

anything she wanted, she came out flat-footed and confessed that she was “afraid to run with the swells” because she’d never know how to act and they might laugh at her.

“Very well,” sighed Nathan. “But I must go—as a matter of business. You can go to a movie.”

“What! Leave me all the evening alone in New York? And you off to a tony party, enjoying yourself?”

“But what else is there to do? If you don’t want to go and don’t want to stay at home, just what do you want?”

“I don’t want you to go, either. You could sneak out of it and go with me to a show. I don’t believe I’ll ever get my fill of shows in New York.”

“Unfortunately I feel I ought to go, Milly. You’ve always talked about wanting to meet high-caste people and now when the chance is open, you’re half-frightened to death.”

“You’re frightened too!”

“I’ll not deny it—not frightened so much as nervous. But it’s a chance to go and learn something and show me what I lack. Those people can’t eat me and I intend to take it. If I’ve got to learn, now’s as good a time as any to start in.”

Milly gave a nasty little chuckle.

“And to think that once I thought you was my hero,” she observed, “as far above me in class as the stars!”

“We won’t go into that, Milly. Do you care to go with me to this dinner to-morrow night or do you not?”

"I'll go," snapped Milly, "but you needn't blame me if I put my foot in it."

"Milly, did it ever strike you that you're not trying to help me very much as my wife—to get on, I mean —holding up your end?"

"I'm no different than I was when you married me! Kindly remember that!"

"How can I forget it, Milly?"

"You needn't give me none o' your nasty slurs—like your Pa was always throwin' your mother. Oh, I know all about 'em! Your mother told me and I seen enough of him at the shop to know she warn't far wrong!"

"Let's not quarrel, Milly. If you're going to the dinner you'll need some clothes—something new."

"You bet I will!" cried Milly defiantly, then added as though the expense might make Nathan think better of the rash engagement, "It'll cost you all of fifty dollars, Mr. Man!"

"Milly, this thing may mean a lot to me. I want you to appear extra attractive. Fifty dollars! I'm going to give you *two hundred* and fifty dollars and I want to see you 'dress to kill!' Find a masseuse first and have her doll you up and then go over in Fifth Avenue and splurge!—for once—splurge!"

Two hundred and fifty dollars! Milly nearly had a spasm. She remained struck voiceless as Nathan actually handed over the money with a vague idea that some such sum would be necessary. Like many poor males, Nathan held the subconscious notion that all that was necessary to dress a woman "to kill" was money.

And Milly? She swore she was being robbed when a masseuse had worked over her an hour and a half and charged her ten dollars, though she was not wholly displeased with the resultant change in her appearance. But when she walked into Martinets, Incorporated, with an aplomb she did not feel and discovered that “the cheapest dress they had” cost two hundred and sixty dollars, her nerve fled and so did Milly. Over on Sixth Avenue she bought something “perfectly stunning” for seventeen dollars and ninety-eight cents,—a difference of two hundred and forty-two dollars and two cents by traveling one block. Which only went to prove how much money you could save in New York when you only knew where to shop!

The “perfectly stunning” creation was an afternoon dress of cerise taffeta, gorgeously strung over the front with spangles. Milly went on the theory that shine and “class” were synonymous,—“class” being Milly’s favorite word and “shine” Milly’s favorite idea of beauty. And if the lights of Mrs. Percival Mosely’s dining room didn’t shine on Milly’s frock it was going to be through no fault of the goods whereof the said frock was constructed. Milly also bought a dark bottle-green fan on the principle that colors show off best by contrast.

Truly Milly was a “queen” when the adjustments were finally completed. She wondered if she could go through with it.

The Moselys lived in the East Fifties, two blocks off The Avenue,—a rather coldly impersonal house with a gray-stone front. At seven-forty-five Milly permitted Nathan to help her alight from the taxi. In fact, his help was extremely welcome. For Milly’s knees had turned to tallow long before Nathan had

“hooked her up”, not knowing whether he exactly approved of Milly’s purchases or not. The fan shocked him so badly that he absolutely forbade her carrying it. Likewise he made her dispense with the twenty-cent aigrette she had purchased to add “class” to her hair. On the whole, Milly did not object to dispensing with these things, although she did wonder what she was going to do with her hands.

When he had finally drawn off and looked at his wife, Nat knew there was something vaguely wrong somewhere. But the time was going and if they delayed longer they would be late. Milly insisted it was fashionable to arrive late. Nevertheless, her husband believed in being punctual at so critical a time to himself. As for Nathan, he had bought his first suit of dinner clothes and, exceptional to recount, the fellow felt strangely at home in them.

A second-man in full house livery tended the door, —the butler being busy with last touches on the table. Nathan tried to nudge Milly to go ahead. But Milly was too terror-stricken and shrank in his rear. The husband instinctively felt foolish stumbling ahead with Milly tagging after like a poor relation he could not shake off. But she clung to his arm as though she might lose him.

The house-man conducted Nathan to the smoking room, raising his Celtic eyebrows when Milly followed, as in a daze. The smoking room had been set aside for the gentlemen’s street clothes.

“This way, madam, please,” he corrected, with a cough to hide his smile. And with an expression of despair, Milly was borne away to where a maid took her in charge at the end of the hall in a dressing-room set apart for the ladies.

Mrs. Mosely had her drawing-room lighted with shaded lamps and adorned with flowers. The curtains had been drawn and the piano opened. Milly furtively watched for Nathan to appear and then almost ran across the broad hall to join him. She clutched her husband again and "tagged after him" despite the man's quick whisper to go ahead. "I'm afraid," she choked. "You go ahead!" So Nathan and his wife moved into the big drawing-room and Milly's daze continued,—as though she were following her husband into the glories of heaven.

Mosely senior, being bedridden, was not in evidence. Young Mosely was assisting his mother in receiving. He caught sight of Nathan and moved slightly forward with an outstretched hand. Milly dodged him and crept behind her husband.

"Glad to see you, Forge," was the young man's easy greeting.

"Meet my wife," suggested Nat, wondering if it was the right thing to say, or rather, the right way to say it.

"I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Forge."

"Pleezeter meecher," lisped Milly from a safe position halfway around her husband's back.

"I want to present you to my mother," went on Fred Mosely. "Mother, may I present Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Forge. Mr. Forge is the one I spoke of—possibly taking my place at the office."

Mrs. Mosely was a remarkable woman. Her coiffure was a classic. Despite her sixty years, her face had an onyx beauty, unwittingly reflected in her voice. She wore silver-satin and cobweb lace. Her

shrewd eye appraised both new arrivals and grasped the young country wife's distress at once. Regardless of who or what her guests might be, first, last and foremost they were her guests always and must be put at their ease. The fine, hard old society matron extended a blue-veined hand.

Milly shifted her clutch on Nat from her right hand to her left. But she didn't let go of him. He might fly through the windows, up through the ceiling, down through the floor or explode in her face, if she failed to hang on to him. She gave the hostess the hand thus disengaged. Thereafter the next three minutes were one phonographic repetition of "pleezeter-meechers"—as though the needle had slipped on a scratched record and hiccoughed the word over and over again. Six other men and six other women smiled quietly but affected not to notice.

Introductions completed, the various groups returned to their intercourse. Nathan and Milly stood apart, looking uncomfortable and feeling worse. Nathan at length shook himself free of Milly's blood-binding clutch. Milly found her wits long enough to gasp hoarsely in her husband's ear, "Gee, ain't it swell, Natie! Lookit! They got a coon orchestra!" Then a moment later, "You stick by me, Natie! Don't you go lettin' 'em set me off by myself away with folks I don't know!"

"They'll probably have place cards, Milly. This isn't any Vermont church supper."

"Place cards! What's them?"

But Mrs. Mosely had noted Milly and Nathan standing alone, and remarked to a gorgeous creation in old-gold georgette and (to Milly) shocking shoulders:

“For pity’s sake, Cynthia, go rescue that poor little girl in the afternoon dress. Put her at her ease, or she’ll ruin my party!”

So before Nat could explain about place cards, the girl Cynthia interrupted.

“Oh, Mrs. Forge!” she cried, “do let me show you the new study by Roerich that Mrs. Mosely just secured at the Aldine Galleries. I’m sure you’ll be interested.”

Milly shrank from the onslaught as though Cynthia What-ever-her-last-name-was had jabbed the deadly muzzle of an automatic into her midriff. She sent a desperate appeal to Nathan with her eyes as though Nathan should speak up and put the Cynthia person in her place with, “No thank you, Madame; my wife has absolutely no interest in Roerich—or any one or anything else but her husband.” But Nathan did nothing or the sort. He even looked relieved. Relieved until he saw his wife moving down the big library beside the old-gold gown. Milly wasn’t only a frump: she was a monstrosity! That flaming cerise with those awful spangles! Could it be possible that Milly had paid two hundred and fifty dollars for that? Where was Milly’s taste, anyway? Must he not only support his wife and shelter and feed her and educate her,—but turn modiste as well? It was sickening!

Cerise Taffeta and Old-Gold Georgette brought up before a large canvas at the northern end of the library. Milly duly recognized that it was a picture because it was bounded by a gold frame and had a shade of inverted lights above it.

“Have you ever seen any of Roerich’s work before?” queried the Cynthia person. She was

amused in a way, but it was a painful amusement.

“No,” gulped Milly.

“This is called the ‘Rain Princess,’” went on Old Gold Georgette. “You know, I dearly love Roerich. He has so much tartaric virility—such bold, wide sweep and atmosphere. His brown steppes, his blue seas, and his purple mountains seem to come from a borderland——”

“Yes,” gulped Milly. “It—it—ain’t painted very plain, is it?”

“Roerich is always the colorist, the emotionalist. And in the East, form ever remains subservient to color, you know.”

“I like paintin’s,” averred Milly, “where you can tell what you’re lookin’ at. There was an artist come to Paris one time. He painted pictures in the window of The Modern Bargain Store—painted ’em right while you watched—houses and trees and things. He asked ten dollars apiece for ’em. But it did seem a pity to pay him so much—he did ’em so quick.”

“Paris, France?” demanded the puzzled Cynthia.

“Lord, No! Paris, Vermont.”

“Oh!” said the other quickly.

“Me,—I go in for sepia,” confided Milly, gaining a bit of self-confidence and evincing the volubility of the provincial once started. “I’m doing my sitting room in browns and such. I got a print of St. Cecilia at Michalman’s. He lemme have it for seven dollars because the frame was scratched. But you never’d notice unless you looked close. And it was a fifteen-dollar picture!”

“How interesting!” murmured the other in slight

distress.

"Oh, I know how to buy, once I have the money to buy with! I got a whole set of that funny furniture with the twisted legs to Blake Whipple's for our dining room. Only fifty-nine dollars! It was marked a hundred and fifteen but Whipple lemme have it because he got stuck with it. Folks in our town ain't much on stylish stuff. They want chairs that has good strong legs, made to be set on and not much else."

"Undoubtedly!"

"Madam, dinner is served," came a somewhat sonorous voice off toward the left. A butler in complete evening livery—a rare and an awesome sight for Milly whose only contact with butlers had been in the motion pictures—stood by the dining-room door. Instantly the hum of conversation ceased.

A rapier stab of fright pierced Milly's vitals. Where was Nathan and would he wait for her? The wife abandoned the Cynthia person abruptly and frantically tried to pick her husband from the seven men all dressed alike. Horror of horrors!—Nathan was talking to that stout girl in silver-gray; she had a hand on his arm and they were moving toward the dining room.

Milly had a wild impulse to flee. She would have flown if she had dared search out the dressing-room alone. In her pitiful panic young Mosely approached her.

"May I take you in, Mrs. Forge?" he asked easily.

"I guess so," the girl responded dazedly.

Mosely held out his arm but Milly did not essay to take it. The idea of such presumption! He should have taken *her* arm, of course. All the fellows had

done it at the Saturday night dances in Foresters Hall before she was married. So in a cold sweat and flaming fright, somehow she moved toward the great double doors. Soft music started playing behind a bank of palms on the landing.

Milly forgot her terror for an instant at sight of that “wonderful” table. The overhead chandeliers had been extinguished. Shaded candle lamps were so concentrated that every part of the cloth was in radiant light. Upon the centerpiece of drawn work a low crystal bowl held a gay mixture of blossoms, mostly small roses. Milly wondered where the food was, what they intended to eat. All she saw in evidence were a few nuts and some “soup plates filled with cracked ice.” Then she came back to her dilemma. The “crowd” was wandering about the table, looking over the napery and silverware, horribly ill-bred, Milly thought. Then she grasped that they were reading names on “little cardboard signs” as she told her mother afterward. Inertia took Milly forward. With a little jolt she came upon her own name. It startled her.

She sat down at once and then got up again—hastily.

She expected that Nathan’s place would be beside her own; Mrs. Mosely would have fixed it that way if she knew anything. But apparently Mrs. Mosely didn’t know anything, because Milly found herself between two disturbingly strange men, one a “bald-headed old fool” and “a tall, sleek young man with a trick mustache who looked like Charley Chaplin.”

Milly beheld that she “was in for a sickening evening.” She wished that awful Mrs. Mosely had at least put one woman beside her.

Guests finally took their seats when Mrs. Mosely had taken hers—up in Paris a hostess was always the last seated and more usually out in the kitchen, looking after things—and then Milly got her first shock of that evening of shocks when she shook out her napkin and found some one had hidden a roll in it. Down on the floor went the roll and Milly had quite a time recovering. The fat gentleman told her not to mind and to leave it for the servants to recover later. But Milly remarked, not without some heat, that “somebody might step on it and work it into the carpet”, and the roll episode being closed, she faced her “plate of cracked ice.”

In the next five minutes Milly discovered oyster cocktail and rather approved of oyster cocktail; when she had held back to see which spoon the Cynthia person employed and how she employed it, finding it to be a fork,—“pickle fork, at that!” thought Milly. “And one for everybody!” Then Milly “caught on” as to where the food was. As fast as you disposed of one course the servants took your empty plate and brought another. Great idea, but what an awful lot of dishes you had to have. And think of the job of washing them afterward!

During the soup, Milly located Nathan. She was a little surprised at Nathan. He was proceeding cautiously but did not appear at all distressed. Nathan, in fact, looked as though he were actually enjoying himself. He had the stout girl in silver-gray on one side and a tall, cold-faced Amazon in black upon the other. And he was carrying on conversation with both. Milly felt rather proud of Nathan. Never until this moment had she noticed how well he parted his hair. Maybe she had not done so poorly in marrying Nathan, after all.

A maid distributed plates from the left and after her came another, laying knives and forks softly in their proper places. Then a manservant presented the various dishes, and until Milly noticed that the others were not doing it, she took the big dish from the servant's hand as she helped herself,—a proceeding which perturbed that worthy greatly.

The fellow with the trick mustache essayed several attempts at conversation which Milly answered in monosyllables. Then the fat man at her right turned to her with a suddenness which almost made her upset her water glass and asked:

"Have you seen Barrymore in 'Peter Ibbetson' yet, Mrs. Forge?"

Milly had not seen Barrymore in "Peter Ibbetson." In the first place she had not the slightest notion who Barrymore was and in the second place she had not the slightest idea of what he should be doing in "Peter Ibbetson" or any one else, and how he managed it.

"Who's Barrymore?" demanded Milly.

"My dear woman! Is it possible you don't know the Barrymores?"

"One can't know everybody," remarked Milly witheringly. She considered this neat and sophisticated, wishing at the same time she had bought a dress with a low neck. She had as good shoulders as any one in the room. Besides, this was New York. She would buy a "low neck"—a "very low neck"—next day. She was glad she still had almost two hundred dollars left of Nat's money.

"But the Barrymores, Mrs. Forge. I mean Lionel and John."

"Are they brothers—or something?"

"Yes," collapsed the stout man. "Brothers? Oh, yes! Certainly!"

"And who's Peter Ibbet's Son?"

"Peter Ibbetson—*Ibbetson!* A play, you know—at the Republic."

"Oh," exclaimed Milly. "You're talkin' about a show. What kind of show is it? Funny?"

"No. I wouldn't call it funny. Although first night was rather amusing. One of the back drops caught somehow at the dark-change in the last act. Some of the scenery was in distressing danger of coming down on Barrymore's bed."

"That oughta been a riot," observed Milly. She felt her self-confidence returning again. She was, as it were, getting along famously. "We had a show like that once at the Opera House up to Paris. Some of the scenery fell flat and knocked the orchestra leader clean into the first violin. They couldn't ring down the curtain. They couldn't do nothin'. Just beller! Funniest part was, what different folks was doin' behind the scenes when the thing went over. One man was changin' his pants. He got outter sight awful quick!"

The fat man roared. But the real reason for that roar entirely missed Milly. He wasn't such a bad sort, after all.

Mrs. Mosely observed that Milly had sprung a highly entertaining *bon mot* and was amusing her near-by table companions greatly. She leaned forward. The fat gentleman, in fact, was growing purple in the face and giving alarming symptoms of sliding under the table.

"Really, Mrs. Forge, you must tell us the joke," suggested the hostess.

"Yes, please do!" pleaded a few feminine voices.

The attention of the diners thus being focused on herself, Milly colored scarlet and felt her scalp take fire. Conversation ceased. They were waiting.

"I—I—this—this man and I—were talking about—a show that come to Paris one night," stammered Milly. "That's our home town—Paris! Up in Vermont, you know!"

"I understand," smiled Mrs. Mosely. Her onyx voice was at its best. "And what happened?"

"Some of the scenery fell flat and knocked the piano player clean into the first violin. They couldn't ring down the curtain. They couldn't do nothing—on the stage, I mean—just holler. But the funniest part was what different folks happened to be doing at the moment the thing flopped over. One man was—one man was——"

"Yes, my dear!"

"*One man was changing his pants!*" gulped Milly. And waited for the explosion of applauding merriment.

But instead of an explosion of applauding merriment came a ghastly silence. Mrs. Mosely tried to smile but turned a queer pea-green. The stout girl beside Nathan looked wildly around the table and jabbed her fork quickly into a morsel of roast. One of the men made a weird noise,—it sounded as though he had swallowed a worm, a long, upholstered, fuzzy one. A little red-haired girl giggled. And poor Nathan! Nathan was suddenly out on the bounding billows of a raging main looking avidly for a

particularly inviting spot in which to drown with neatness and despatch.

“How very interesting!” remarked Mrs. Mosely. She turned to her ever-present help in time of trouble,—the Old Gold Georgette. “Cynthia, my dear,” she suggested, “and suppose you tell us that other amusing anecdote about De Carter when he tried to find Mr. Whitesmith at the Hermitage, and ran into the character actor who looked just like him, you know!”

Cynthia caught her cue and the cogs of the universe moved again. But it had been a hideous ten seconds while it lasted.

Milly was the last to finish her food at each course and the dinner dragged in consequence. She never noted she was holding up the dinner. She essayed other conversation with the stout man after a time, waving choice morsels on her fork as she did so, before putting them into her mouth. Her knife leaned against her plate, or sprawled at rakish angles from other dishes. She felt, however, that those present had not appreciated the delicious comedy in her anecdote. “High-brow,” she snapped to herself. She decided she detested Mrs. Mosely, and as for the Cynthia person’s anecdote, it wasn’t funny at all.

At the conclusion of the dinner Mrs. Mosely led the way into the drawing-room and left the men to cigars. The big double doors between the two apartments were then closed. Again Milly was “thrown on her own.” And——

She wished to Gawd she were home!

If this were high life in the brilliant metropolis, give her good old Paris, where folks ate their food naturally and talked about subjects a body could

understand: the weather, perhaps, the latest film at the Olympic, what bargains Michalman was showing in his basement, how many chops Bud Jones gave for a dollar. What fun was there sitting around like a lot of “dummies at a wake”, nibbling at a very little food in slathers of dishes, having so many forks it took all the joy out of eating to remember to use the right one, and made one’s head ache beside?

What enjoyment was there for a woman to be stuck between two men whom she just knew wanted to talk business, and be stiff and uncomfortable and starched and nerve-racked to death for two mortal hours? Then a séance in the big room afterward and music on the piano that sounded like the player trying to see how many chords she could touch per minute or how many trick combinations of sounds she could manufacture on the keyboard? As for Milly, give her “Put on Your Old Gray Bonnet”, or “Alexander’s Rag Time Band.”

No, Milly didn’t like society. One agonizing evening was enough. She would be a nervous wreck in two months if she had to endure it night after night as a program. This thing she decided emphatically off in a corner by herself. Nathan was not going to take any job where a steady menu of this sort of thing might be necessary. Not if she could help it,—and she flattered herself that she could and she would.

Milly was almost in tears when she finally culled out her husband.

“I wanner go home!” she almost cried. “And if you won’t come with me, I’ll go alone!” That a lady and gentleman were talking with Nathan made no difference to Milly. She had enough. She wanted to go home. She meant what she said.

Nathan excused himself as adroitly as he could. And Milly “sashayed” from the drawing-room, straight to the dressing-room door.

“We must say good night to Mrs. Mosely,” said Nathan, before he started for his own wraps.

“Oh, you can do it for me! I don’t ever want to speak to her again! I think she’s horrid! She asked me that joke about the pants and then made me feel like thirty cents when I told it.”

“But, Milly, it’ll be almost insult to walk out this way; ordinary courtesy demands you come with me and bid her good night. Don’t you want to be courteous?”

“Not to such as her! No! She’s too much of a high-brow! She makes me sick! You can tell her I said so!”

Milly got her street clothes and put them on in the hallway,—as she might have “gone off mad” at a surprise party up home when some one present had “slapped her face.”

Nathan went to Mrs. Mosely and apologized for his wife’s indisposition. “She’s taken suddenly ill,” he explained, “and I must hurry to the hotel with her at once.”

Milly was anything but ill when they went down the steps at last and headed west in the invigorating night air toward the Avenue. Milly continued her comment anent Mrs. Mosely and all Mrs. Mosely’s guests, comparing them to sundry “honest-to-God” folks up in Paris. Nathan was at last stung to remark:

“That was a rotten break you made! I should think your own intuitive good taste would have told you that those people think along a little higher plane than a stage hand changing his pants. That might be

excellent humor for your father up in Gridley's tannery. But in a New York drawing-room——"

"Well, Gridley's tannery and Paris and my father are good enough for me! And you needn't think you're so all-fired high-brow, either. It wasn't only a few years ago you was helpin' skin cows right alongside my father."

"I didn't do it from choice. I was made to do it."

"I suppose you'll be telling me next that a continual bill of fare of the 'class' we had to-night is what you'd 'like from choice'?"

"Certainly it is! You bet it is! And I intend to have it—if it's possible to get."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, Nathan Forge, you'll have it without me! If that's 'high-brow', then gimme the 'flats,' where people live natural and enjoy themselves!"

"What do you mean—you'll have it without me?"

"Just what I said. I'll go back to Ma—for good. Oh, I guess I can earn my own living again! I did it once, remember. You used to say I was the smartest girl in the box-shop—once!" And Milly began to sob openly as she trotted along by Nathan's side. Pedestrians on the Avenue turned and stared.

IV

Extract from a letter mailed from the New York office of the Thorne Knitting Mills under date of October 3, 1916, to Theodore E. Thorne, vice president and sales manager at the main offices and plant, Paris, Vermont:

...I hardly know what to say, Ted. You're putting me in a rotten dilemma. God knows I'm no knocker. Also the last thing in the world I'd want on my conscience would be the dirty work of knifing a poor devil in the back because he hasn't had advantages which some of us have been lucky to receive. But what alternative are you leaving me when you put it up as a question of policy affecting the welfare of the Company?

Forge came down here and spent the better part of a week going over things. As I'm leaving anyway, I was absolutely unprejudiced—you believe that, don't you? I showed him all there was to show. He impressed me as being a fair business man, considering his age, a little higher than the average, perhaps. He's got imagination and executive ability, especially the last, and there's not a doubt he'd work his head off to make good. I think he's especially endowed with the faculty for managing help. But this isn't a factory down here, Ted. The office help requiring management, or even the local sales staff, are almost negligible. This job calls for a "mixer," a diplomat, and a personality capable of holding the trade and adding to it by adroit business politics. I can conceive of Forge being a fair success out in the boardwalk towns, selling union suits to merchants who wait on the feminine trade with their vests unbuttoned and a toothpick between their lips. But running up against such smooth articles as old Anstruther, or the Caldwell boys or the Perkinsnaith people, they'd walk through him like a crooked lawyer driving a coach through a will written on the back of wall-paper.

You know that this business, as the New York territory has always done, contains a big portion of the personal element. Many's the time we might have lost business with some of the heavy-weights if I hadn't been "in right" personally with their families and womenfolk. Take Haymarker and the Tonowanda affair last June: you may not have known it, but I got old Haymarker and his wife to come out to the Long Island place for the week-end—or mother did, which amounts to the same thing—and played around with him until the psychological moment. Before he returned to town

he clapped me on the shoulder and said: “Let’s forget the business fuss, Fred. We’re too good friends in a social way to let a matter of a few dollars break up our relations outside the office.”

...and that’s how young Forge must carry on, and I’m frank to tell you, Ted, I don’t believe he’s there. Oh, he may catch on in a year or so, but the cost to the company in the meantime may be ruinous. Why should the Thorne Knitting Mills pay for the education of a man who should have received that education at home from his parents? It’s a cruel handicap he’s under, but business is business. What his folks can have been thinking of is beyond me. And his wife—oh, my God!

...perhaps the average outsider would say that a man’s wife down here would have little bearing on his job. But believe me, Ted, it isn’t so. Maybe I’m over-emphasizing the social part, but business is sometimes a bit more than price asked and price paid. There are times when personality, family connections, tact, diplomacy, politics played by a fellow’s wife in a social way can mean thousands of dollars in the course of a year. And poor Forge has a millstone around his neck and an anvil tied to each wrist.

...I’ve nothing against her because she comes from a small town. But just because a person comes from a small town is no license to show themselves as mud-hut peasants who wear their boots to bed. A certain nicety of taste is expected of the least of us. And honestly, Ted, that girl Forge calls his wife is absolutely impossible. He must have found her and married her from the lowest class of factory help, just because she was female.

...she came to the dinner in a cheap afternoon frock whose shrieking color would stop a train—she clutched him like a poor relation—mother was almost a nervous wreck when the ordeal was over, and I should have been kicked for pulling any such stunt. She’s been all the week figuring out ways to apologize to her guests. The height of Mrs. Forge’s mentality and idea of dinner wit was an anecdote about somebody up in your town changing his trousers.

> ...of course you're running your own business and it's none of my affair. But I do hate to see all the good work I've tried to do and the organization I've built leak away or go to smash through being turned over to a poor country boob with a wife who remarks that "the servants mustn't be onto their job in this place" because they've neglected to set out the toothpicks along with the demitasses—and actually thinks they aren't.
>
> ...Forge wants to learn all right and he probably will. But the New York office of the Thorne Knitting Mills isn't the place to teach him, and because his wife is so pitifully deficient in the common fundamentals of etiquette, I'm afraid the opportunity is not for him. I'm no snob, as you know, Ted. But there are some things that simply are not done.

Nathan entered the Paris offices of the knitting mills the day following and instinctively felt that something was wrong. A certain cordiality and solicitation were missing in the sales manager's manner. His behavior, in fact, was a bit apologetic, furtive.

"Nat," began the other, "it seems to us that the Pennsylvania and middle-New York territory is in such a precarious state just now, on account of the prospect of war, that the directors have decided it for the best interests of the company not to transfer you to New York for a while. We want you to keep on as you have been going—drumming the department-store trade."

Nat's disappointment was heart-rending,—for a moment.

"Back to the road again?" he whispered wearily. "It's sort of monotonous, Ted; the same thing over and over, week after week——"

"I know, Nathan. But unfortunately there are those kinds of jobs in the world and somebody's got to fill

’em. With war in prospect, we really don’t feel warranted in making the shift. That’s about all I can say. After all, you know, I’m under my directors.”

“That’s tough,” commented Nat finally. “I’d sort of set my heart on getting a big office job like that and really showing what I feel capable of doing. And—and—well, I’ve sort of grown beyond small-town living, and New York made me feel as though it was the sort of thing I’d hungered for, without exactly knowing what made that hunger.”

“I’m sorry, Nat. But business is business.”

That night Mrs. Anna Forge met her son on Main Street.

“...and he came down from upstairs, Nat! I’ll swear he came down from upstairs! And what could he have been doing up there that was all level and on the square?”

“What were you doing up at the house, to catch him?”

“Well, I—I—went up to see you and hear all about your New York trip. Milly’s bragging all over town about a swell dinner they gave you down there, and how you’re going down there to live and have swell dinners all the year ’round.”

“Don’t worry, Ma, I’m not going. The Thornes have changed their minds.”

Nathan went on toward home at the end of another ten minutes. Grimly he considered two things to which his mother had given voice, her worst fears about the man who had come down from the upstairs of Nathan’s home in company with Milly and—his mother’s comment after she had forced him to tell her all about the “swell” dinner.

"Oh, Natie," she had cried anxiously, "I do hope you remembered your manners and said 'please' and folded your napkin afterwards, like I always tried to teach you at home!"

V

"Milly," demanded the husband when he faced his wife in the kitchen half an hour later, "what was Si Plumb doing upstairs with you, when mother called the first of the afternoon?"

The girl flashed him a look of defiance.

"So! Your mother's been carryin' tales, has she? Well, it's just like her! If you want to know, Mr. Smartie, I sent for Si to come and tighten the faucets in the upstairs bathroom." Si had long since quit the tannery and become a steam-fitter in the village.

But somehow Milly's explanation sounded thin.

"I could have done such a simple job as that," Nathan observed. "You didn't need to call Si and run up a plumber's bill!"

"You tighten bathroom faucets? You're a high-brow, remember! You're above tightening bathroom faucets these days, Nat Forge!"

CHAPTER VIII

DRIFTING

I

America was not going to preserve her neutrality and keep from the European shambles much longer. As the days passed and 1917 drew closer, there was less and less doubt about it.

The *Lusitania* tragedy had forecast what might possibly come; the President's famous note of May 13 had met with general approval. Wilson had received a vote of confidence. He was free to deal with the situation created by the various peace proposals of the winter of 1916-1917. But the negotiations which followed in December and January were obscure at the time and the vital issue by no means clear. Then on the twenty-second of January came the announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare. Declaration of war on April 6 was only a matter of dénouement.

When Madelaine came home for the spring vacation, she was hardly in a mood, with the swift and ominous trend of world events moving about

her, to consider any advances of a marital tenor from Gordon or any other man. Then one night in late February it came to her how short the space can really be between a blind exasperation and intolerance of anything threatening a fierce desire for complete independence, and a frantic heart-cry after reliance on a man's strength, the most tender and intimate dependence life had to offer her.

She would arise in the morning fully determined to postpone her studies until the German menace was blasted forever and follow scores of her sister students to France,—to work out her own salvation on bloody fields where men in the abstract needed her most. She went to bed to clutch the counterpane hysterically as the most lonesome and unwanted woman in God's bloody world. Between these two moods she swayed back and forth, wondering at times if she were losing her capacity for straight, cold-brained reasoning.

Gordon came up to the house that February night and found Madelaine in the upstairs library. Mrs. Theddon was down in the city directing some Red Cross affair. The servants were below in the rear, out of sight and—in so far as Madelaine went—out of mind. A coal fire glowed beautifully in the open grate. In silken gown which only accentuated the strength and comeliness of her figure, the young woman sank down before the coals with Gordon across from her. Neither spoke for a long time. Madelaine knew it was no ordinary call which had brought Gordon up to-night. The man's manner was perturbing.

"Madge," he said at last, "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately."

"About what, Gordon?"

"About the war—and myself."

"I wonder if we're really going to have war, Gordon?"

"We are! There's not a doubt about it. They're expecting it at the Works and preparing accordingly."

"Mother told me last night you'd been promoted again. I'm glad you're doing so finely. I'm really proud of you!"

"That's just the trouble, Madge. Sooner or later I've got to reach a decision."

"What sort of decision?"

"Whether I'm going to be a 'desk cootie' through this Big Show, or whether I'm going to do my stunt like a he-man."

"Explain a little more fully, Gordon. Do you mean ——"

"If we get into the Big Show, there's going to be a draft. Everybody's talking about it down at the office. There's no other way, with so much factional feeling among these hyphenated Americans. If they have a draft, it's only reasonable to suppose that certain of us who know our jobs extra well at home may be ordered to enlist and yet to remain on those jobs as being more valuable at home than stabbing Germans. It looks as if that sort of thing might come to me—old Dalliworth is making plans along that line already. And Madge—I—I——"

"Don't be afraid to talk it out, Gordon. You may tell me without fear of being misunderstood."

"You bet I can!" cried the fellow thickly. "God bless you, Madge! What I started to say was, I can't

make up my mind which I ought to do—stay home and direct the making of shells or go to France and have a part in firing them off!"

"Which do you want to do, Gord?"

"I think I want to go to France, Madge. I know my job and all that. But—well, there ought to be lots of older chaps unfitted for active service who could do the home job as well as myself."

"Then, Gordon," said the woman, without an instant's hesitation, "I'd go to France!"

Silence fell between them. It was broken by the man's long sigh. He looked around the room.

"This used to be your mother's chamber, wasn't it, Madge—before she had the house done over? It was in this room I met you first."

"You—as you are now, Gordon—were never that hot-headed little boor. Not only do I refuse to admit it, but I can't conceive it. You've changed so, Gordon. You're not the same fellow at all."

He laughed a depreciating laugh.

"Well," he said philosophically, "if that's true, you know what I told you down in Boston a while ago. You and you alone have been responsible. 'You made me what I am to-day—I hope you're satisfied.'" And once more he laughed. But it was plain the laugh did not come from his heart.

"How long have we known each other, Gord? Let's see, I'm tweny-seven this spring and I was eleven when mother brought me here and gave me this home; that's sixteen years ago! It doesn't seem possible—sixteen years! How time slips away!"

Gordon leaned forward toward her, elbows on his

knees.

“Madelaine,” he asked suddenly, sincerely, “are you happy—really happy?”

“Why do you ask me such a question, Gord? Of course I’m happy! After all I’ve had done for me, why shouldn’t I be happy?”

“There seem to be times—forgive me, Madge, if I’m rude—but there seem to be times when I fancy you’re not. I don’t know exactly what it is—an expression on your face, perhaps, a glance of your eye—I could almost believe you were secretly grieving over something, dear. Isn’t it so?”

The girl felt the springs of emotion beginning to well deep in her spirit. She averted her face. She looked down at her hands, laced together suddenly and tightly in her lap.

“You know, Gordon, I’ve always had a slight mist of tragedy hovering over me, never knowing who my parents were, how I came to be found as I was. A woman could never quite forget that, especially when strangers have been kind to her and tried to treat her like their own.”

“I like that pretty little fantasy associated with you as a girl, Madge. I mean about the fairies leaving you for earthly persons to discover. It makes you very sweet and rare, Madelaine. To me you will ever be that—a fine and tender woman, brought to earth in babyhood by the fairies!”

“Gordon! Please—don’t!”

“How can I help it, Madelaine? Every man must have some sweet, rare, fine, tender woman in his life, mustn’t he—to work for—to please—to bring out the best that’s in him? And having been that to me, how

can I help telling you so, dear girl?"

"I've just been—myself!" the girl responded huskily.

"Yourself! Yes! Thank God for that! Yourself! Madge, does a woman ever realize what she can mean to a man sometimes—who loves her because she has given him a goal and a promise—of still finer things to be—and faith—the essence of things hoped for, but not seen?"

"I'll tell you the truth, Gordon. Yes, there are moments when I'm miserable—terribly miserable—and not because of my clouded parentage, either. Sometimes I don't think I quite know what it is. And yet—and yet—at others——"

"Madge, you've never been really in love, have you—away down deep inside—so deep that you could give that loved one up, if need be, to insure that loved one's happiness?"

"No, Gordon, I don't believe I have."

"That's strange, Madge. It's extraordinary for a woman to reach twenty-seven and never have known a love affair—a real one. And yet in your case, I don't know that it's so extraordinary, after all. You're so different in many ways——"

He stopped abruptly at the mask of pain which slipped over the girl's cameo features. "So different!" Always she had heard that "so different." And never once had she ever wanted to be different, not realizing how beautifully Gordon meant it, what a compliment he was trying to pay her, entirely aside from any question of policy or to abet his own suit.

"Please don't say I'm different, Gordon," she pleaded. "It hurts—terribly!"

"But you are different, you know. Not queer or eccentric, I don't mean. You're so much more elegant and delicate—oh, tosh! I don't mean to sound silly, or indulge in the callow ravings of a school kid. But—oh, Madge, the man who gets you will get a gift direct from the fairies, indeed!" He waited a moment and then added softly, "And, God!—*how* I'd appreciate being that man!"

Tumultuous emotions swept and swayed the girl. She studied the toe of her satin house slipper. That feeling of helplessness came over her again—the sensation of drifting, drifting—on and on—into Gordon Ruggles's arms at last—his wife! Well, and what of it? He was proving himself a man and he loved her. There was not a doubt about that. He loved her.

"Gordon," she said unevenly, "you're going to keep at me and keep at me until you make me your wife, aren't you?" There was no rebuke in her voice.

"In what other way, dear, does a man win the heart of the woman he loves?"

Madelaine sprang from the divan and walked down the room. She threw up her soft, bare, beautiful arms. From her throat came a cry.

"Yes, I'm different—different!—different because romance has never come to me as it has come to other girls—sweet, wild romance that would make me love a man so deeply and fiercely I'd follow him over the world and live with him in a hovel, to be close beside him!—love him so that he would beat me, if you please, and I could suffer it—because I loved him! Oh, Gordon! Gordon! You may win, after all, for you've overcome the most of any man I've ever known. But you'll never know the heart of a

woman! You'll never know! You'll never know!"

He kissed her hand when he left her at the door that night. Despite his great love, despite the inspiration she was in his life—was he hurting her by denying her that Great Romance she might possibly find after he had married her?

For that would be a terrific hurt. Madelaine would be true as steel to any man whom she had once promised to love, honor and cherish, come what might, afterward. She was that kind of woman.

CHAPTER IX

THE LAST STRAW

I

Nathan was facing the prospect of a dreary, rainy Sunday in a Wilkes-Barre hotel when that "turning-point" telegram arrived from Thorne. Since that day in Springfield when he had received a wire from Mildred concerning his child's death, telegrams had not been without a flavor of calamity. Yet Thorne's message on its face looked harmless enough. It read:

> DROP EVERYTHING COME HOME AT ONCE IMPORTANT MISSION FOR YOU. T. E. THORNE.

An important mission for him! Nathan had a queer, telepathic intuition that something had happened, or was about to happen, that was to affect his career and perhaps his whole life vitally. It never left him. In fact, it grew upon him as he entered Vermont the next afternoon and his train drew into Paris about half-past seven o'clock.

Usually Nat wired Milly when he was returning from his trips; his wife was piqued and exasperated when he "walked in on her" with no food ready in

the house or when she was in the midst of neighborhood or family activities such as occupied her time while her husband was absent. But he had been so intent on making his trains that this time he had forgotten. When the man finally alighted on the depot platform Sunday evening, the place showed no signs of life; not even a Ford taxi met the train. So Nathan left his suit cases in the baggage room to be brought up next morning and started toward the business section afoot.

He entered the Metropolitan Drug Store pay-station and called Ted Thorne. Ted was out for the evening and Nat promised to call him later. Then he called Milly to inform her that he had returned to town and would be up in a few minutes. Milly did not answer the ‘phone.

“Probably down to her mother’s,” he said. So he stopped for a lunch at the Élite, lit a cigar and headed for Preston Hill at a leisurely pace. This was about half-past eight.

It was one of those blowy nights in early March with the wind drying up the snow puddles and clouds scurrying across the face of a high white moon. Spring would be on New England in a handful of weeks. Already most of the snow had gone and only sickly, dirty patches, the last vestiges of winter drifts, were disclosed on the northern sides of walls and fences where the sunlight failed to touch them.

His house was dark when he finally turned into Vermont Avenue. As Milly had not answered the ‘phone, he thought nothing of it. He went up the front veranda steps and let himself into the hall with his latchkey. The warm odor of his own home was pleasant and inviting, the house welcomed him after his three-weeks’ absence by its mellow darkness. He

pressed on the lamp button in the hall and called his wife's name. But he received no answer. The house was very quiet. The wind blew a loose blind somewhere. On the distant kitchen sink-shelf a brassy alarm clock ticked faintly. Nathan hung hat and coat on the hall hat-tree and pressed out the hall light as he moved into the sitting room on the west side.

He pulled the tiny chain on the reading lamp and looked around for his mail. It contained nothing of interest, most of it being bills. He glanced over the recent copies of the *Daily Telegraph*. But his thoughts were upon Ted Thorne and why he should have been called so abruptly off the road.

After a time the moon got around to where it cast a splotch of lemon-colored light on the sitting-room floor. The window shades had not been drawn. Nathan glanced up and saw the cold, round disk behind the gaunt, waving tree boughs. He turned his chair—a heavy wing-rocker—so that it faced the window, its back to the room. Then he reached a hand and pulled off the reading light to enjoy the wild, windy beauty of the outside night.

He had turned many bitter things over in his mind and it was after nine o'clock when the man heard a strange sound. It seemed to come from the rear of the house, out on the back porch beyond the kitchen. At first Nat thought it some freak of the wind. Then, as the latter died down and perfect quiet reigned for a moment, the sound came again, sharp and distinct.

Some one had tried several keys in the back-porch door. Finally they had found one which fitted. A gust of wind swept through the house and the door was immediately closed.

Nathan had no desire to startle his wife. He was about to rise and call, to advise her of his presence in the darkened home, when there came a thunderous thud in the kitchen and an oath.

A man was in the kitchen! He had fallen over a chair!

Nathan drew back into the protective depths of the rocker. He was frightened. Most normal people know some degree of terror when it is evident burglars are in the house. He debated what he should do. Then it occurred to him to keep silent a moment, to see what the intruder was after and where he would go.

The burglar apparently righted the chair and groped his way to the sitting room, where Nathan held his breath and waited, completely hidden by the enormous back of the rocker. The intruder came in, still groping. Nathan could hear his deep breathing through the semi-dark.

Apparently the man stood for a time in the center of the room, hesitant. Then, to Nathan's bewilderment, he sank down on the sofa. Nathan heard the springs creak plainly. Next came the scratch of a match, the silhouette the flare made of adjacent furniture on west wall and ceiling, and the acrid odor of cigar smoke. A queer burglar, this! He sat down on the family sofa and lit a smoke before proceeding to his loot. And Milly might come at any minute.

Milly came. She let herself in the front way. Nathan knew when she had arrived by another draught of spring wind and the sharp click when the front door closed and the lock snapped. But she did not turn on the lights. Her footstep sounded on the hard-wood floor of the hall and he knew without

looking around that she was standing in the door.

The sofa springs creaked. Nathan waited for Milly to shriek when she beheld a burglar smoking in the room. He had his mind ready to reach for the chain of the reading lamp and snap it on. After that,—well, Nathan still knew how to use his fists.

But Milly did not shriek. Instead, he heard her say in the most normal, natural intonation of voice, softened with a trace of humor:

“Don’t take you long to make yourself comfortable, does it?”

And a man’s coarser bass returned from that dark:

“You bet it don’t! Leave it to your uncle!”

“I hope to Gawd nobody spotted you gettin’ in. That ol’ Miss Pease next door puts her eyes on the doorstep when she sleeps, same as she puts out her cat.”

“Naw, I waited until a cloud went over the moon before I left the shadow o’ the fence. But I did knock my shin over a chair in the kitchen. I’ll break that dam’ thing if you leave it in my way again—fell over it last Sunday night, very same way!”

Nathan was too stunned to move. He seemed all at once to have no body, so completely had all physical sensation fled. He might have been a disembodied spirit sitting in that chair—which he was, so far as the man and his wife were concerned. And they thought him six hundred miles away! He waited. He knew Milly was pulling off her gloves and unpinning her hat.

“You didn’t light any lights, did you?” It was Milly’s voice that asked it.

“What th’ hell sort o’ boob do you take me for, Mil? Besides, whatter we need lights for—you an’ me?”

The sofa springs suddenly creaked with Milly’s added weight.

“Gawd, kiss me, honeybunch! Gimme a good old humdinger. There ain’t nobody can raise my hair with kissin’ like you can, Si, or anything else, for that matter. Seems just as if a gorilla had me—and I was perfectly willin’ the gorilla should!”

They kissed.

Later-day motion-picture censors would have shortened that kiss considerably, say about forty seconds.

“Honestly, Si,” cried the girl, “when you kiss me like that, I just wanner die—or wish I could!”

“Some little kisser I am, huh? Nat don’t kiss you like that, now, does he, what?”

“Oh, Gawd! If he could do it that way—or ever had—maybe you’d never had the chance, Si. A girl likes to be mauled once in a while—you know—treated rough! But he’s too much of a high-brow to maul anybody. I suppose it ain’t poetical!”

Milly laughed. Plumb swore. As for Nathan,—he sank deeper into his chair. His mind was in that state which a wrecked body sometimes knows between a mangling accident and the moment when blasted nerves begin to respond and bring excruciating agony.

“Mil, honestly, this can’t go much longer! You ain’t his wife, Mil. You never was his wife. He had no business to marry you in the first place. You belong

to me. And the right thing all around would be to either come out flat-footed and have a show-down, or else run off and just love as much as we please—forever. I may be a roughneck, Mil, but I hate this bein' a sneak!"

"I know, Si, but think o' the dough I'm layin' by! I got almost seven hundred saved right now. Did I tell you about the New York dress? Nat gimme two hundred and fifty to buy some togs for that high-brow dinner. Do you know what I did? I got a thing that cost seventeen ninety-eight and made him think I'd blowed the whole wad. Made two hundred and thirty at a crack, right there! Gee, he's easy! He believes anything I tell him. Just because I'm a woman, he takes everything I say for gospel truth."

"I don't care nothin' about his money—unless you wanner blow it on yourself. I got money. And I can get a job anywheres. And honestly, Mil, I'm dam' tired and sick every time a blind blows thinkin' it's him come back by surprise to catch us and raise hell."

"Aw, he wouldn't raise hell. He ain't got the starch." Milly laughed and apparently pulled Si's hair. "He's a high-brow and a poet. Poets don't fight!"

"Don't they, though?" commented Plumb. "I had one scrap with Nat. I ain't hankerin' to mix up in another. He could even gun me for what we're doin' now, Mil, and I wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

"He wouldn't gun you—not if I was around," snapped Milly. "I'd just like to see him. He's the least o' my worries. I can handle him!"

"But it ain't alone that, Mil. I want you myself! You're my class. Honestly, when I'm at work some

days, I got a regularly gnawin' inside to feel your arms 'round me and hear your old ribs crackin' when I squeeze you in an honest-to-Gawd hug! I wancher always, Mil. I thought a heap o' you before you ever took up with him——"

"I thought he was class—and rich," lamented the girl. "He sure did bunco me fierce."

"Well, yer kid's gone and he don't love you no more or he wouldn't go off months at a stretch and leave you—exposed to me!" Si laughed. "Mil, you and me just got to fix this up. It'd probably jolt His Nibs terrible to have a divorce. Besides, he'd probably start messin' things up. Still it oughta be done. Where's he now? When's he comin' home?"

"He oughta be doin' Pennsylvania this week. It's his time for it. He'll be back about a week from Thursday night."

"Mil, what th' hell do we care for him or anybody? Let's cut out this sneakin'-in-the-back-door business. Let's blow!"

There was silence for a long time after that.

"Where'd we go, Si?"

"I gotta swell chance to go down to Jersey and get a job in a shipyards. They're payin' big money for riveters. A feller was tellin' to the shop yesterday that if we get fightin' the Germans, them that works on ships won't have to go across. Let's blow, Mil! Let's get outta here for good and all!"

"There's Ma and Pa and the kids——"

"Yer Ma and Pa wanner see you happy, don't they? And they know Nat ain't doin' it. Then what's the answer? Besides, I can get along with your Pa a lot

better'n Nat. Yer Pa and me speak the same language!"

Another lunge of the couch springs.

"Treat me rough, kid!" cried the girl softly. "Treat me rough enough and—I might!"

Nathan reached up and pulled on the light.

II

Milly shrieked. Plumb sat stunned. He blinked in the abrupt illumination like an imbecile.

Nathan arose to his full height. He viewed the two. He drew a long breath for strength, poise and self-control. Then he leaned back against the table and regarded them gravely.

Milly sat up on the edge of the sofa. Her hair was down and her bodice open. Hairpins dropped on the hard, polished floor at her feet.

"Where'd you come from?" she cried when she could speak.

"This chair! I've been sitting here since nine o'clock."

"You heard?"

"Yes—I heard! How could I help it?"

Milly mustered up her courage.

"You dirty, eavesdropping sneak!"

Nathan raised his hand. On his harrowed face was a sad, disillusioned smile. He addressed himself to Plumb.

"How long has it been going on, Si?"

The steam-fitter was dressed in his Sunday-evening best. His Sunday-evening best was slightly rumpled by his liaison with Milly. Once he cast his eyes about as though debating whether to try for the door or dash through the window glass.

“How long has what been going on?” he asked weakly.

“Come, come! Let’s not spar. It isn’t necessary.” Nathan took his hands from the table edge and folded his arms. “You needn’t try to get up nerve to leap through the glass. I’m not going to hurt you!—I may be a poet but I’m not quite a fool.”

Si breathed easier. He sat up. They were a cheap, disheveled, foolish-looking pair, ranged there side by side, a cow of a woman and a bull of a man. Was there any reason why they should not seek each other’s embrace?

“I been lovin’ Mil ever since you married her.” The steam-fitter confessed it sheepishly, picking at his broken finger nails. “I was lovin’ of her when you stepped in to the shop and cut me out. If you’re goin’ to blame anybody, blame yourself!”

“I am blaming myself,” Nathan returned quietly. “All I can’t understand is, Milly—how could you do it?”

“Do what?” snapped the girl.

“All the time I was trying to do things for you—get you this home—furnish it as you wanted—buy you clothes—take you with me on my trips—introduce you to people in New York—hand you out more money than you’d ever be able to earn yourself—and all the time you loved another man behind my back! You were carrying on with him while I had the

utmost confidence in you—at least, I refused to believe what all the town tried to tell me."

Milly began to cry.

"It was little Mary," she sobbed. "You was her father. Besides, you'd never understand how or why I loved Si. I didn't suppose you ever could."

"I should think you'd have felt like a virago," declared Nathan disgustedly. "What else can you call yourself?" He looked down upon her as upon some biological specimen that was exhibiting strange phenomena.

"I don't know what it means, but I can guess—and if I'm that for lovin' Si more'n you—well, I ain't ashamed of it! It's bein' done every day! You could go see a few classy films if you wasn't so high-brow ——!"

"That's plenty, Milly. You love Plumb enough to follow him into disgrace. Is that it?"

"With my kind of love there ain't no disgrace. In 'Sex and the High Heart' it showed where——"

"And you love Milly enough to make her your legal wife?" Nathan interrupted in hard voice to the steam-fitter.

"You betcha life I do! I'd——"

"Then take her!" snapped Nathan contemptuously. With lips closed tightly, he turned. The episode was at an end.

"Huh! You want to get rid o' me, don't you?—Same's your father got rid o' your mother! I might o' known!"

"Shut up, Mil! Don't be a fool!" ordered Plumb. He had a man's brain and masculine grasp of proportion,

sluggish, but equipped nevertheless with a certain amount of common sense. “You mean this, Nat?”

“Do I look as if I were jesting? Two wrongs never yet made a right. I wronged Milly when I took her from you. Every day since, I’ve wronged myself. I see now—as I should have seen from the case of my father and mother—that all the legal and religious promises in the world can’t affect raw nature. People mated will love, honor and cherish one another. People not mated may live in the same house, eat at the same table, sleep in the same bed for a thousand years. Every moment of those thousand years they’ll be prostitutes. I see it now. And any one who teaches or preaches differently is an ass. Get out!”

Plumb heard and agreed inwardly that Nat *was* a high-brow. “Must o’ swallowed a dictionary!” he explained afterward. But from the dangerous predicament he needed no second invitation to exit.

“But I gotta get my clothes!” cried Milly, “and all my things——!”

“All your ‘things’ will be sent to your mother’s house in the morning. Get out!”

“Then you mean for me to get a divorce?”

“I’ll get the divorce, thank you! I’ve taken this sort of thing lying down long enough. I said get out!”

“Come on, Mil,” ordered Silas. “I know a place we can go for to-night. How long’ll it take you to get that divorce, Nat?”

III

Ted Thorne, in the library of his home at ten-thirty that night, beheld the face of his young salesman

with anxiety.

"For heaven's sake, Nat, what's the matter? Sick?"

"No, just a bit upset, that's all, Ted. You wired me to come home in a hurry and I forgot to telegraph my wife. I reached the house to find——"

"Yes?"

"That she loved that Plumb fellow—the steam-fitter that works for Holcomb."

"You caught them?"

"Yes. I caught them!"

Nathan stretched his legs and drew a long sigh. His lips were very firm. His self-control was admirable.

"And what's the answer?" demanded Thorne.

"She's gone with Plumb. I told her to go."

"You told her to go! My God! I'd have got a gun and plugged that steam-fitter so full of holes——"

"The man who'll so lower himself as to run amuck and shoot anybody up for the sake of a woman who doesn't love him enough to be true to him deserves exactly what the jury hands him in case they fail to disagree!"

"But there's such a thing as the Unwritten Law and ——"

"Unwritten fiddlesticks! Let's get down to business. What's this important mission you want to send me on?"

"Suppose we smoke," suggested Ted weakly. He was too upset at the moment to discuss business. When the cigars had been lighted he sat with his chin deep in his chest for a time and then said

frankly, “You’ve had a sort of a rotten experience with women, haven’t you, Nat? Oh, I know all about it! Most of the town does. Your mother—that Gardner girl—now your wife—say, Nat, the marvel to me is, that regardless of it all, there doesn’t seem to be the least shred of cynicism in your whole make-up. I’ve got to hand it to you, Nat. I don’t understand it.”

“It’s nothing but common sense, Ted. What’s the use of showing yourself a mean, small-bored, surly little runt, rooting about the earth or frothing cheap spleen, just because you haven’t had the chance to know the right people? It’s this way, Ted: When I was a kid, and even later in my ‘teens, I felt that I’d been handed a raw deal. I got an awful dose of it, or thought I did—such a dose of it that, frankly, I began to get curious about it. I couldn’t place any other construction on it finally, Ted, but that somewhere, somehow, there was a purpose behind it. Unconsciously these last few years, I’ve been searching to determine just what that purpose could be. I’ve searched the Bible. I’ve read a lot of what all the big thinkers in other ages have left behind. I’ve watched people—other folks in trouble. Why should some fellows be born with silver spoons in their mouths and a whole regiment of solicitous relatives standing around at birth and afterward, to help them stir with it, and other fellows have to scratch for themselves, buy their own spoon and do most of their own stirring? Ted, there must be a reason behind all this hodgepodge of life. Ever stop to think about it? Human vicissitudes, Ted, seem to be the only things in the universe that aren’t subject to pretty well-defined laws for pretty sharply defined purposes. The seasons come and go—seed time and growing time and harvest—for a purpose. Showers

follow muggy weather—to water the thirsty earth. Even the very nitrogen from our lungs in devitalized exhalation becomes food for the fairest flowers. It's a pretty intricate universe, Ted, with precious little happening by chance. All but the ups and downs of human life. Do you mean to tell me that human life, the highest organism in all nature, runs hit-or-miss? I can't believe it, Ted. The very fact that there's no apparent reason for all our ups and downs convinces me there *is* a reason. And it's simple as dirt. There's some of us deficient in some attribute or other that only raw dealing and struggle make strong. Others have follies and weaknesses. Sorrow and hard luck burn the dross away or show the whole stuffing of us is dross and not worth the Almighty monkeying with at all. The whole trouble happens to be that we poor mortals don't know what the assay of ourselves was—before we came into the darned world and started living in it in the first place. So we can't know what we need and what we don't need. And we kick and we caterwaul and we revile and we squirm. Or we show we're only cheap stuff and 'turn cynical' as you call it. But I'm beginning to believe, Ted, that people who let themselves sink into self-pity and get cynical and rail against the ups and downs of life are only cheating themselves. They're probably deliberately knuckling under on precisely the load of trial and tribulation they need to make them strong—in this world—or for some other race—on some distant planet—further on! Got it? 'Them's my sentiments' on the woman mess. The class is dismissed. Now let's get down to business!"

"You're a philosopher!" gasped Ted Thorne weakly.

"Until a man becomes a philosopher in some form

or other, he's going to have a mighty hard scratch in this world, Ted, to dig up reasons for all that happens to him."

Ted Thorne looked at his salesman in frank admiration. He saw a prematurely old young fellow with fine flecks of gray beginning to show at his temples, even at twenty-seven. There were deep creases of still deeper strength about his mouth. His eyes were calmer and held a wounded look at times which melted into growing reassurance that life, after all, was mostly what we make it. Nose was prominent. Mouth and chin were stubborn, though lips came together evenly. His head was perfectly proportioned. His hands were the slender hands of the artist, the builder, the creator. He had the properties of piano wire, somehow—wire capable of producing the finest melodies in all nature when properly tightened and tuned—yet strong enough to bear a weight more out of proportion to its size and stress than any other substance in existence.

"Nathan," he said gravely, "we're going to have war; did you know it?"

"I hope not!"

"All the same, we're going to have war. And if we have war, there'll be a draft. Before that comes, I want to utilize your services in doing something for the company we can't spare any other man to do. I believe it'll be extremely agreeable to yourself, too—a change—an education—an opportunity to get out and see what the world is like. I want to send you abroad."

"Abroad!" gasped Nathan.

"Your wife's elimination comes at an especially happy time, old man. Besides, a change of scene may

soften the sting of the experience. How long will it take to start the divorce business?"

"A week to start it, perhaps. The case can't be heard until June, anyhow."

"It'll be purely mechanical, of course, seeing it probably won't be contested."

Nathan nodded.

"Where do you want me to go?" he asked quietly. "France?"

"Siberia!"

Thorne made the announcement as he might have named Rutland, Bennington or Troy, New York.

"What!"

"Here's the story, Nat. About eight months ago we manufactured a lot of shirts for the Russian government. Ships were at a premium to transport goods across the Atlantic. Beside, they might be subject to seizure going up through the Baltic if the German fleet came out. So we routed those goods across America and shipped them over the Pacific. But you know what's happening up in Russia. And here we are, with about forty thousand dollars' worth of goods stuck somewhere in the Orient, and what's going to become of them if we don't send a representative to look out for them, the Lord only knows. Nat, the directors couldn't give you that New York job because of the impediment your wife was—I'd just as soon say so now. But we can give you this trip and a bigger job when you get back, if the war turns out the way we hope. We want you to go to Vladivostok within the next thirty days and look after the placing of those goods in the hands of the proper parties."

"Whew!" exclaimed Nathan. "A mere trifle! What else?"

"Nat, old man, we've got confidence that you can work it out, or we wouldn't send you. We'll get your passports and routing—to sail from San Francisco on or about the first of April. And you can have until that time to wind up your affairs. You may be gone a devil of a time and circle the world before you get back. But it'll be a college education and I don't want you to refuse."

"I'll go—of course," assented the lad. But for a time his gaze was blank.

He was thinking of his father, last heard from in Japan—directly in his route.

IV

A dour time followed when Mrs. Anna Forge heard that Nathan had been slated for a trip to the Far East.

She acclaimed in the highways and byways that the Thornes were sending her boy to his death, to be gnawed by wolves and lashed with knouts. She visited old Jim Thorne in his offices and told him what she thought of him. Nathan had to be called to take her away. The week before Nat left town she clawed his face when he tried to get her out of my house, whither she had come to invoke my intercession in stopping the mad enterprise.

"After all I've done for him, he goes off to the other side the world and leaves me! Casts me aside like an old shoe! He shan't go! He shan't! He shan't!"

It developed that she was not half so much concerned for Nathan's welfare, or what might

possibly happen to him in the Orient, as she was for herself and how she was going to live in the meantime.

With Nathan's wife eliminated at last, of course God had shown plainly enough that He wished the son to devote the rest of his days and dollars to his darling mother.

She went and saw a lawyer about it and when the lawyer was cool, she visited the editor of the local paper and wanted a "piece" inserted therein, flaying the lawyer alive and exposing him as a double-dealer, a horse thief, a wife beater and a villain of the deepest dye.

Nathan gave her a hundred dollars and a five-pound box of chocolate caramels—the kind with nuts in them—whereupon Mrs. Forge conceded that Siberia might have its good points and would he write to her every week and be sure to wear his heavy underwear in those awful Siberian winters?

Nathan promised and Mrs. Forge departed through the town to spend seventy-two of the hundred dollars before five o'clock on clothes for Edith's youngsters. Not because Edith's youngsters especially needed the clothes, but because Mrs. Forge had the hundred dollars.

CHAPTER X

FIRST LIGHT

I

The afternoon and evening before Nathan's departure he spent with me. An arrangement was finally effected whereby Mrs. Forge received the money accruing from the sale of Nathan's household goods, and with an additional sum deposited with me to keep her during his absence, she went down to start living with Edith. Her own mother had died at the time Nathan worked in the tannery and she "was on the outs" with her three brothers and their wives. So bag and baggage upon Edith she descended and mother and daughter "had words" before she'd been in Edith's home six hours. That, however, was no concern of Nathan's prior to his departure. He was very patient and tender with her when he saw her off on her train. But he turned to me with a philosophical smile afterward and remarked, "Of all troubles, Bill, there are no troubles quite like family troubles, are there?" Father Adam in the Garden probably originated the remark after the well-known dispossess notice. Anyhow, the afternoon and

evening before Nat's departure he spent with me.

It was a sunny day in late March and it cleared off into a beautiful starlit evening. We roamed about town and talked of many things before dinner, for deep down within both of us was the vague dread that perhaps it was our last walk and talk, that we might never see each other again. Then in the evening we sat in my living room and smoked our pipes, and the past was brought back vividly again.

I have already referred to the group of small boys we encountered interning mimic Huns for sedition and the reminiscence it called up of the afternoon back in Spanish War time when we played "Hang the Spy" and "Slaves in the Dismal Swamp." These were only two of many anecdotes over which we had much laughter to hide the ache in our hearts.

We talked of the day we had first met in the school yard in East Foxboro; those walks homeward in the late afternoons; the day that Bernie Gridley had driven old Caleb's mare home in terror because Nat wished to present her with a deceased rodent as a gift with which she could "trim up a room." We lived again our early days in Paris, Bernie's birthday party when Nathan presented the little girl with a bust of Cæsar, the "happiest day" off in the woods at the Sunday-school picnic.

"By the way," said I suddenly, "what's become of Bernie, anyhow? I don't think she's been back here to Paris since her mother died."

"Old Caleb told me one evening, Bill, and I've always considered it confidential; but I guess there's no harm in telling you—now. Most every one in Paris thinks she went abroad after school, with some friends from Springfield."

"And didn't she?"

"No, she didn't. Bernie got into trouble with a man. The trip abroad was only camouflage to cover up the scandal. She never went abroad. Her baby didn't live and I guess it hardened Bernie—the whole experience. And if the truth were known, I think that's what killed her mother. It was a body blow to the Duchess 'after the nice way in which Bernice-Theresa had always been brought up.' You remember how she suddenly withdrew from her grand direction of village and church affairs under the excuse she had heart trouble. It wasn't heart trouble. The woman's bump of ego got the *coup de grâce,* Bill. It finished her!"

"Old Caleb knew?"

"In time he found out. But—poor old Caleb! Do you know what he remarked to me one night, Bill?"

"I can't imagine."

"It was the Sunday night that I'd first quarreled with Mildred because her father brought gin into our house and got drunk at Sunday dinner. I went up to spend the evening with Caleb and get cheered. I had to tell him something of what I was going through with Milly. That recalled my experience with Carol and even something of my earlier calf-love for his daughter. He was silent for a long time and then he sighed. 'Bub,' said he, 'don't think you're the only man on earth, young or old, that ain't been able to get along with women nor understand 'em.' You can imagine how he said it. 'You'll find there's lots of fellows can pal with men and make friendships the grave can't bury. But when it comes to the weaker sex, life's just one dam' thing after another. And most of 'em wears petticoats and gets their way with

tears,' said he. Poor old Gridley! I guess he's had his family troubles, too."

"But what became of Bernie?"

"Old Caleb saw that Bernie had been through some terrific experience and wasn't long worming it out. He didn't have much to say. All the same, he wanted her to come back to Paris and keep house for him. They quarreled before Bernie returned to Springfield —with the mother not two days buried. And I guess Bernie said some snippy things that cut the old man pretty deep. It seems old Caleb had a love affair when a young man, but the girl broke it off because she didn't think herself competent to be his wife. He stood in just that awe of the sex that he didn't try to persist and overcome that foolish little objection. And the disappointment gashed deep. He married the Duchess much as I married Mildred. The wound healed but the scars never left his heart. And Bernie learned of it and twitted him about it. Her principal indictment of old Caleb was that he had been content to remain a small-town man and bring her up as a small-town girl so that when she got out in the world 'among real people', as she called it, she was always at a disadvantage."

"There was a rumor about the place a few years ago that she married a Chicago millionaire."

"She did. But whether she found happiness with him seems to be unknown, at least back here at home. I don't believe her dad has heard a word from her since she left in high dudgeon after her mother's funeral." Nathan paced along by my side for a quarter-mile in silence. Then he laughed sadly and said, "Bill, did you ever know about me asking Bernie to marry me, the week before she went away to school?"

"Marry you! Why, Bernie was only about fifteen ____"

"I know it! That's why it's so amusing—about as funny as the 'Death of Little Nell.' It was down along the pathway through the Haskell meadow—the 'short cut' from Matthews Court to Windsor Street—all built up now with bungalows. I met her and proposed to her desperately—poor short-trousered little ass that I was. But she was mad at me; she said I hadn't the backbone of a fish. If I was half a man I'd get a gun and shoot dad for whaling me that picnic day in front of everybody. She ended by calling me a freckled-faced little frump and declared when she married any one, it was going to be a millionaire. Well, she made good there, all right. But the way she scorched me at the time surely blistered for many a month afterward. I remember I returned home, took all her letters and tied them up with a ribbon—my first rosary. I hid them away out in the ell attic of the Spring Street house. By gosh, they must be there yet! I haven't thought of them from that day to this!"

So that last walk of Nathan's and mine ended by making a trip to the Spring Street house; my friend had a little hunch that he would like to see if those letters were still hidden there and read them over again, because of what they had once stood for in his precocious young life. A family by the name of Bailey had bought the Spring Street place and grudgingly gave consent for us to search the garret. Nathan found the packet, laid there on the mellow, brown rafters in the dark through sixteen years and smelling acridly of dried plaster, dank soot and moist creosote from the near-by kitchen chimney.

After dinner that night, as we smoked our pipes, Nathan opened them,—a packet of boy-and-girl love

notes faded with the flight of time and bringing back the joys of Long Ago. Scrawled sheets where “he was mad” and “she was mad” and he had spoken to some other little girl yesterday, and she had permitted Sammy Sargent to walk home from school with her and carry her books. There were dozens of them. And though Nathan smiled at the “till-death-do-us-part” endings, I knew they were vibrating raw heart chords. Excoriations of Nathan’s dad, intrigues for him to “skin out” and go with her to parties, little petulant fault findings, all were very sweet now, misty, as those years had become with the nebulous glow of Boyhood Romance.

“Bill,” said my friend finally, “I’ve got a hunch I’ll call off in Chicago and look Bernie up. I might return these letters to her as an excuse for seeing her, if nothing else. I’d like to talk over old times with Bernie, even if I was a mushy young calf. Yes, I’ll stop off in Chicago and look Bernie up. After all, a man rarely forgets his first love, never mind how many follow.”

We mentioned Milly only once in our talk that last night. She had disappeared from town immediately and so had Plumb.

“It was all my mistake—marrying her in the first place, Bill,” he said. “I had brains enough to know better but not the common sense to exercise them. And I was lonely—God, how lonely! Poor Milly! After all, *she* was more sinned against than sinning.”

He went away on the same train next forenoon on which Carol Gardner had left our homely little railroad station, nine years before.

Only it wasn’t raining the morning Nathan left. The sun was shining—shining gloriously—bright and

warm. I was too deeply concerned with bidding my friend good-by, however, to attach much significance to the sunshine.

So we parted—for War!

Old Caleb Gridley's train reached Paris at twelve o'clock. He missed bidding Nat farewell by an hour.

II

Queer things happen in life. Just beyond Buffalo that night, the train newsboy came through, crying the evening dailies. The papers were black with headlines. The big munitions plant at Russellville, New Jersey, engaged in making shells for the British government, had blown up that afternoon, killing hundreds, destroying the town. The conflagration was still burning, with shells exploding in the vitals of the flames like a small battle transferred to this side the Atlantic.

Nathan read the account of the disaster like a hundred million others that evening, thinking "Such is war!"

He found my wire when he reached The Morrison in Chicago. I thought he should know; the gypsy trail of the world spread before him now with many mystic and perhaps romantic twists and turns yet to be negotiated. I worded my telegram thus:

> MILDRED RICHARDS IN LIST RUSSELLVILLE DEAD IS MILLY FOLKS JUST RECEIVED WORD PLUMB HAD TAKEN JOB SHIPYARDS near-by IS UNHURT NO TRACE MILLY FOUND BEST WISHES PLEASANT TRIP MOTHER WIFE AND SELF
>
> WILLIAM.

III

It was a week before Nathan located Bernice. Not because he did not know her address; he had procured it from Elinore Carver who had married a local furniture man and with whom Bernie had kept up an intermittent correspondence since leaving Paris. It was because Milly's passing affected him grievously. Somehow it was difficult to shake off the presentiment that in ordering her from the house that Sunday night, he had unwittingly sent her to her death. Certainly she would not have left with Plumb so soon and gone to work in the munitions plant. I think he went to Bernie's apartment on the North Shore, seeking some poor solace in a woman's company. Anyhow, thinking to surprise her and never dreaming she would not be glad to see him, he dressed in dinner clothes one Wednesday evening and set out for the address Elinore had supplied.

The place where Bernice now resided was an exclusive apartment, with an onyx marble entrance and a negro 'phone attendant to announce callers to rooms above.

"Yo' is one of de guests, ah s'pose," commented the African, and then, before the puzzled Vermonter could respond, "De guests is to go up wifout bein' announced. Flo' Three, 'partment Three-Fifty-Fo'."

Nathan went up in the automatic lift.

A Japanese boy answered his ring and immediately the door was opened, from regions behind came jazzy music.

"May I see Mrs. DuMont?" asked my friend.

The Oriental grinned and held wide the door.

"You please to give me your name," suggested the

Jap. “I tell her to come out to see you.”

“What’s going on—a party?”

But the Oriental only grinned the more and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, tell her a man from her old home town is here and would like a few moments with her. Forge! Nathan Forge!”

And in a few moments Bernie came.

Nathan was shocked, badly shocked. He had seen Bernice on the streets of Paris once, at the time of her mother’s funeral. But he had not beheld her in a “close up” or spoken with her since the day in Haskell’s pasture. He looked at the woman approaching him now and—and she was Bernice Gridley—but oh, how changed!

Nathan knew she was of an age with himself, just turning twenty-seven. She looked forty and not very successful in looking it, either. She was half a head shorter than Nathan and had to look slightly upward into his eyes. Yet she was big-boned and coarsened, and the daring gown she wore did nothing to soften the outlines of coarseness in her figure. The gown was plainly expensive, yet on Bernie it was hideous. It was dull green, to contrast with her once-gold hair. But it was cut from the bust down almost to her waist in the back and the display of nudity was disgusting and repellent, particularly so because Bernie had lost her girlhood plumpness. Her bones poked through her skin and her sawtooth spine reminded Nathan of some pictures he had once seen of starving Cubans, taken nude to show their pathetic emaciation. The woman carried a large green fan which she now held against her flat breasts in a manner that only called attention to her bizarre

costume and admitted that subconsciously it shamed her.

Nathan was so stunned by the change that for a few seconds he could only stare, his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth. Bernice took it for self-consciousness and provincial awkwardness, traits she detested. They reminded her too vividly of her humble origin and "what she had risen from."

"Well, Nathan?" she demanded sharply. "Where did you come from?"

Nathan fought for his wits.

"I'm—on my way to the Orient," he stammered. "It's—the first time—I was ever in Chicago—and I thought I'd stop off and look you—up!"

"The Orient! What in the world are you going to the Orient for? Aren't you afraid you'll get lost out there—such a long way from Vermont?"

"Of course, if you don't care about seeing me, Bernie, I won't impose on you," returned Nathan stiffly.

Bernice covered her annoyance with a forced smile.

"What did you want to see me about?" she demanded.

Well, what did he want to see her about? It would be a foolish reason—the true one—to explain.

"I—I—haven't seen you for going on sixteen years, Bernie. And I thought—I thought—well, I saw your father about a month ago."

"Yes? How is he?" Bernice asked it perfunctorily, as she might have asked after sundry unfortunates in devastated Belgium.

"He's—well," gulped Nathan. He looked down at his hands, raised his eyes to Bernie's, smiled foolishly, dropped them again in embarrassment.

Bernice made no comment on her father being well. And Nathan saw how life had hardened her. The woman was adamant. Her eyes, as she watched the man's embarrassment, seemed to declare, "Oh, what a hick you are! Oh, what a hick!"

"Well?" she suggested irritably.

"I won't take any of your time to-night, Bernie. But I would like to talk over old times with you before I go—on!"

"I'm having a few friends in to-night, so I can't see you. But if you'll come to-morrow night, I'll try and give you a few minutes. How's your wife? Is she with you?"

"I have no wife. She—died."

"What business are you in now?"

"Until lately I've been on the road for the Thornes. They took me off and are sending me to Vladivostok on special business."

"How's your father and mother?"

Nathan looked up in surprise.

"Didn't you hear? About father's going away and all?"

"Oh, yes. Seems to me I did. He stole a lot of money and left for parts unknown, didn't he?"

"Yes," said Nat in a whisper. His thoughts turned to a little packet of love notes in his pocket. Could it be possible this hardened woman and himself had ever loved?—That she was the little girl by the side

of the stream that picnic day—that together they had crouched beneath his coat from a shower and she had kissed him.

"Well, come back to-morrow night," ordered Bernice. "I've got to get back to my guests."

"Your husband——" began Nathan.

Bernie started.

"I have no husband," she snapped angrily. "I divorced him three years ago."

"Oh!" said Nathan quickly.

IV

He went back the next night.

Bernice received him in a pale-blue smock, her hair twisted up in slovenly fashion at the back of her neck, a black band about her head. The smock looked greasy. Bernie was smoking a cigarette as she admitted him herself.

"It's Hashi's night out," she explained. "We'll be alone and can talk. Come in!" And she led him into a spacious studio room behind, where the evening before the music had been playing. Nathan was clothed again in his Tuxedo. Bernie surveyed him and smiled quietly, aggravatingly.

She shoved a chair across for him and reclined on a chaise-longue. She did not offer to apologize for not including him among her guests of the prior night, although Nathan soon learned why she had not done so, and not because the woman was ashamed of her guests, either.

"Now," declared Bernie, "tell me all about that

damned hick town of Paris!"

Nathan honestly tried to do so. It was sketchy.

"But when did your wife die?" the woman demanded.

"May I smoke?" the man asked.

"Smoke? Of course you can smoke! Don't be such a disgusting rube. I'm smoking, am I not?"

He lit a cigar.

"I had some trouble with my wife, Bernie. She was untrue to me while I was away on the road. I came back one night and caught her in another man's arms. She left Paris next day. You read about the Russellville explosion last week? She was either blown to atoms or burned to death—in it!"

For a moment Bernie forgot her pose and looked frankly incredulous. Then she tapped her cigarette and sniffed.

"I don't know that I blame her, Nat. You always were rather impossible from a woman's standpoint, you know."

Nathan let it pass.

"I've brought you something, Bernie, that you might like to keep," he said. And upon the table at her elbow he laid the little packet of childhood love letters.

"For God's sake, what're those?"

"The letters we wrote, Bernie, while we were boy-and-girl sweethearts in the graded school together."

Bernie dropped her cigarette. She had a bad time recovering it and the fire burned a small hole in the smock before she had done so. She swore.

"But what the devil do you suppose I want of them now?"

"I don't know, Bernie. I thought perhaps they might mean something to you—little relics from the past, as I've always regarded them."

"You always were a sickly, sentimental fool, Nat. As for the past, the less we discuss it or think about it, the better I'll be pleased. I've had trouble enough weaning myself 'from the past.' The present and future gives me bother enough, God knows. As for Paris, I hate it as I hate copperheads in a mangrove swamp. I'm done with it forever and never want to be dragged back into it again—not even to be buried."

"It's your old home town, Bernie. You can't get back of that."

"I don't want any 'old home town.' I've risen above it. I was simply unlucky enough to be born in the little tank-burg, and that's plenty. And as soon as possible I shook clear from it and all it stood for! I got over being a hick quite a while ago, Nathan. And I hate everything that reminds me of it as the devil hates holy water. I don't want to have to think of the disgusting depths I've come up from."

"I'm sorry, Bernie."

"You're not half so sorry as I am! Paris nearly did for me. Father and mother—especially mother!—ugh!"

"What about your mother? You thought she was pretty classy once——"

"Nathan Forge! Don't say 'classy' or I'll scream. More provincialism! 'Classy' was one of mother's favorite words. The other was 'blood.' Blood! And for

all her grand airs, she was cheap as dirt! But how could I know it until I got out in the world and had to suffer for it? And God, what a Golgotha it's been! When I first married Wallace and was taken into his family, life was one long nightmare of 'break' after 'break' before his people. They were Real Blood. And they looked down on me—righteously—from the day he brought me home until the day I divorced him. I've had enough of vulgarians and lowbrows. I'll have you know I'm a *lady*!" And in proof that she was a lady, Bernice lit another cigarette and inhaled the smoke.

"I apologize, Bernice," the man offered.

"Oh, you needn't apologize. Don't depreciate yourself. That's 'hick' too! And don't sit sprawled out so, as though you didn't know what to do with your hands and your feet. Paris is stamped all over you, from the cravat in your collar to the cut of your shoes. And yet Ted Thorne is sending you to the Orient to represent him! Oh, well, after all, he's 'hick' too. Probably doesn't know any better. It's none of my business!"

Nathan's face burned. She was the same old Bernie. He might have known. He tried to appear at ease—although nothing the woman could have done would have made him more self-conscious—and he smoked for a moment in perturbed silence. She broke that silence by exclaiming angrily:

"And I wish, as a favor to me, that you'd stop eating that cigar! And I'll bet it cost five cents and came from Tom Edwards' cigar store next to the newspaper office——"

"It cost twenty cents," defended Nat, with foolish ire.

“I’m not going by the cost. I’m going by the smell! Just goes to show how much bringing up you’ve had. If you didn’t come from a small town, you’d know more than to drag out a heavy, offensive cigar in front of a lady; you’d smoke a delicate, gentlemanly cigarette.”

“I don’t smoke cigarettes,” the other replied dully.

“Well, you would if you weren’t a rube. Thank God I didn’t introduce you to those people I had in here last evening! I suppose you’d have pulled out one of those sickening cabbages and lighted up right in my drawing-room.”

Unconsciously Nat’s eyes swept the apartment. It didn’t look like a drawing-room.

Bernie’s tone suddenly softened. Perhaps it was the sudden misery and pain of self-consciousness in the man’s eyes. She leaned over with her elbows on her knees and the cigarette fumes bathing her colorless face.

“Natie, tell me something. Hasn’t anybody ever broken the news to you what an awful hick you are —and have always been?”

“N-N-No!” choked the young man.

The woman regarded him gravely for a quarter moment. Then as though to herself she remarked:

“Honestly, I almost think it’s my Christian duty, as a woman and a one-time friend of yours, to hold up a mirror in front of you and let you look at yourself properly.”

Nathan arose, walked to the window and threw out the offensive cigar.

“What did you do then?” cried Bernie hysterically.

"Threw out my cigar, of course. You said you didn't like it."

"Yes. But where did you throw it? Out of one of my windows—like a Polack at a drink-fest down by the railroad yards on a Sunday afternoon. Suppose there's somebody down in the court that happens to know my window! What will they think of me, when my window opens and rains down nasty cigar butts? Oh, Nathan, in God's name, where is your bringing up?"

"I guess I haven't had very—much," the poor man choked.

"You never said a truer thing in your life! And stop walking the floor! As though we were married and having a quarrel! Come and sit down quietly and *poised*—as a gentleman should—and let me show you how very impossible you are to a well-bred lady!"

Nathan obediently returned to his chair.

"In the first place, why did you come up here to-night in dinner clothes!—just for a social call when you knew I'd be in careless négligée myself?"

"I didn't know it. Anyhow, to wear a business suit ——"

"I shouldn't have minded you in a business suit! Just goes to show how little you Forges understand women! But we'll let the dinner clothes pass. Oh, Nathan! Nathan! Nathan!" The last word was almost a hysterical shriek.

"Now what am I doing?" cried the thoroughly unnerved fellow.

"Picking at your thumb nail!" cried Bernie. From the cold horror in her voice one might imagine

Nathan had drawn the decapitated head of a child from his clothes and juggled it to amuse himself while she talked.

"Excuse me," he muttered. And he dropped his hands in his lap and looked the picture of misery. What could he do but sit quietly like a tailor's dummy and take the hot-shot she poured into him, broadside? And she poured it. There was no doubt about it. She poured it.

"Look at you!" she cried witheringly, her neurasthenia getting the upper hand. "Feet clad in rakish patent leather shoes! Dinner clothes, when you know you're from a little tank-town anyhow and never wore dinner clothes there in your life! Necktie drawn too tight! Shirt bosom hard and smooth instead of soft and pleated! Collar two seasons out of style! Hair parted on one side instead of deftly and sophisticatedly in the middle! Ears—look at your ears!—especially your left one! Ugh! It gives me the creeps to look at it——"

"It's an injury, Bernie. I can't help that, can I?"

"Certainly you can help it! You got into the fight that made it that way, didn't you? And if I remember aright, it was over some of your asinine poetry! But aside from getting into the fight in the first place, surely you could have submitted to a surgical operation and had it removed and put on right! And your hands! Look at your hands! Knotted and gnarled in the knuckles——"

"If you'd had to do as much manual labor with your hands as I've had to do with mine, your hands would be knotted and gnarled in the knuckles!"

"There you go! Hick again! Trying to defend yourself! Insulting a lady!"

“But aren’t you insulting me a trifle, Bernie, by calling attention to the condition of my hands, which I can’t help?”

“No!” Bernie’s hysteria was growing a trifle wilder. “If a man is a perfect gentleman—and perfectly bred—never mind what a lady says to him, he concedes her the privilege of insulting him as her right—because she is a lady! But what can you know about that, of course—coming from Paris!”

“I don’t think a perfect lady would be cruel enough to remind a fellow of things about his appearance he can’t help.”

“What do you know about perfect ladies? Where have you met any perfect ladies? Who are you, that you presume to sit there and question my knowledge of etiquette and what’s right and polite?”

Nathan gave a tired laugh. He drew a long breath,—that sigh of infinite patience when called upon to hold his temper and indulge irascible, inconsistent, spoiled womanhood.

“It’s true I haven’t had many social advantages, Bernie,” he conceded. “But that’s never been because I didn’t hanker for them——”

“There you go! Hanker! That’s a nice word to use before a lady. Hanker! I can see old man Fodder using it, while he spits foully on the floor and wipes his dirty whiskers with the back of his hand. Hanker! Nathan, you’ll leave me a nervous wreck!”

“What should I say?”

“Hunger is bad enough. Because you ‘never desired them’ would be better and more refined.”

“Well, then, it’s never been because I’ve never

desired them. But what can a fellow do when his father——”

“That’s right! Blame your father! Blame your mother, blame your sister, blame your town, blame every one and everything but yourself! In a moment you’ll be blaming me! Do you remember the day after the Sunday-school picnic when your father flogged you for going off alone with me in the woods? Do you remember what I told you to do?”

“Yes!”

“What?”

“Get a gun and shoot him!”

“Precisely! Why didn’t you? Don’t you suppose that if you’d found a shotgun and peppered his hide with holes, the big, hypocritical, child-mauling bully wouldn’t have had a new respect for you and left you alone?”

“But suppose I’d killed him?”

“Well, suppose you had? Wouldn’t it have been what he deserved?”

“But, Bernie! Be reasonable! You’re not advising a boy to get a gun and commit murder? Where would I have ended? In the electric chair or on the gallows.”

“They don’t hang children!”

“But do you think it would be pleasant to go through the rest of life with the realization that I’d shot my own father?”

“If you were justified—as you were!—there would have been no remorse. Besides, if you had been hounded by remorse, it just goes to show you’ve got a clinging, messy, sentimental mind!”

Nathan had a feeling that he was talking to some one who was not quite rational. Still, he was accustomed to dealing with irrational people—especially, The Sex.

"I preferred not to do it," he returned dully.

"Just so! And your father walked all over you, and took your earnings, and imposed on you, and ground you down so that at twenty-one you flew into the arms of that little Richards slut. And now you come yowling around me for sympathy——"

"I haven't—I'm not—'yowling around you for sympathy.'"

"You needn't think I haven't any brains! You needn't add that to your boorish insults! You came here to-night, with your cheap peasant wife dead and those silly love notes, thinking to stir up something of our kid romance—ask me to marry you, perhaps. As if I would marry you—you! Oh, my God, what an insult! I could call the police and have you ejected for it, right this minute!"

"Oh, Bernie, please be reasonable! I haven't asked you to marry me! I——"

"You don't need to add falsehood to it all. If I'd marry you to-morrow, you'd feel highly complimented, because there's nothing in Paris to equal me. Isn't that so?"

Nathan hesitated to say "No," and felt that "Yes" was falsehood.

"Answer me!"

"I hardly know, Bernie. I——"

But Bernie was obsessed with her own assumption.

"Well, I'll have you know I'm done with men, do

you understand? There's never been one yet that shot straight with me! Look in my eyes, Nathan Forge! Do you see that stabbed look there?"

Nathan looked in her eyes. He saw no stabbed look. But he did see the wild forked light and iris dilations of a rampant neurasthenic. And moreover, if no males had ever shot straight with Bernie, Nathan had a quiet hunch he knew the reason. But Bernie, of course, would have exploded in one grand cataclysm of atomic energy if he had not agreed that he did see a stabbed look in her eyes.

"Men have put that stabbed look there, Nathan Forge! Your sex! Even you have had your part in doing it!"

"Me?" cried the amazed young man.

"You! You, you, you! That day off in the woods—remember it? You bet you remember it! You tempted me to degrade my girlish modesty! You taught me what fascination a woman's body has upon——"

"Bernice! I——"

"Stop! Not a word! I guess I know! I've suffered enough for it! You and your sex are rotten! Rotten! Rotten! And I'm done with it! And yet here you come, sniveling around in your small-town boorishness and dinner clothes, bringing me old love letters, thinking I'd marry you! And what have you done that I should marry you? What are you in the world, anyway—among real men, I mean? What goals have you won? What have you to offer a woman——?"

"I hope I've got a reasonable amount of decency ——"

The effect on Bernice was a shriek.

"Decency! Oh, my God, what conceit! You're worse than some of those Los Angeles picture actors I met last summer! 'A reasonable amount of decency!' You! Who lived for six years in foul propinquity with a woman you didn't love——"

"I believed that sticking by my wife—when I'd given her a child—was the right and proper thing to do. Men usually are sports that way."

"More conceit! So you're a sport, are you—along with being eligible to an especial halo for decency? As if anything could offset sleeping—even for one night!—with a woman who was not your ideal and your princess! It just goes to show where your self-respect is! You haven't any! You never had any self-respect! If you'd had any self-respect you never would have permitted your father to bamboozle you as he did! Oh, what a dirty little cad you are! And you talk of decency!"

Nathan was beginning to lose his sense of proportion; he was getting muddled trying to follow Bernie's logic.

"All I've had to go by is experience, what I've been taught, what I've contacted," he blurted out. "If I did wrong it was because I didn't know any better!"

"And here I am, trying to show you wherein you're wrong, like a sincere friend, or a woman who loves you—and you sit there in all your small-town boorishness and bigotry and conceit and try to defend yourself! Faugh!"

Nathan, ever supersensitive, began to wonder how far Bernie was right and how far wrong. And the woman's continued tirade did nothing to enlighten him:

“Hasn’t it dawned on you,” she cried, her voice strained with hysteria, “why you’ve never gotten on in the world—why at twenty-seven you’re no further along than you were at seventeen? I’ll tell you! It’s because you’ve never been able to see yourself as others see you! You’re a boob! A hick! A sentimental little small-town vulgarian. And I bet at table you eat with your knife and blow your coffee in a saucer! No wonder you haven’t got ahead. Hasn’t there ever been a time when opportunity opened for you and then—when people you met saw you—that opportunity mysteriously closed? Answer me! Hasn’t there?”

At once into poor Nathan’s distraught brain came the experience of the New York knitting-mills management. His acknowledgment showed plainly on his bewildered face.

“Ah! I thought so!” cried Bernie exultantly. “And why did you lose that opportunity? Because you were a hick! Because you didn’t know how to act! Because you probably deported yourself before fine-grained, well-bred people the way you’ve been deporting yourself in my house to-night—like a savage who pads around naked before his family and tears his food apart with his fingers! That’s why you’ve never gotten ahead and you never will! You’re small-town, I say! You’re rube and hick! A vulgarian! And a rotter beside!”

Nathan stared blankly ahead of him. Was he? He almost began to think that he was.

Bernie drew a long jagged sigh for breath, stared at him in self-satisfaction, then arose abruptly and crossed the room to the steam radiator. Bending down, she rattled the valve to turn it off. She came back. Nathan was still in his daze. Hands on hips, a

slurring sneer on her features, Bernie paused before him contemptuously.

“Look at you!” she snapped. “Just as I say! Sit there and let a woman turn off a steam radiator—never make a single move, or offer to do it for her!”

Again Nathan was taken aback.

“You didn’t ask me,” he defended thickly.

“Ask you! Ask you! And has a woman to ask a man every time she wants a thing done? I can see your father sticking out all over you! All her life your mother had to ask him to get things done. A gentleman would anticipate all a woman’s little whims and desires and please her before she had to ask for them! And you!—you—want to marry me!”

Nathan was sick and getting sicker. More than sick, he felt bruised and bleeding, somehow. Bernice had jabbed the lance of her spleen into his most sensitive feelings of self-consciousness and handicap.

Were all women like this, even the best of them?

Again he had the feeling of holding out his hands to a woman and having them slapped. Slapped? His hands? Bernie was cuffing his hands, his mouth, his ears, belaboring him with blows from which he had no defense, which he could not return because she was woman, The Sex.

“I guess I better go, Bernie,” he whispered huskily after a time.

“That’s right, you piker! Run! Just when you hear the naked truth about yourself, run! It’s like you! It’s just like every man. It’s especially like a Forge, and your father! I understand he didn’t stop running until he got out of the country with a valise of other

people's money! And you ask me to marry you—his son!"

"Bernie, I haven't asked you to marry me! At least if I did, I wasn't conscious of it!"

"Then why are you here to see me?"

"To—to—talk over—old times—in Paris!"

"Fiddlesticks! Why should I want to talk over old times in Paris, when I despise and detest the place—and all it stands for?"

"I didn't know you despised and detested the place. How could I? The trouble with you seems to be, Bernie, you want a man to anticipate what's in your mind, or think of what you're thinking about, before you even begin to think about it yourself——"

"Well, a brainy man would! Not being able to do it is another phase of your provincialism—the deficiency and mediocrity that's held you back so that right now, sitting in that chair, you're not a millionaire, a great success in life, a big-leaguer socially——"

"I simply happened to be 'way off here, passing through Chicago——"

"'Way off here! A long, long way from home, aren't you? A long, long way from Vermont and the General Store and the Village School and Uncle Josh Weatherbee's Farm? Faugh! Yes, I think you'd better go! And I'm going to bed—and call a doctor. And if I'm ill as a result of this, your firm will get my doctor's bill, and don't you forget it!"

V

Nathan walked back to The Morrison. It was still

early evening. The wind off the lake was delightfully welcome. As he walked he carried his hat in his hand and let that night wind cool his hot forehead.

He had been shocked, shocked terribly. He felt as he had felt one night back over the years when he had asked his mother about the origin of infants and that mother had given him a terrifying delineation of the everlasting fires of hell instead. The rapier point of Bernie's arraignment had cut through the armor of his philosophy, through his very vitals and almost punctured the sac of self-faith which wrapped his pulsing young soul.

He tried to analyze Bernie. She was irrational, a monomaniac, a neurotic, the full and final flower of her mother's infirmities. There were ways in which Bernie was very like his own mother. Yet Bernie had never been weighed down and had her individuality twisted and perverted by the narrowness and mediocrity his mother had encountered. Bernie had been "out in the world." She had been academically educated. She had met the world's diverse types and temperaments. What, then, was wrong with Bernie?

Frankly, he gave it up. It was beyond him. If he could have analyzed Bernie he felt he could have analyzed himself. He decided that she was simply a small-town girl even as he was a small-town boy, only he was trying to put all his handicaps, vicissitudes and experiences to a constructive purpose, so far as he had the light, and Bernie was not and never had tried. There he had to let the matter rest, never realizing how near the truth he had stumbled.

Yet in all this hectic analysis business, in all this vicious contact with parental mediocrity, in all his heart-breaking experience with The Sex as he had

known The Sex thus far, the boy had never once grasped an explanation as simple and obvious and plain as sunlight—and as common as mud.

He had lived for twenty-seven years among people of half-developed or deficient mentality. He had been surfeited with persons “who had no brains.”

Looking upon the men and women he had known, especially the women, he had observed that they possessed bodies, limbs, heads, faces. They moved about, they talked, they ate, they slept. To all outward intents and purposes, excepting perhaps for a certain vacancy across the eyes, they were no different than the most profound philosophers who had ever walked the earth. And because they possessed bodies, limbs, heads, faces, because they moved about at their daily activities, talked, ate, slept, he had subconsciously expected them to know all, see all, be all, and impart to him a birthright heritage of mental and spiritual nutrition for which his growing soul and spirit hungered. The nearest he had ever approximated this was when he said of his mother, “She can’t help it; she’s made that way.” It was not that his mother was “made that way” so much as it was that she had not been made anything better or finer or greater. And the same general hypothesis applied pretty well to all those who had surrounded him. Mediocrity was only mental limitation. It was not default of intelligence, as he had always assumed. It was boundary. Beyond a certain point, God seemed to have ordained that certain mortals should not pass.

Nathan had yet to learn that in the bodies of men and women, individually and severally, never collectively and rarely racially, and regardless of where they may discover themselves at birth, exist or

do not exist chromosomes—vital, literal cells—of character, high quality, divine dissatisfaction, goal-winning discontent, beauty hunger, atonement with Perfection, which is God. It seems as though God had picked out certain persons throughout the human race, endowed them with the divine Order of Merit, favored them with the Cosmic Urge to approach Idealism. Those chromosomes might lie dormant through generations, to appear suddenly virulent as they had appeared in my friend. And this being a world in which like seeks like, Nathan was groping for fellowship with other immortals in that divine Legion of Honor and thus far had not found them and was miserable until at times he almost doubted himself.

People of no brains! Mediocrity! Small-townism! Self-satisfaction! Sordidness! Narrowness! Bigotry! Stagnation! Dross! Chaff! Nature segregating her human waste! Nathan was not yet sufficiently enlightened to sweep them all into the same great basket and discard them from his scheme of things forever.

And this was the thing that bothered most: He knew instinctively that in certain portions of her indictment, perhaps in its very fundamentals, Bernie had been right. But where to go to overcome those deficiencies she had excoriated, how to lift himself above them, perfect himself—who was there to show him, give him his cue, point a way? He had assumed his parents could do it. They had not done it. He had looked for Woman to do it,—The Sex. But thus far The Sex had not done it. Whence was the light and the help coming? For divine discontent with mediocrity and sordidness was now rampant in his heart and could never be eradicated. Fog! Fog! Fog!

Nathan finally turned into The Morrison. He passed through the crowded lobby. Every woman he saw raised a feeling of repulsion in his breast. In his heart was a blind impulse to smash and crush even the pretty little elevator operator who made a laughing remark about a fussy old man who wanted to alight on the fifth floor.

He reached the sanctuary of his own room and locked himself in. He threw off hat and coat and lighted a cigar. He sank full length on the bed, snapping the burned match angrily at the footboard.

He knew that culturally he was a provincial, a small-town “rube”, as Bernie had called it. He didn’t want to be told those things. What he wanted was to be shown how to correct his crudities and have them nursed out of him, not blasted out with a torch; helped in his great moments of self-doubt; he needed a knowing friend to face him in the right direction, be patient with him when he stumbled, believe in him, have confidence that he could win,—win with him!

There was no one,—yet!

Even his own philosophy as he had spoken it to Ted Thorne almost failed him that night in Chicago. Bernie had been too cruel.

What was he groping for? What was this thing for which he hungered so blindly? What was this “small-town” business, fundamentally? Why was there such execration in being a provincial? Why did it bother him so? Why the necessity for climbing out of it? When he had “climbed out of it”, what then?

He thought of Paris, Vermont, as he lay there on the bed. He thought of the view of Main Street from the Whitney House steps,—the same scene which

Madelaine Theddon had found so depressing two years before. What was the matter with it? Why was it depressing? Why should it stand for all the things he was trying to shake from his fingers like sticky fly-paper? Was it lack of beauty in the place? No! Many parts of the town were beautiful. And hundreds of great cities were filled with sordid, depressing neighborhoods and quarters. It wasn't a question of size. It wasn't a question of beauty. What then?

"Mediocrity, provincialism, small-townism," he reasoned to himself, when philosophy was beginning to win out and his hurt brain and consciousness could function again. "It must be nothing more or less than the embodiment of standing still! Backwaters of life, peopled by those who fear the great, rugged currents, living to a standard and never daring or attempting to raise that standard—seeing no reason why they should! Lethargy—abiosis—existing from week to week, month to month, year to year in the same fashion and speed and gait as the week, the month, the year before. It's the hideousness of standing all one's life in one set of tracks when something inside shrieks to go on, to move, to improve, to be bigger, better, broader next year than last."

He arose and walked to his room. He wished he had old Caleb to talk it with.

"That must be what's been the matter with me," he argued to himself, as the hours slipped on toward midnight. "I wanted something better at home and father and mother couldn't grasp it. I tried to get it in the business and in so far as I got it the business prospered and there was money and we approached some degree of happiness. I wanted to go on and up

with Milly and she couldn't appreciate it. And I've subconsciously hated everything and everyone about me because they gave me no approval or supplied no incentive or showed understanding of that urge to create, improve, Go Up. That hatred made for intoleration and I kept it repressed inside me. I'm not a hick! I won't admit it. Nobody can be a hick so long as they've got the urge to go on up, to rise to better things, better ways of living, better ways of understanding one's fellows, better ways of expressing the fine things of life in Art ideas,—up, up —toward God waiting at the Top. Perfection at last. The provincials are only those who hide in the backwaters, content to stay in the backwaters, to remain in their tracks, to be satisfied with little, inconsequential things, to see no reason for changing their standards. And I'm not!"

Torn and mangled of spirit as he was that night, emaciated with the great hunger of brain and heart for a birthright of sane, constructive, inspiring, encouraging, understanding parenthood which had been denied him, Nathan fought out his problem, step by step, for himself, and in the recesses of his own soul looked for the way, the truth and the light.

He would keep moving. To move meant enlightenment. It must mean enlightenment. He would hew at his niche and accomplish his task though a thousand millstones and anvils were loaded upon him. Somewhere were High Hilltops, peopled with soft voices and calm eyes, manifestations of elegant living because such was social efficiency—still another phase of omnipotent perfection toward which he groped blindly—Art waves in which the soul of him might bathe luxuriantly, somewhere were High Hill Tops. There was no disgrace being

born in the valley so long as he had no choice in the matter and was consistently and sincerely hunting the evasive pathway up to those Hill Tops—up to the Dwelling Places of Light.

My friend had within him the gift of the Magi beyond rubies,—the great galvanism of Divinity—energizing, vitalizing, driving his young Soul Indomitable to cry from far up the heights "Excelsior!"—to battle forever toward the stars. Yet he knew it not.

To Abaddon with cloying, handicapping, misunderstanding parenthood! With fretting, abusive womanhood—with coarse environments—with petty twopenny handicaps! He would go on,—doing his duty as he saw it, taking advantage of the last iota of opportunities as they came, fighting as he went,—true to the Aryan that was in him.

And after that night, he set his face to the west and he went on, disregarding what the going cost him, little realizing that he was suddenly carrying his High Aspiration written large on his fighting face for the World and One Woman to see!

VI

Back in her apartment, Bernice picked up the packet of faded love notes, untied the string with sneering amusement and selected a letter at random. She read and the sneer disappeared.

She picked up another and read and the worldliness fell from her face. She picked up a third, a fourth, a fifth. She did not read the sixth.

Face downward in the tapestry pillows, she sobbed out her heart.

CHAPTER XI

MAN'S WORLD

I

The Czar had been deposed in the opening weeks of March. Sturmer, Golitsyn and Protopopov had been arrested. The Imperial Russian family were under tragic detention in Tsarkoë-Selo Palace. On March 15 came the coalition cabinet of the revolutionists. As April began, the Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Delegates were declaring it necessary for them to control the course of the provisional government. Events were moving in seven-league boots in the land of the luckless Romanoffs. But where they were moving or what would be the state of affairs when the moving was ended, no one dared to predict.

Nathan sailed from San Francisco on the first day of April. Queer emotions played through him as the big Japanese liner, *Tenyo Maru*, turned its prow about, started its engines, gathered speed away from the line of handkerchiefs, cheers and tears along the dock, down the harbor, past the Presidio, followed by swarms of crying gulls out through the Golden

Gate, off into the mystic West which strangely becomes the East again. Much might happen before he next saw the clock on the Market Street ferry-house tower.

As the land dropped lower behind the ship and the flocks of gulls thinned out and the arms of the Pacific opened wider and wider, a sense of vast freedom came to Nathan. Those broad ocean reaches stirred deep reactions within him. They beckoned him away from petty things. Hour after hour he walked the *Tenyo's* decks or sank down in his steamer chair and dozed there, sending dream-cargoes off across the miles. Every day carried him farther from the handicap, sordidness, mediocrity, trial, pose, struggle, which had been the sum and substance of his life and environment to date. Something big and vital must transpire out in this world whence he was going. He would look for it. It was all in the epilogue of Going On.

Entering the dining saloon for lunch on April 6, he found beside his plate a copy of the little daily news sheet filled with items received by wireless.

America had declared war.

Tourist trade to the Orient had dropped to zero. Passengers aboard were people of importance, outward bound on serious business. Nathan shared his cabin with an International Y. M. C. A. official going to Siberia to open cantonment work among the Russian troops.

With his easy ability to "get along" with those of his own sex, he had become intimate with the Y. man before two days had passed. By the end of the week he knew most of the men on board and had talked textiles to a group of South Americans in the

smoking room one night so intelligently that one of them had approached him next day declaring his government needed a man of Nathan's experience and ability, and would Nathan consider a position in Bolivia when his present mission was over.

Nathan laughed, shrugging his shoulders.

He could not help feeling as he "held his own" among those of his own sex, that they minded little the talon aspect of his gnarled hands or his mutilated ear. That for Bernie! It was what a man was in his head and his heart which counted most. He began to get a perspective on himself.

Yet he hungered. He hardly spoke to a woman throughout the voyage. But this was true: for the first time in his life Nathan had day after day to dream,—to do absolutely nothing but think.

He tried to assay his mental equipment in those long, lazy days of meditation, to determine what he was best fitted to do, how to make up for lost years, whether he should go on as a salesman and make textiles his business after his return and now that he was free,—or specialize in some profession or art. His poetry? He had long ago seen enough of life to realize it would be a dreary day before he could hope to secure a living from poetry. Well enough as a hobby, perhaps. But life meant more than compilation of romantic rhymes. He felt it too late now to go to college. But it was never too late to educate himself for some profession or art. Just what should that education be? To what purpose? What did he enjoy doing best, aside from composing rhymes? Of what could he make a success because his heart would be in his work?

One night, as the great liner swung down the

northern border of tropical seas, he leaned over the railing and watched the soft, warm stars. One star in particular was very luminous and close. A snatch of an old poem came to him——

"Sometimes, dear heart, in the quiet night,
When the stars hang soft and low,
I slip away from the clash and care
To the Hills of Long Ago.
Across those hills in the whisp'ring dark,
With the night-breeze sighing through,
I see those castles we'd planned to build
When our dreams had all come true!"

The lines brought the tropic skies close. Nat's heart sang in rhythm with the swash of the water and beat of the screw. Who was the one with whom he had built castles—Bernie? Carol? Mildred? Who?

"Your face glows plain in an evening star,
Ere the moon rides high and cold,
And memories tune with the summer night
On a chord that's rare and old——"

A face in a star! Whose face? He thought for a time he could almost discern. Fancy led him to invent a face which should approximate his ideal. What was his ideal woman's face? If he were a great painter and would put on canvas the features of his Dream Girl, what manner and type of face would he paint?

The boat swayed on in the starlit dark. Above it, lights of God looked down their mighty passwords over the waters. Stygian smoke furled from great funnels and dropped a billowy screen across their phosphorescent wake. A happy laugh floated out a sharply defined door from the ladies lounging room up forward.

A face in a star! Whose face?

Nathan thought of a woman he had seen in Springfield one night—the night of the Harvard-Pennsylvania boat race—before he had gone to his hotel to get that awful wire about little Mary's going away—a girl sitting across a snowy-white table from a man in dinner clothes,—a girl raised just above him—with features he had never quite forgotten, they were so fine and tender and cameo-rare.

If he were a painter, he believed he would try to sketch that woman's face as something very like his Dream Girl. He wondered who she had been—her name? The fellow's wife probably. Strange how things stick in the back of a man's mind at times.

A face in a star, indeed!

Happily, new scenes and clean, free horizons were taking pressure from head and brain. The world with which he had battled was drawing off in increasingly better perspective. He was humbly thankful.

He awoke one morning to find the engine's heart-throb stopped and the vessel strangely quiet. Glancing out his stateroom porthole in the hush of dawn, he beheld a mountain sky line weirdly close. They had approached Hawaii and Honolulu during the night. Dense, tropical vapor clouded the mauve mountain summits. The city was almost hidden in foliage. A molten sun came up while he was breakfasting. About ten o'clock he went ashore.

The narrow, low-roofed streets with queer souvenir shops; the native, comic-opera policemen at intersections of traffic; picturesque brown men with hatbands and collars wreathed with flowers; quaint Japanese women with brilliant sun-shades,—among them Nathan felt like a schoolboy off on his first vacation.

II

Many features of that voyage supplied "atmosphere" which Nathan will never forget. Laughing forenoons swashing through shimmering waves; schools of flying fish winging low above the whitecaps like dragon flies, to flip from sight as one watched them; children playing on the after-deck and a kiddie-car always left for peripatetics to stumble over; soft sea breezes wafting through velvet-covered saloons; a wisp of smoke on the far horizon where another steamer passed; the sun going aslant down the sky and making a shadow ship that sailed into flaming carmine with them; nights of laughter and music; dancing under Japanese lanterns; the close, hot confines of narrow white stateroom passages faintly scented with bilge,—one grows to love a ship which has carried one in safety over thousands of watery miles.

And his father had known all this, three years before.

His first sight of Japan came about eleven o'clock the morning of the seventeenth day at sea. A hatless young missionary in white duck, China bound, came around the southern side of the promenade deck with field-glass case swinging from one shoulder.

"Japan ahead!" he cried. "Just sighted Fujiyama!" Then Nathan noted that the deck where he had been reading was deserted.

On the opposite side of the ship, up forward, passengers were telescoped against the rail. It was some time before Nathan discerned the great, weird, snow-white cone, high and vague in the clouds, guarding the portals of the East, though no shore was visible yet. But the shore loomed quickly after that,

though the mountain outline faded.

During lunch he glanced through the dining-room port-holes to see low, sandy coast slipping past on the north, as though the liner had entered an inland river. A chalk-white lighthouse on which the sun dazzled—gray, jagged cliffs against the northern horizon—boats hugging the beach; they were at the mouth of Tokio Bay. They would dock at Yokohama late that afternoon.

And when the vessel veered sharply northward, in the ensuing two-hour ride up that bay, with the smoke pall of Yokohama hanging in the sky ahead and weird, thatched-cottage, dwarf-pine, deep-bowered shores gliding away on east and west, the man's heart beat with pardonable excitement. In a handful of hours he might meet his father.

It would be a dramatic meeting, not without a trace of pride on the part of the son.

It was a wonderful ride up to Yokohama. The sunshine was dazzling. The mazarine water was a-shimmer with whitecaps and spectrums. A bizarre touch was given that seascape by scores of *sampans*, native fishing boats, with long rudders and leg-o'-mutton sails, that worked so close to the incoming leviathan as to disclose their contents,—fish poles, nets, discarded clothing, coils of rope.

Yokohama's smoke drew closer. It was ten minutes of five and the sun was beginning to sink over the city's western hills, when the mighty engines stopped at last and the soul of the ship delivered her bulk to fretty little tugs that finally worked her up against her dock. The pilings creaked with the shock. The hawsers tightened.

The voyage was ended. Nathan had reached

Japan!

As a dozen half-naked coolies pulled and groaned and jabbered and cried, getting the high gang-plank raised, handkerchiefs waved on the dock. Friends recognized friends. Relatives called joyously to relatives.

The bulk of the crowd on shore were Japanese,—ludicrous old men in black nightshirts and wooden sandals, heads shaded with cheap straw hats, baggy umbrellas clutched by their middles; somber-clad, high-coiffured Japanese women surrounded by slathers of babies; here and there the figure of a "foreigner" in pongee, a white face anxiously seeking the lines of humans high above, along the rail.

Nathan looked for his father. At any moment he might meet him.

He eventually descended the gang-plank stairs, down into the seething, joyous, jabbering, gesticulating mob, in through the long, shadowed dock-house, out into a circular front yard where bowler-hatted rickshaw men sat on the shafts of their vehicles and waited for fares, beckoning and honking now frantically.

Nathan stored his bags in one vehicle and stepped up into another. The lean, sweating, diminutive draysters received instructions; shafts were raised; the high-wheeled, rubber-tired little carriages crunched away over powdered trap-rock, out into a hard gravel street, fresh sprinkled, off toward the hotel in the cool of that wonderful afternoon.

Japan! Spotless streets flanked by high stucco walls or buildings with shuttered windows—a bit of old London, somehow—a group of boys in gingham playing ball—half a dozen in "bathing suits" riding

bicycles, despite clumsy wooden sandals—rickshaws trotting noiselessly in groups of two or three, the sinking sun glinting on bright steel-wire wheel spokes—a street corner with a far vista of tiny dragon-scrolled shops—three nude men washing after their day's labors at a public horse trough.

Southward along The Bund the rickshaws rolled along the side of quiet Tokio Bay, in the sunset; then came the long, low, red front and cool porticos of The Grand Hotel—much confusion about procuring Japanese money to pay the *kuruma* men. The sea trip was ended.

Nathan looked around the big lobby. Any one might suddenly turn out to be his father. But he saw no Johnathan.

Nathan followed the Japanese boy upstairs to his room,—a great airy chamber facing the east and—home!

He forgot his father temporarily in the ensuing irritations of Chinese tradesmen continually knocking at his door,—pongee suit-makers, boot-makers, guides for the city in the day and week following. He liked Japan.

III

Wiley was strolling about the lobby when Nathan came down for dinner. Wiley was the Y. man who had shared Nat's cabin. They dined together. Afterward they explored Yokohama in the warm summer evening.

Through dank, clean-smelling side streets their silent *kuruma*, or rickshaw men, trotted them,—in and out of moonlight and shadow, past tradesmen's

shops where the tradesman's family sprawled on shining-matted rooms in the rear, a single electric droplight hanging from the low, polished ceiling, across a canal, northwestward where lights glowed and music played, and Theater Street reveled in illumination and bunting and laughter.

Laughter, laughter! Everywhere was laughter. The land was saturated with it. Old men laughed, young men laughed, women laughed, children shrieked continually. Everybody seemed gloriously happy.

Wiley and Nathan left their *kuruma* and walked the length of Theater Street, with its bizarre shops, exotic music, peanut whistles, shuffling *geta*; they went to a Japanese movie and sat on floor cushions while a "lecturer" talked the film as it unreeled; they bought "ice cream,"—scraped ice with fruit juice spilled upon it; three times they narrowly "dodged" being run into *geisha* houses.

Nathan retired to bed finally with a little twinge of disappointment. He had not met his father.

He went to the Consulate promptly next morning.

"Forge?" repeated the consul. "Came out three years ago, you say? I'll have one of the boys look back over the books. But I don't know any Johnathan Forge living here in the country at present."

The books were searched. There was no record.

"Then he couldn't have come here under that name," Nathan was informed. "Was there any reason why he should have employed a different one?"

Nathan shrugged his shoulders.

"It doesn't matter," he observed.

He did not find his father.

IV

He was sitting in one of the big windows of the southern portico looking out over Tokio Bay, ten days later, when Wiley caught sight of him and came abruptly over.

Wiley was in khaki,—a bright new uniform. On his left sleeve glowed a heavy scarlet triangle.

“I’m off to-morrow, Nathan,” he cried. “How goes it? Found your goods yet?”

“Yes,” replied Nathan. “Found them in a fine mess! All smashed together in a *godown* over in Tsuruga, on the other side the island. They’d been held up because of broken crates and lack of tonnage—to carry them up across the Japan Sea.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“Sell them to the Japanese Government. To thunder with the Russians! In another year they won’t have cash enough to buy their own propaganda newspapers.”

“Nat, they’re going to have a draft at home!”

“I’ve heard about it.”

“Listen, old man; why don’t you dodge it by kicking into this thing with me? You can’t enlist out here; there’s only the Regulars down at Manila and they’re not taking volunteers. If you wait for the draft, it’ll mean going way back to Vermont, being sent to camp, maybe not getting into the scrap at all. You’re out here now, just a few hundred miles from real war. Enlist in the Red Triangle and come on through to Moscow with me. I’m going straight across Siberia. Man, it’s the chance of your life. We’ll be in the thick of it within a week.”

“But I’ve got to wait for an answer to my cable first, Dick. That much is due my employers.”

“If you really mean it, Nat, I’ll delay my departure so we can go up together.”

Nathan really meant it. Wiley delayed his departure.

V

Far back in America and up in Vermont five weeks later, Ted Thorne called me on the telephone at the newspaper office.

“Just got a long letter from Nathan, Bill!” he cried. “And what do you suppose that darned son-of-a-gun has gone to work and done? He not only found our goods and took ’em in charge, but he’s engineered a sale to the Japanese Government for twenty-two cents per garment more than we ever dreamed of getting from the Russians. And by the living Jehoshaphat, he’s got his money!”

“That’s bully, Ted. I always thought Nat had the stuff in him, if he only had a chance. What’s he going to do now—come home?”

“No, that’s why I called you up—thought you’d like to know. He wants to join the American Red Triangle and plunge into the heart of Russia.”

“Well, you’re going to let him, aren’t you?”

“Holy Moses! Do you think I’d try to stop him? But believe me, he’s going to have some job with us if he ever comes home!”

VI

Nathan and his friend Wiley sailed into the Golden Horn Bay at Vladivostok on a drizzly morning, the first day of the following July. The steamer was the perky little *Pensa* of the Russian Volunteer Fleet.

Against a great arch of murky sky on the three hills to the northward lay the bizarre city—huge, gaunt, towering, ponderous, mosque-domed—Siberia!

To meet the *Pensa* and tie it up along the wharf with maximum clumsiness and confusion were a mob of men who resembled the foreigners below the railroad yards back home in Paris, who once had beer delivered to them regularly on Saturday afternoons and got into fights Sundays.

Nathan and his friend had come into a nation of them, the land of Whiskers, Vodka and "*Nichevo*!" which translated into plain United States means "I should worry!" He was in a khaki uniform and a military cap. On his sleeve was a flaming scarlet triangle.

"Dick," he cried, as he stood with his companion in the lee of a deck-house to escape the rain, "there's adventure!" Nat made a gesture at Vladivostok and what lay in its mystic hills behind.

"You said a mouthful!" returned Wiley. "And us for it!"

Nat left the ship and went down among the vile-smelling crowd on the wharf. The crowd enveloped himself and Wiley.

Enveloped them, I say.

For one solid year, in so far as his relatives and friends back home were concerned, Nathan Forge vanished from the face of the earth.

Siberia!

CHAPTER XII

UNTIL WHEN?

I

"We're entraining on the 'eleven o'clock' for New York to-night, Madge. I'm supposed to have my men on the transport to-morrow at noon." Gordon pulled back a khaki sleeve and looked at his gunmetal wrist-watch. "I must be back at the Armory at nine o'clock sharp. It will take me half an hour to reach it. It's now five minutes to eight. So I suppose, like most of the boys about the city to-night, I've got to cram eternity into thirty-five fateful minutes." Gordon said the words with a smile. But his features were white as chalk. "I suppose, Madge, it's good-by!"

"But you didn't expect orders for two weeks yet, Gordon!" Madeline arose from the divan with a hand against her heart.

"I know it, Madge! But the order came through suddenly."

"Sit down, Gordon!" The girl's request was a piteous whisper.

Gordon laid his officer's cap on a corner of the

table.

His new puttees creaked as he sank in an opposite chair.

“Does this mean—our last meeting—before you go to France?” Madelaine groped for the seat behind her and her knees wilted.

“By this time to-morrow night, I’ll be dodging submarines. Ho for a life on the bounding main!” The man’s tone affected a lightness that was ghastly.

Madelaine’s throat was cruelly dry as she appraised his fine figure. His outfit was so new it seemed as though he were only playing at war. He was so clean-shaven his cheeks were blue. His hair was close-cropped. His mouth was firm. His eye was straight and true. He was a man!

“It’s come so quickly! I’m all unprepared—to say good-by—to-night, Gordon, dear!”

“It’s all in the business—the dirty business of wiping the earth clean of Huns. But let’s not talk about that. Let’s talk about ourselves. Let’s talk about —you!”

Madelaine closed her eyes. Her head was light. In her heart was an ache like an ulcer. Then all the nights she had ever lived had narrowed down to this! Gordon was going away and might never come back. Did that ache in her heart mean that at last she knew she loved him? Had she discovered in the past two weeks what it meant for a woman to send a man to war?

“Gordon—it seems—it seems—as if all I’d like to do would be to sit quietly and—say nothing!”

Gordon leaned forward with elbows on his knees.

He studied his hands for a moment,—lithe, patrician hands. Very quietly he said:

"I'd like to take that to mean that you care, Madge. A little bit!"

Madelaine pressed her hands against her eyes.

"Oh, Gord," she said in a hoarse, difficult whisper. "If I only knew—for a certainty. If I only did! If I only could!"

"Doesn't a woman recognize love when it comes to her, Madge?"

"She should. That's just it. Maybe that's the trouble."

"Madge, what is the trouble between you and me? Is it what went before—the sort of a chap I started out to be?"

"No! No! Somehow I've never thought of you that way the last few years. You're not the same man at all. But—but—it's a serious thing for a woman to send a man to war under the impression she loves him, when she isn't sure of it herself. And real love—the long, fine, enduring kind—ought not to leave any room for doubt."

"I've never begged for your love, Madge. I'll not begin now. I hoped to command it——"

"And oh, how splendidly you've done, Gordon! I'm so proud of you—as I see you sitting here in your new uniform now and compare you with a boy I faced one horrible night in a Boston hotel. I'm so proud of you it hurts. But I'm wondering if love can be even commanded, Gordon? It just comes unannounced, for no apparent reason in the world, excepting that two people realize they've been

created for each other and want to be together always. And Gordon—in fairness to you—I don't know that our recognition has yet come—that way! Maybe—maybe—the war will show it."

"I may not come back from the war, Madge." He did not say it as a threat or in self-pity. It was a simple statement of fact which he made no effort to ignore.

"I know, Gordon! Oh, how I wish I had a few weeks more to decide. You want me, don't you, dear? There's no doubt in your love, is there?"

An unusual thing happened, unusual for an erect, clean-cut, strong-jawed young lieutenant in khaki only a few days back from Plattsburg. As Madelaine turned her large, luminous eyes toward his face, she saw his own, brimming tears. Those tears dropped down his smoothly shaven cheeks and off the point of his cleft chin. He made no move to brush them away—did not act as though he realized they were there.

"No, Madelaine," he said solemnly, "in my love for you there's no doubt. There's never been a doubt. And I brought you something to-night I hope to leave with you—as a pledge between us—until 'the war is over.'"

His fingers were steady, as steady as his voice when he unbuttoned the breast pocket of his uniform and from it took a little box of wine-red plush. He snapped back the cover.

The library lamp caught an iridescent drop of white fire, cold as a thousand winters, pure as a baby's tear, with all the love and tragedy of the race deep in its refractive depths.

Gordon passed it across.

It was the ring he hoped her to wear,—the gift which stood for his heart. It was significant that the man did not take the ring from its white satin casket. He did not try to crush it on her finger.

The girl gazed down upon it.

“You beautiful, beautiful thing!” she whispered reverently.

“Somehow I had to save it for the last minute, dear. I’ve carried it for weeks because—because—I either wanted to go away deliriously happy or knowing there wasn’t any hope. Then war would be mighty welcome.”

“Don’t say that, Gordon! It—implies a weakness!”

“I might as well be honest, Madge.”

“Gordon, if I take this ring and wear it, I’ll be engaged to you. And if you come back safely, it means that we’ll be married.”

“Pray God I come!”

“Do you know what it means for a girl to be engaged to a man? After the word is spoken, that man will be my life and my world.”

“I know.”

“Then don’t you see at what a cruel disadvantage you’re placing me? To leave this until the last moment so? To ask me to love you forever—while in my heart there’s the least little doubt?”

“You know I didn’t mean it for an intrigue, Madge.”

“True! I can’t conceive of you doing such a thing—now. And yet, oh, Gordon, I want so much to make

you happy, to reward you for your manhood and your faith and your hope. And yet, dear boy, I want to be happy, deliriously happy, myself. Not for my own selfishness but because that much will also be due to you!"

Her appeal was suddenly that of the lonely little orphan girl pleading for a chance to give of her nameless life and love to its fullest.

"Gordon!"

"Yes, dear?"

"Can't we—can't we—let the war decide?"

"What do you mean, let the war decide?"

"Can't you go away with my promise that when you return you shall have my answer—with the knowledge that you're the first man thus far in my life—that I love you more dearly than any other man up till to-night—that the ending of the war may bring more happiness than either of us dare dream? Can't you go away being happy and temporarily satisfied with that?"

His voice was like aching iron as he asked:

"You wish it, Madelaine?"

"I wish it—yes!"

"And—what of the ring?"

"Because you're so far the dearest man in my life—closer than any man has yet become—I'll keep the ring. But it must lie in white satin until I'm sure. Then when the Better World we're fighting for has come, and you return with victory—perhaps there'll be an Amethyst Moment when you may take this beautiful thing from its satin and place it on my finger, Gordon. And if the doubt is all washed away,

that moment will be very, very sweet. That's half a promise, Gordon. But it can't be a full promise—yet. I must know for certain."

"If you wish it, Madelaine. Above everything, your happiness comes first."

She moved over so that by leaning forward she could drop her forehead on his tightly interlaced fingers. Her free tears fell upon those fingers. He unclasped them. One hand smoothed her wondrous hair. Then he bent and placed a kiss upon that hair, tenderly.

"I know you love me very much indeed, when you say that, Gordon. A girl could easily trust herself to a man who'd think of her happiness so much at such a time as this."

For fifteen minutes that would never come again they sat so, the girl's left hand gripping the wine-colored box and the trinket which meant the ultimate surrender of her womanhood and heart forever. Her deft fingers toyed with the clasp. Her other hand gripped Gordon's wrist. And that hand was cold.

"And if I don't come back, dear?" he said hoarsely at last.

"Maybe, Gordon, I'll wear no other ring—the rest of my life. Who knows?"

"Perhaps, after all, dear girl, it's better so."

"But even until I know, I shall have a little song in my heart, dear. I shall have a man at the wars. And he is a man! Of that there's never a doubt. Not even now, to-night."

Verily in the life of every man, sooner or later,

comes one white-hot moment when small things drop away. Prophets and seers are silenced and dismissed. The earth is without form and void. Darkness is often upon the face of the deep. With only great thoughts, great feelings, great decencies left in nakedness to give what help they can in that zero hour in Gethsemane, a man proves himself, not for what others have tried to make or unmake him, but for what he will be when God has returned and ordered there be light again.

Gordon arose, that last night, that last hour, that last moment, alone with the girl he loved. And because his own happiness would perchance make that girl unhappy, at least cast a shadow upon her happiness, he accepted a great disappointment. And he never murmured.

“I must go,” he said simply.

The girl stood before him, pale and fine, exquisite and fragile, the biggest and best thing that had ever been in his life. Calm eyes were starry now. They were raised to his face. She was trying to smile. She could not send him away knowing she had not smiled.

“Gordon!”

“Yes, dear,” he answered huskily.

“You may kiss me—if you will, Gordon. My lips are yours—just once—to-night—freely.”

He stole his arms about her soft shoulders as though he feared to profane and desecrate a holy thing. She raised her sweet face to his, fearlessly, poignantly, softened with the parting.

He kissed her. But it was not upon her lips. It was upon her fine, cold forehead.

The choice had been his. He could have tasted her lips, but he did not want to remember them—so. He had changed much in the last few years. He went away without that memory to haunt him.

He knew he had lost. Madelaine Theddon would never be his wife.

II

Gracia Theddon came home about eleven o'clock. Despite the iron gray in her hair, the years seemed to have had small effect upon her. She had changed little since that day at the Orphanage. But then, that might have been Madelaine and the great happiness she had found in her daughter.

"Madelaine!" she cried, "the boys are entraining to-night! Gordon's company! We should have been told, so we could have gone to the station to see them off—why, Madelaine!—what's the matter, child?"

"I know about the boys entraining to-night. Gordon has been here this evening. I—know!"

Mrs. Theddon dropped off her hat, her furs, her coat. The daughter, woman—grown though she was, came into her arms. Together they sank to the divan, the daughter a distraught little girl, sobbing upon her mother's lap.

"He asked me to be his wife for the last time to-night, mother mine. He brought me a—diamond."

"Madelaine! Are you engaged to marry him?"

"I couldn't, mother-mine! I couldn't! I couldn't! I love Gordon. But somehow it's the great love of a sister for a brother. Oh, mother-mine, what's the

matter with me? What is it? What is it?"

What could Mrs. Theddon say?

"I feel that I've so much to offer, mother-mine, *so* much to give! And I want my heart to leap as I give it. I want to look into his face—his eyes—and read there the great, sweet mystery that we were made for each other from the first. I want the world to fade out as he takes me. I want to abandon myself in his tenderness. I want to lose all that I am, or ever may be, in the depths of his love which I know in that one great Moment I'm meeting gloriously. I want Romance—mother-mine! And I want it to bear me up and away to a Palace where the eastern sunrise lies always radiant upon its towers. And I haven't found it, mother-mine. I've only found a sweet, deep friendship that makes me feel that the real essence of womanhood is passing me by!"

"Madelaine! Madelaine! You tear my heart when you talk so!"

"I want a man who's been through more than Gordon has—whose fight has cost him more—who's been true to himself in spite of everything! I want a man who's gone through dark shadows and black fog —and never once lost faith that somewhere above the sun was shining brightly. I want to work with him, play with him, laugh with him, love with him. I want him to draw upon me, to feed upon me, body as well as brain—to leave me stronger than ever for the things I may give him. I want to be his workmate, his playmate, his hunt-mate, his home-mate! I want to be his partner, his mother, his sister, his mistress—everything, everything, everything! I want to feel that he's the other half of myself, for whom I've hunted a dreary time and found at last—and know that all the world is wonderful and God is

good. And I haven't found that man yet, mother-mine. I've never met him yet. And I want to meet him so. I'm cruelly lonely without him. I've suffered that loneliness a hideous time. Where is he, mother-mine? Tell me where he is, that I can go to him quickly? Wherever he is, he wants me—he needs me! Right at this moment he's hungry for me, too!"

"Hush, dear! Don't feel so badly! You'll meet him yet. I know you'll meet him yet. God is good! He wouldn't permit it otherwise."

"I've never had a real love affair, mother-mine. But it's not because I've never wanted to love. It's because I could never seem to throw myself away. I had to save myself—for him! Maybe I'm a silly little idealist, mother-mine. But I've dreamed so much! I couldn't be satisfied with any one but him! I couldn't! I couldn't!"

"And you mustn't, dear," declared Gracia Theddon.

III

It was nearly midnight.

"Mother," cried the girl fiercely as she walked the room, "I've got to get into this thing! I've got to have some part in this war! Some great, vital, strength-sapping part! I can't stay here merely folding bandages and waiting, waiting, waiting! I've got to do something—with my hands, my heart—all that I am or can be! They're going away—the boys—to die—to pour themselves out—to give their all to make a better and safer world. And I can't merely wait and smugly accept the fruits of their sacrifice. I'm going to get in!"

"But what can you do, my dear? Your studies

aren't yet completed. They won't take you as a doctor. You know nothing in the way of a trade or a ____"

"I'll find a place! I'll make a place! Maybe off over the rim of the world I'll find my Amethyst Moment—though it's only for a moment! I've got to get in!"

"God will it!" whispered Gracia Theddon, as somewhere a clock struck twelve—deep-toned and mellow.

She had to get into the war!

Madelaine went to her room. Features deathly pale with all the emotions the evening had wrought, she turned down the heavy lid of her desk and pulled on the tiny chain of her writing lamp. But she did not write. She had nothing to write. She sat before her desk, elbows upon it, strong, lithe fingers covering her face.

Finally, with a breath as though for strength, she reached into one of the lower pigeonholes and drew forth a packet of letters. Among them she found one that she sought. It had a Chicago postmark.

> ... and perhaps you might like to know, she read, that the fellow you were so curious about a while ago, the Forge fellow, that I might have told you about all along if I'd only known you were interested in him, ... called off to see me on his way through to San Francisco last week ... he brought me a little packet of love letters we wrote to each other when we were school-kids, years ago ... Oh, Madge, dear, you're the dearest friend I ever had, I've got to tell you! ... after he had gone they broke me all up, Madge! After all, they meant so much! ... I told you a story, Madge, when I said he didn't come out of that jail scrape clean. He did come out of it clean. He's an awful provincial, Madge, ... he'd shock you to death in lots of ways ... his etiquette is impossible ... but I guess he never had a chance,

> Madge, like you and me. I'm sorry I treated him so. I said a lot of things which hurt him terribly. But he's gone now and I don't know where he is, to let him know I'm sorry ... he lost both his child and his wife ... there's no woman in his life ... but there's something hickory about him, Madge, deep down under his awful manners ... oh, Madge! ... I wish he didn't come from a small town ... I wish he wasn't a small-town fellow ... I wish I wasn't so world-wise ... I'd like to have him love me greatly, a man like him ... and forget ... everything ... in his great, strong tenderness ...

Madelaine read the letter, in its coarse, underscored penmanship, to the end.

It was two o'clock when she laid down on her bed and tried to get a few hours' sleep before morning.

Next day the marines went into action at Château-Thierry.

CHAPTER XIII

INTERLUDE

I

Take your atlas, find Siberia, locate Vladivostok in the northwest corner of the Japan Sea and trace your finger inland. Follow the Trans-Siberian railroad. One branch will travel upward along the Amur River, as though in the United States the traveler started from Boston, went northward and down the St. Lawrence, to reach Buffalo. Another branch of the Trans-Siberian drops in a southwesterly direction toward Harbin, Manchuria, then up to Chita, away across the steppes to Lake Baikal and beyond, thousands of miles beyond, almost in a straight line into European Russia. Transposing Vladivostok for Boston, Harbin would be Binghamton, Chita would be Buffalo, Lake Baikal would be Lake Michigan, Irkutsk would be Chicago. Further west Omsk would be Lincoln, Nebraska, Ekaterinburg would be Denver, the Urals would be the Rockies, Petrograd would be San Francisco, Moscow would be Los Angeles. The geographical similarity of the two countries is extraordinary. Only Siberian distances are three

times as great and Siberian populations one-thirtieth as large.

If any lasting gain is totaled from the great Russian bedlam, emphasized in it prominently must be the opening of Siberia to the world. As boys and girls, and even as grown men and women, we thought of Siberia as an arctic waste of snow and ice, ravaged by man-hunting wolves, dotted with world-lost exile mines, peopled by a strange semi-barbaric race in fur and lambskin and dwelling in half-real dusk beneath the bondage of the knout.

It is only the winter picture which has come to us; then only such a picture as a Russian traveler in America might carry home by describing conditions around a Hudson Bay trading post in late January.

Siberia is a pleasant, smiling land, a land of sunshine and blue distances, of green fields and wild flowers. It is a land of bowered forests, baked prairies, heat-soaked deserts, babbling brooks, plashing, purling rivers.

And the eye of mortal man since Eden has never gazed upon such sunsets!

It has great cities with paved streets, electric car lines, pretentious stores, massive theaters, imposing mansions. And a high-caste Siberian Tartar knows how to make his residence imposing. Many of the great railroad stations, when lighted and viewed at a distance by night, resemble the marble halls which come to us in dreams. But alas, Siberia has its little earth-lost country villages—its “small towns” too—its Podunk Corners and its Gilberts Mills, its East Gileads and its Hastings Crossings. Russian writers have dwelt unduly upon peasant life in these earth-lost villages—as though an American Tolstoi drew a

picture of contemporaneous American life solely from Rupert Hughes's "Carthage" or Sinclair Lewis's "Gopher Prairie", eliminating and ignoring entirely Boston, New York, Palm Beach, New Orleans, San Francisco. There are many intermediate steps in Russian living between six log huts clustered on a prairie where half-wild males and females rear families like animals, and the Imperial Ballet at St. Petersburg or the Grand Mosque at Moscow, as both existed before the cataclysm.

In the heart of Eastern Siberia is Great Baikal, a lake sixty miles long and twenty to thirty miles wide. On the northwest corner of this lake, back on the Irkut River, lies the city of Irkutsk. In size it compares with Springfield, Massachusetts, or Cincinnati, Ohio. The river flows through the metropolis. The railroad station and freight yards are set upon the western bank, the main part of the city upon the eastern. Connecting the two is a dilapidated floating bridge of gray, weather-beaten, flood-racked timbers.

Irkutsk was the farthest western point reached by Japanese or Yankee troops in the recent Intervention. From Irkutsk westward to the Urals, the Germans were checkmated from shipping submarines in sections across the Trans-Siberian for submersion in the Japan Sea and "unrestricted" warfare in the Pacific, by a stout little army of pro-Ally Slavs who should have a place in history with Ulysses on his Odyssey and Leonidas at the Pass.

From Russian internment camps under Kerensky "the Talker", the Czecho-slovaks—pronounced "Checko-slow-vacks"—started for France, via Siberia, Japan, America, the Atlantic. The Germans, through Lenine, heard and said they should not go. France

said they should go and supplied the money. The Czechs were willing, eager, to go. So they fought their way forward, holding the Trans-Siberian as they moved, to journey no farther than Vladivostok.

But there were no *Lusitania* horrors in the Pacific.

II

Far down the southern end of the Irkutsk railroad yards on a muddy night in September, 1918, three men in khaki sat in a caboose freight car around a small sheet-iron stove. Upon a near-by shelf-table, a lone candle burned in an empty bottle.

The interior of the car was warm but sordid. Living utensils and army paraphernalia were strewn around, with scraps of food. In an alcove behind, two rumpled bunks showed indistinctly. Outside the wind was blowing, bringing down the febrile, incessant tootings of locomotive switchers up the yards, where swarthy engineers in lambskin hats signaled their yardmen with maximum of noise and blunder.

They were lean-jawed, copper-faced men with khaki shirts torn open roughly at their throats. One had the insignia of the United States Engineering Corps (officially known as the “Stevens Mission”) on his pocket. The others were Red Triangle “secretaries.” And the air was blue with their pipe smoke. They talked horrors which will never be written in books.

A pause came in their conversation. The locomotive blasts died down. For a time the silence was so deep the only sound was the crackle of the flames in the stove or a meditative tapping of a briar-stem against the smaller man’s teeth. The deepness

of that silence was suddenly disturbed by a noise. It was a noise like a cry. It was followed by a thud. Some one had fallen on the outside steps.

A burly young fellow from Scranton, Pennsylvania, in charge of the Y. train at the moment, leapt up and opened the door. “What do you want?” he cried irritably into the dark. Some drunken trainman was probably after “*pappyroose*”—Russian cigarettes—again.

“Give me a hand, will you? This is the Y. car, isn’t it? I’m—all—in!”

“My God!” cried the Y. man. “It’s a Yank!”

They helped the stranger into the car. The door was closed, shutting out the murky night. The stranger sank on an inverted box by the wall shelf and for a minute leaned his forehead over on his wrist. Then he raised a gaunt, haggard face and looked at each man in turn.

The three saw a fellow countryman of twenty-eight or thirty who might have come through the well-known Inferno as amanuensis for the late Mr. Dante. His uniform was foul with grease, dried mud, stains of origin beyond explanation. His eyes were deep-sunken. Hair fell an inch over his collar. His thin beard was stringy and ragged. He wore an old Russian hat with a great chunk of the lamb-wool missing in front.

“I just got in,” he said, “train pulled in a few minutes ago—haven’t eaten anything for two days—rode for the past forty-eight hours packed away in a dark berth behind two stinking Chinamen. Who’s got a—cigarette?”

Three pairs of hands began frantically fumbling in

six pairs of pockets.

“What’s your name, ’bo? Where’ve you come from —now?”

“Forge is my name—Nat Forge. I’ve just come through from—from—Moscow.”

Crack! One of the briars had fallen to the floor and the hard-rubber stem had broken in two pieces.

“Forge? Nat Forge? God in heaven! Are you—the fellow—that started in toward Moscow with Dick Wiley a year ago? Where’s Wiley?”

“Dead,” responded Nat simply. “They shot him. Let me have that cigarette.”

They got him his cigarette. They got him many cigarettes. They rolled them for him as fast as he could smoke them, meeting each other’s eyes blankly. The fellow from Scranton dug around in his boxes and cartons for food. The fire was poked in thick silence. A battered pot was set thereon. Coffee was sifted in from a scoop of open fingers down in a bag.

They finally set food before him. They had sense enough not to prod the famished, emaciated man with damfool questions until he had partially recovered his strength.

“War? Gad, boys—I’ve seen enough war! You guys at this end of the country don’t know anything about it. This is the first square meal I’ve eaten in seven months. I mean it. Seven months. Since last February when we left Omsk, going east.”

It was pathetic, the way he ate that food. A square meal!

“You been in Moscow—ever since?”

“No. We reached Moscow, turned right round and walked right out again. I’ve been with the Czechs at Kolybelsk. I’m on my way out—to Harbin or Vladivostok—to see if I can’t hustle along some supplies. Medical supplies. They’re chopping off arms and legs down there with butcher knives and no anesthetics.”

Ten minutes had elapsed before more was spoken. The sudden introduction of food into the man’s weakened vitals distressed him. He drank cup after cup of the vile coffee. But it was hot. Heat was what counted. Then more cigarettes. Eleven of them.

“I know my clothes must smell like hell, boys, but if you’d seen what I’ve been thrown among, coming across from——”

“I’ve got an extra outfit you can change into,” offered the man from Scranton. “Jake, turn some fresh water into that kettle and put it on. Forge’ll want to shave.”

“Yes,” said Nat, with a choke of emotion at being among his countrymen again. “And which of you boys is a barber? Some one’s got to harvest this hair. Nothing fancy. Anything to get it off.”

Nat took a sponge bath, nude at one side before them, at the huge samovar. He changed into clean garments. He removed his stringy beard with scissors and shaved his face. His hair was sheared. He came back and sat down at the stove.

“When did they shoot Wiley? What for?”

“They shot him at Krasnoyek. We got there in the rainy dark. We were on our way back toward Ekaterinburg. Something was the matter with his papers—a ‘t’ wasn’t crossed or an ‘i’ dotted

somewhere. He was standing within three feet of me —without a word they asked him to step aside—an official pumped four bullets from an automatic into his chest and stomach before he knew what it was all about—he looked at me in surprise—sort of sickly—he just sank down to a sitting posture on the ground, holding himself up on a stiffened arm, his other hand at his stomach—then he laid his forehead down on his wrist—he never spoke a word—just died. God damn this bloody country and all the low-browed fiends in it! It's getting just what it deserves—my papers happened to be all right—thank the Lord for tobacco—how long you fellows been here, anyhow—and for the love of Mike, tell me what's happening in France?"

III

The Americans were "doing things" in France. The German steam-roller had smashed head-on into another steam-roller and the second steam-roller had not been the one reduced to pig iron.

"We're givin' 'em hell!" informed the Stevens man. "Consulate here got a long wire this morning. We're hangin' our dirty shirts on the Hindenburg line and pepperin' Chinless Willy's pants with buckshot so he looks like a country signboard."

"Down where we were, not a word's come through since the fuss at Château-Thierry. Won that, didn't we?"

"Won it? Won it? Think the Yanks come across to hold a tea party, maybe? God! They're only stoppin' the slaughter o' Huns when their rifles get hot and plug. This war's goin' to be over by Christmas, I'd almost be willin' to bet by Thanksgiving. I hear there

was one time they ordered the Yanks to retire but the order to retire couldn't catch up with 'em fast enough so they used it to wipe German blood off their pants. And went out and killed a few thousand more before supper just to call it a day! You been out here since it first started, ain't you?"

"Wiley and I came up a year ago last July. A year ago last July! Fellows, it seems like—it seems like—eighteen years!"

They were very sober. They understood.

"And what do you hear from America—home?"

They told him all they had heard from America and—home.

At eleven o'clock that night, Nathan was still talking.

"——in those get-away trains from Moscow the poor devils were even hanging to the locomotives—like flies—some standing on the red-hot piston boxes, gripping the cow-catchers. They slammed us into a freight car and locked us in—pitch dark!—men and women, Lord it didn't make any difference who or what we were!—two hundred and twenty-one of us slammed in a *tepluska*, crammed so tightly we couldn't raise our hands to our shoulders—twenty-four hours of it—agony just standing up, and when we couldn't stand up any longer we just sagged on those about us—they took out seventy-eight corpses when they finally unlocked the door and let us out—rode with a dead woman pushed so hard into my right side her cold body hurt my ribs—she was a well-dressed woman too; her fur boa kept tickling my ear—and the typhus down there! What do you hear from the Red Cross? Any trains come out this way?"

"Doc Seaver and Cleeve are headed this way with a train. The Consulate expects them some time the last of next week."

Nathan leaned forward with his face in his hands.

"Thirty million dead in Russia since the bust started—think of it, fellows—thirty million! That's an awful mass of dead bodies."

"Yes," said the Scranton man tersely. And the railroad man observed, "I'm natcherly a peaceable yap. But for once, if they'd lynch that dam' Kaiser, believe me, I'd pull on the rope!"

"Amen!" said the small man who had not spoken.

"I wonder what the chances are for getting transportation through to Vladivostok? Lord, I've got to get through! Those poor devils off there at 'Cold-belly' as we called it, are dying like flies, just for bandages and disinfectant."

"Better go over to the Consulate in the morning and ask Thompson. He'll know. There's a he-man." This from the engineer.

"They run a string of 'empties' through to Harbin for supplies about once a week," added the chap from Scranton. "There's a consular courier named Roach going out when the next one starts. Maybe you could kick in with him."

IV

Hartshorn, the Scranton man, offered Nat the upper bunk in the caboose car that night. And Nathan crawled in between blankets for the first time in weeks.

It was very easy to think, lying awake there in the

dark. But Nathan did not want to think. He wanted to forget—forget quickly.

Yet he did think.

One great, vital fact stood out white-hot above all other facts in his consciousness—*he was alive!* He wasn't out of the mêlée yet. But to date he was alive! A year had passed—gone like a terrific nightmare. And he was alive. Alive, alive, alive! He couldn't get over that stunning realization.

There were days and even weeks in that year which were blurred. His mind had been so filled with impressions that it had absolutely refused to absorb any more. Oh, how picayune all his introspection, his love affairs, his family troubles, his Golgotha of small-town life had been back home, compared with life stripped stark naked as he had seen it out here! He seemed to be living now in another incarnation. He was not—he couldn't be—the same fellow who had once lived in the Pine Street house with Milly, who had read poetry with old Caleb Gridley, who had drummed the trade from Wilkes-Barre up to Syracuse for the Thorne Mills, selling dozens and grosses of ladies' and misses' "thirty-sixes" and "forty-fours" and "spring-needle union suits with reënforced seats."

How different life would appear when he got back—if he ever did get back!

What was his mother doing at this moment, Edith with her increasing family, Ted Thorne, myself? The boy's mind grew sluggish; vague thoughts trooped helter-skelter across the filmy playground of his brain: Main Street, Paris—the Élite Bakery and Lunch Room with smoky ham-and-eggs frying at the back—the rumbling roll of the door in the box-shop that

opened out upon the shipping platform—shaking down the furnace the last thing before going to bed in the Preston Hill home—Milly's bake-bean-flavored pantry of a Sunday morning and most of the beans burned in the pot on top—how the March wind washed through the bare tree limbs the night he had sat in the dark and caught Milly with Plumb—Bernie Gridley's colorless face bathed in blue cigarette smoke as her forked eyes impaled him that night in Chicago—a girl raised just above him in a hotel window, a girl with a clear-cut profile and calm eyes—queer, indeed, the things that stick in a man's mind across the months and years!

He fell asleep. But he was alive!

He was headed out toward Vladivostok and when the war was ended, he would go back to—what?

His disordered imagination, twisted and wracked by the horrors he had witnessed, bathed him in icy sweat all night.

Milly tied hand and foot to a rail fence, a big cavalry officer in front of her with a saber—little Mary crying across a vast space, tiny hands blood-smeared—his father crawling along railroad tracks with eyes seared out, holding to the ties in hope of some one picking him up—his mother sitting in the midst of multitudinous household goods and wanting him to listen while she told him what the Germans had done! All night long!—horrible specters! handless, headless! Then along toward morning the girl of the hotel window, the girl of the calm eyes, leaning out of that window, reaching a hand down toward him, telling him not to mind—the fellow who had been her escort had gone—she was not his wife! She had never been his wife! Wouldn't he find his way in at the door and finish the meal with her——

He awoke with some one's hand upon his shoulder. A bleary-eyed face was close to a candle beside the bunk.

"For Heaven's sake, Forge, old man—what's the trouble? You've been groaning horribly the last five hours. It's almost more than a fellow can stand, to hear you."

"It's all that coffee I drank," apologized Nat. "I shouldn't have taken so much. I'm sorry!"

But it was not the coffee.

CHAPTER XIV

SUNSHINE GLORIOUS

I

But Nathan had one more terrific experience to suffer before he was finished with the Russian bedlam,—an experience and an aftermath beside which all that has gone before—everything!—pales into insignificance and becomes as nothing. And like most stupendous experiences in life, it came when least expected, certainly unannounced.

Nathan reached that great tenth day of October, 1918.

“It was the turning point—the hinge!—of my whole life, Bill,” he has said to me since. “I wouldn’t have missed it for a million dollars, but whether I’d take a million dollars to go through with it again—it’s a question, Bill—it’s a question!”

II

At the Consulate the following morning he met Roach. The young courier was delighted with a

companion the balance of that hectic journey. One week later they were on their way.

Nathan had recuperated quickly during that week. Plenty of food, *plenty of soap and water*, the chance to shave every morning—simple things—had given him a new lease on life.

Nathan had changed, anyway, during that year with the Czechs. Mental troubles had stopped bothering. He had far more to worry him than his culture. Despite his physical hardships, the young man had added weight. Hard, healthy exercise in the open, soldier fare, rough living, had toughened him. He was a stripling no longer. He had learned to walk erectly. His shoulders were square, almost burly. And his face——

Though Nathan knew it not, a whole life epilogue lay upon his features. He was bronzed to copper red with sunburn, wind-burn and snow-burn. At his temples was a faint sprinkling of gray. True, as Bernie had said, there was no woman in his life, and that also showed upon his features and in his strong, gray eyes. But Nathan had been through “a thousand measly little small-town hells” which can often take more from a man than a few big hells. He had lived above them. Then had come the few big hells also,—that autumn, winter and spring at Kolybelsk after the flight from Moscow. He had come through all that too—and lived. He would go on living. He had damned Russia and the war a hundred times, especially when poor Wiley’s surprised face came back to him with a body suddenly punctured by bullets; but what normal man without a heart of brass had not damned the war after seeing men die horribly? Still, that had not shaken Nathan’s faith in human nature. A peasant army gone mad was no

criterion of the entire human race! And that Nathan had not lost faith in human nature showed in his face also. It was growing into a Lincolnesque face. Self-control, self-discipline, infinite patience, the capacity for fathomless tenderness. When I looked into Nathan's features a year later and compared him with the fellow who had bade me good-by at the Paris railroad depot that sunny morning when old Caleb missed him by an hour, frankly I was shocked. But it was a thrilling shock. I felt a choke in my throat. Nathan's face! A far, far cry from the little, freckled-blotched, snub-nosed countenance upturned to me that day when I belabored a barrel-stave on the fence boards in the yard of the Foxboro school. All that Nathan needed now was a great woman, an infinitely tender woman, a woman with a big soul, and there would be something rather glorious about my friend, though it is hard to say, looking back over the quite prosaic vicissitudes of his life, just wherein and why. It was a presentiment lying too deep for the intellect. It belonged in the realm of the emotions.

So Nathan started out of Irkutsk one morning with Roach—eastward, eastward—toward the greatest adventure in his life.

The country, up to the week of the fifth, had been riotous with the screaming yellows and flaming scarlets of autumn—not unlike New England—not unlike Vermont. Hour after hour as the dilapidated train crawled infinitesimally across moorlands and steppes, through mountain defiles, along valley bottoms, around the edges of great inland lakes—always eastward, eastward, eastward—he sat in the door of the howling, bumping, empty freight car and drank in the glory of titanic Siberia, the

undiscovered wonderland of the planet.

Vastness, strength, poetry, he saw in that land through which he traveled. It was the home of a race still primitive, though old as the world, with deep faith, with curiosity, with many passions, with suspicions, with fears, with heartache,—striving piteously to work out a social and economic problem as far above their grasp as God. It was a land of brown steppes, blue waters, purple mountains; that barbaric, borderland world where troglodytes lived with large-bodied women who might have ridden with the Valkyries out to meet Brünhilde. The very proximity of death gave outlines to that wonderful land; that lucid sadness which is the essence of the soul of Russia. Deserts, distances, lisps of forms and ideas, the powerful simplicities of souls already in Infinity,—and yet too, a land of junk and chaos almost crashed into wreckage along with the thing that man called Civilization.

Colors, colors, riotous colors! Its yellows were great tartaric life-motives, thwarted and defiled; its blacks were terrible doubts, hatreds, abuses and cruelties; its reds were the accouchement of a great people where a nation's natal pains were griping amid the roar of war; its blues were for simple strengths which could endure all and still survive, and loves which could never quite fade from life's horizons. Colors, colors, riotous colors! And Nathan —the colorist, the emotionalist, the mystic, the romancer—drank them in deeply and let them cleanse him from the Terror through which he had slipped. No—life could never be small and petty and landlocked and drab again.

It was time for snow now, yet the weather had remained steaming warm. Instead of snow there had

been rain. For hours the train had crawled through vast infinities of depressing fog. The entire day of the ninth the car doors had been closed to keep out the dismal mist and chill. They had no fire. They could only sit on the floor of that rocking box-on-wheels and play the hours away with a deck of cards which Roach had somehow managed to keep in his luggage. About seven o'clock the night of the ninth Roach arose and opened the door.

"We're going through a lot of hills," he declared. "And my God! It's dark as the devil's pocket! I never saw such fog. You can almost taste it!"

The two spread their blankets on the cold, hard planking. They lay down, automatics within easy reach, and tried to sleep. It was torturous business.

"Well, old man," cried Roach in grim humor, "if we don't live to see morning, here's good-by!"

They had employed such a "Good night" every evening since the fortunes of war had thrown them together. For the country was filled with bands of murderous Bolsheviki, striving to break through the Czech guard lines and cut the railroad at a vulnerable point in order to maroon enemy forces farther in-country.

"Same to you and many of them!" laughed Nat. And he pulled up his blanket to his chin, pillowed his arms behind his head and dozed off to the shrieking grind of the wheels.

Outside of one terrible shriek which Roach gave three hours later, they were the last words Nathan ever heard him utter.

My friend had dozed off—to dream as usual that he was back in Paris—in the box-shop with his father

—going home to Milly and the Pine Street house furnished in mid-Victorian and Larkin Soap premiums—brooding over boyish troubles,—always introspecting—always worry-ridden—when in his dreams, half-way in the borderland of slumber, came a crash as though all hell had exploded and blown the earth to shreds in his face!

III

The crash was part of Nathan's nightmare,—part of it until he felt himself rocking, bumping, knocking, billowing, hurled at a strange tangent he could not comprehend.

Then came another crash, more horrible than before. He was falling,—down, down, down. BUMP!

Roach uttered one long-drawn, grisly cry. A car beam had crushed his legs. When some ominous ripping sound followed, a portion of the iron underwork broke through the timbers where he lay impaled, crushing his skull in the inky dark.

For an instant all was quiet,—the ghastly quiet before pandemonium. Then from up front started a gigantic hissing of steam. The engine boiler blew an instant later. When the roar had echoed away across the distance, hoarse voices were calling, a staccato tatting began,—a machine-gun spitting death.

Nathan came to his senses and tore frantically at nail-jagged sheathing that pinned his lower limbs. His hat was lost. One of his legs was shot with sudden agony where a nail had spiked it to the bone.

But he crawled out. Somehow he crawled out. The leg was not broken. He looked around.

Through black fog loomed a horrible glare. Sharp tongues of ruddy, ominous flame shot up, forked, ravenous. The glare grew brighter. It disclosed grotesque, hysterical figures silhouetted against roaring yellow. In the wrecked cars, imprisoned men were bellowing in agony. From surrounding banks of murky dark, fiends were shooting down others as they crawled from wreckage or forced twisted doors open and leaped down the embankment.

The wreckage fired terribly. It might have been sprayed with oil, so swiftly did those tongues of liquid flame leap from timber to timber. And through the hissing, crackling, snapping, roaring tumult which obliterated the next few minutes came sharp rifle fire and singing death.

It was massacre!

Nathan could not grasp where he was, where to flee, what to do. Fear-grazed, he stood irresolute. The fire-painted fog blanketed everything.

Then from the mist-wall a short distance away he heard more frenzied shrieking than the rest.

"*Americanski! Americanski!*" The attackers had recognized his uniform.

Nat tried to run forward. He slipped and fell. The entire Bolshevik army piled immediately on his back.

Nathan waited for the impact of bullet or bayonet stab to finish him. His terror was so great he was physically paralyzed. The fortunes of war! The end had come! He was interested to see what Death would be like. Let it come—quickly.

But the entire Bolshevik army lifted itself from his back. He was yanked to his feet. In front of him, lighted by the wild, barbaric flames was a huge,

bearded man in a high, outlandish, lambskin hat pushed over one ear. He jabbered at Nathan crazily.

"*N'panam'ayu!*" (I don't understand!) cried Nathan frantically.

But his contention had small effect on the Russian. Nathan protested hysterically that he did not understand.

The big Bolshevik grew angrier and angrier. Then a tall, lithe figure, girt with a huge cavalry sword, jammed his way forward. He looked like a Cossack, though the Cossacks were considered pro-Ally.

This man took note of Nathan's uniform. To the boy's stunned astonishment he spoke in broken Germanic English.

"You are American?"

"Yes," cried Nathan. He could scarcely make himself heard amid the increasing tumult all around.

"You are American soldat—*yist*?"

"I'm a Y. M. C. A. man!"

"Where are you going? You help Czecho-slovak—*yist*?"

"I was only traveling on the train—Petrograd to America!"

The panther-like young fellow jabbered to the man in the lambskin hat. A dozen others tried to harangue each other at once. Nathan looked death in the face. A dozen bayonets were ready to finish him without further ado, for Nathan heard that sickening word "*shteek!*" Finally the Cossack prevailed.

"You go with us. Do not run away. We ask you question afterward!"

A dozen maniacal hands gripped him. Down the incline on the south side of the horrible furnace he was hustled, out of range of the bullets.

The bullet fire was subsiding, however. The flames were roaring in triumph over the long line of splintered cars where a few luckless human beings were roasting horribly.

Nathan was half-dragged, half-carried to the bottom of an embankment. There were hordes of stampeding horses there. One had a bullet through its nose and was shrieking in agony. There is no earthly cry like the shriek of a wounded horse. It was dispatched with a shot in the head and broke a man's leg in its writhing.

The attacking crowd which had engineered this holocaust was a tattered, unruly, blood-crazed mob.

"You climb up!" ordered the tall Cossack grimly. He indicated a scrubby pony that three men were holding by the head.

Nathan had no choice. He was living by minutes now. The Cossack threw his pipe-stem leg over another pony. His act was followed by a dozen. There was a howling argument over something. Then southward from the roaring, roasting horror, serpentine along the trackage, a cavalcade started abruptly down into deeper southern fog. Nathan had to grip the high Siberian saddle tightly to preserve his balance. It was like riding atop a moving fence post. The Cossack had the reins of the pony's bridle.

Nathan was conscious of traveling down a far, far slope. He marveled how the men knew their way in that fog. The slope seemed miles long before they reached the valley bottom. Then he realized the cavalcade was taking its course from the depression

in the hills. But the horses walked. The hysteria of the crime which had been consummated burned itself out.

Several horsemen trotted alongside and howled questions at Nat in their native tongue. Over and over the young man had to protest he did not understand. Finally when they stopped once in that labyrinth of mist, Nathan demanded of the Cossack:

“Where are you taking me?”

“Beeg commandant! You see! Stop talk!”

“What for?”

“You have come from Petrograd! To answer question! I say stop talk!”

“And what then?”

“Ah! We see how good you answer question!”

IV

Due southward they bore—if Nathan kept sense of direction. It was uncanny how these horses found their footing in that fog. The ride became a nightmare in which huge bearded demons rode with him. Hour after hour it seemed to continue. Then far ahead, lights gleamed fantastic through the mist. They were approaching a settlement, back from the railroad.

Nathan had been in scores of such lost Siberian villages. One long, wide, muddy street of log huts with acres of sapling-fenced cattle pens behind: they were all alike. Two big beacons were afire before the largest house in the place, half-way up a slight incline on the right.

"You come!" ordered the Cossack.

Nathan almost fell to the ground when first his weight bore upon his stiffened leg. He groaned with the pain. But he was immediately grabbed and jostled forward. In behind the twisted fence he was hurried, while aroused villagers, a tatterdemalion crew, gathered from fifty directions.

The room into which he was pushed was low-studded and rough-hewn. Candle-lighted, its corners and furnishings were mostly in shadow. At a rough plank table in the center sat a bear of a man in a great ulster with a fur hat like a drum major's. He had immense black whiskers—in which he might easily have lost articles of small compass such as stub pencils, cigar holders, toothpicks, pipe-stems, and never found them again—and those whiskers were finished off at the top with the longest, wildest, most wonderful pair of mustaches that Nathan dreamed could ever adhere to a male countenance and allow that male to preserve any semblance of Dignity. But there was not an inkling of doubt about the Dignity of this bear-like Commandant. It was immense, and the whiskers and mustaches did it. He took great pride in his whiskers and mustaches. Undoubtedly they had been responsible for his elevation to Commandant. A man with such stupendous hirsute adornments could be nothing less. And in further proof that he was a truly great man, across and about both breasts was a display of moth-eaten medals and badges that made his chest resemble the souvenir board of a street fakir at an Elks Field Day or Fireman's Muster, back in Vermont.

A half-dozen of the bear's "staff" were gathered in distressing Dignity also about the table as Nat was brought forward. They too were high-hatted and

bewhiskered, though not so terrifically as the Commandant. There was but one set of such whiskers on earth, and they were upon the Commandant's countenance. One man had a big, greasy book open before him. He appeared to be "clerk" of this Inquisition. When he wrote in the book, he put his tongue in his cheek and lowered his accipitral nose within four inches of his writing. He had hands like boxing gloves. The panther-like Cossack continued to act as interpreter.

"Now—you tell Commandant where you go," he ordered.

"Moscow to Harbin, then to America," declared Nathan hoarsely. The stolid ring of Tartar faces drew close to the candle-light.

"You been with Czecho-slovak—*yist*?"

"I passed through their lines," assented the Yankee.

"Where you pass through lines?"

"Ybargenosk!"

"What for you go to America?"

"To tell my people the truth about the Bolsheviki," Nathan answered. Not to humor these men meant swift and unspeakable death. "The Americanski know only lies about the Bolsheviki," he stumbled onward, hoping against hope to make friends. "I go to America to stop the lies. It will help your cause much."

All present seemed to be impressed when this was interpreted. A general discussion ensued, principally with hands.

"We wish to know how much Czecho-slovak at

Ybargenosk," the Cossack declared, interpreting the Commandant's next question.

There were three hundred, a pitiful little garrison, at Ybargenosk.

"Three thousand!" said Nathan promptly.

At once any good will which he might have manufactured by his references to America and his mission was lost in the disfavor which this announcement received. Imprecations and abuses were hurled at him as though he personally were responsible.

"How far Czech's line go?" was the next query.

"As far as Chita," Nathan responded. "From there to Harbin the Japanese are in control."

They questioned Nat about Czech equipment, about Czech plans, about Czech supplies, about the recent passage of goods trains, about conditions in Moscow, about a rumor which had spread over mid-Siberia that a medical train was headed westward loaded with Red Cross supplies. Nathan answered as best he could. But he was distrusted. Sentiment curdled against him.

One man wished to know if the skies were blue in America, the same as they were in Russia. Another declared that he had heard that all horses and cows in America had two legs, and how did a horse or cow move about if it only had two legs?

And such human material was striving to found a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal!

Rapidly Nathan lost caste. They took away his khaki coat and the contents of his pockets. There was

much reference to the notes that the man with the big hands had recorded in the greasy book. Then from the mêlée of confusion and discussion, Nat's blood began to curdle as he heard the general word "*shteek*" on all sides. ("Bayonet him!")

The tall Cossack seemed to be defending Nat. The Cossack had to give it up. He shrugged his narrow shoulders and stalked out, his big saber rattling noisily.

With a blunt wave of his huge arm, the Commandant arose from the table. He gave an order in Russian and two men stepped forward. After a fashion they saluted. They were sandy-complexioned and had no chins. Another order, with a jerk of a big thumb toward the ashen-faced Yankee. They saluted again.

Nathan was seized and bundled from the room. The crowd trailed after. The flaming knots burned higher outside the door, death pylons now.

Into the yard Nat was dragged and the crowd fell back. They formed a semicircle for the execution. One of the soldiers drew his long glistening bayonet from a loop at his left hip. He clicked it upon the end of his rifle. Then he jumped the gun up into his hands and steeled himself for the messy thing he had been ordered to do.

But Nathan Forge of Paris, Vermont, U.S.A. had no intention of standing there and being stuck like an animal in an abattoir. His body stiffened. Horror maddened him. The only weapons, the only friends, he had left in the world were the two gnarled fists that Bernie Gridley had cauterized.

Nathan's gorge rose. He leaped like a cat. His right fist smashed straight at the head soldier's lack of

chin. The blow broke his jaw. The gun dropped from his hands, fell sideways, and the bayonet stuck a bystander in the throat. Nathan's boot then came up and stove into the pit of the other man's abdomen. The man doubled like a jack-knife.

At this sudden display of agility and damage, the flabbergasted spectators shrank back. Nathan crashed another blow at the gaping features of a lean fellow who barred his way to the fence. Over the fence went the Yankee and into the murk.

And bedlam broke loose behind him! Hoarse bellows roared in the fog. Shots snapped. A group of horses by the gate began stampeding. The log house spilled soldiers and officers, and the yard bumbled like a nest of yellow-jackets.

Nathan tripped on the other side the fence and went down on his face. He cut a gash across his forehead that for the moment blinded him. But he ran—ran somehow—ran wildly.

He was suddenly thankful for the fog. It enveloped him. It shut off pursuit.

Down the hill he fled, guiding himself by weak, nebulous window lights from huts on either hand. He knew a mob was trailing after. Horses were coming. Two shots cracked in quick succession. The boy felt a deadly, cruel kick in his left arm. In an instant the arm went numb. Something warm and sticky dripped from his fingers. He had been shot. The arm was bleeding.

Into a passageway between two houses he dodged, on into cattle runs behind. Again he was living by moments. He smashed head-on into a diminutive cow. Which was the most terrified will never be known. But he did not lose his sense of direction.

Down the hill the road by which they had entered the settlement turned at right angles northward, out toward that great defile in the hills. His pursuers had lost him in the fog. He skirted through back yards, climbed endless fences, bumped into all sorts of palings and impedimenta. But he reached the bottom of that incline.

There were hoarse shoutings all about him. Several more shots were fired wildly. A group of breathless, running men passed within three feet of where he crouched in the shadow of a gate.

The place swarmed with frustrated Bolsheviks who had been cheated of their quarry, outwitted by a Yankee! Nathan left it swarming. He got onto the steppe's road and headed off northward into soggy, inky night. And fog! That fog!

The boy had a blind instinct to strike back toward the railroad. The railroad meant a frail chance for stopping a troop train and rejoining his fellows. Yet hunting the railroad in that fog was like groping for a lost love in Abaddon.

He walked into a post and had the breath knocked from him, learning that he had not yet reached the edge of the village. He stumbled over old boards, half-buried in muck. After that he groped his way more carefully with his one good arm.

The pursuers gave up the hunt early. It was nonsense, hunting a fugitive in such a fog. Sounds of the village grew fainter behind the groping, stumbling, tight-lipped Yankee. A vastness as of infinity between the planets enveloped him. There were no stars or lights. He wore neither hat nor coat —only his khaki shirt—and the fog penetrated to his marrow.

He had found the road out of town, and he tried to keep the road out of town. The only way he knew that he was keeping the road out of town was by the muck in which he staggered and sloughed his way. The moment he found himself walking on hard, frost-nipped grass, he returned to the slough.

Foot by foot, yard by yard, rod by rod, he went out and on, into absolute blackness, not daring to stop an instant, fearing the morning might find the fog lifted and disclose him. That would mean recapture and a consummation of the fate he had dodged that night.

His face became splashed with blood and muck. He could not tie a bandage about his head, first because he had no bandage, second because his left arm was useless and negligible for the tying of anything. He did not have a left arm. Only a stiff Something hitched to his left shoulder. Not that his arm had been shot away. The chance bullet had struck a nerve and effected temporary paralysis.

On! On! On!

Ankles were wrenched and twisted. Again and again he fell forward. He only saved his face by plunging his good arm, elbow deep, in bog. At times he had to stop, go back and picked up his route again.

That fog! It was thick like cheese, black like paint. It shut out noises. The slough! slough! slough! of his boots were the only sounds he heard. He might have been groping across a world-wide pit of the damned. Yet he had to go on. He must go on. He prayed for the morning and yet he feared what the morning might disclose.

He lost track of time. He could not recollect how long he and Roach had slept before that murderous

crash. Roach! Poor Roach! Then it must have taken the cavalcade an hour to ride down that long defile in the hills; how many hours after that to reach the village, he had no memory or conception. He had been before the Commandant another half-hour. After a time he was obsessed with the notion that he had been going on, hours upon hours, himself. Morning must come soon. Or wasn't it yet midnight?

Leg movement began to grow mechanical. He counted his progress by steps,—one, two, three, four, five, six! One, two, three, four, five, six! He felt of his left hand and discovered the blood had caked hard. Then the bleeding must have stopped. It was queer. But thank God for it, nevertheless.

On! On! On! One, two, three, four, five, six! One, two, three, four, five six! *Lost in Siberia! Lost in Siberia!* One, two, three, four, five, six!—One—two—three—four—five—six!

He grew feverish. It was almost more than human flesh and blood could endure. His injured leg was afire. Every bend of his knee sent whips of flame up and down its cords, from ankle to thigh, from thigh to ankle. One, two, three, four, five, six! Slough, slough, slough! He grew hysterical; he began talking aloud. Oh, God, keep him from weakening! Give him the strength to go on!

God!

Into his mind came another time of desperate predicament back over the years,—a night when two terrified little boys squatted in wet alders and prayed the Almighty to save them from the terrible retribution of kissing a little girl.

God!

Nathan went down on his knees. It was not because he intended to kneel in prayer. It was because he stumbled and could not rise again.

“Dear God,” he cried hoarsely, wildly. “Dear God ——”

In the awful void, no seeming contact with anything mundane but the feel of mud and steppe grass beneath his boots, he felt suddenly so light-headed that he wondered what was happening to him. Was he dying?

“Dear God—Dear God——”

He fainted. Or rather, he collapsed.

V

There is always a morning.

Strange, unreal gray permeated the void. Rolling on billows of nausea, Nathan recovered groggy senses. He was freezing cold; he was being consumed by fire. Where was he? His mouth was dried leather. Where was he? He had no eyes; they had been burned out, or they were in the process of burning out right now. Where was he?

He moved and it agonized him. He uttered a piteous cry for no one to hear. He fell back. He moved again. He got up on an elbow,—the length of an arm. He fell back again. *Where was he?*

It came to him where he was. He was lost in Siberia. He must go on.

There are depths of endurance in the human spirit which no man can assay until he has a last great need for taking their fathoms.

Nathan got up—reeling. He did go on.

The quickened circulation of his blood caused by the exertion warmed his stiffened limbs somewhat. Joints bent more easily with use.

The events of the past night finally came to him in full terror. He remembered he might yet be only a mile or so from the tatterdemalion crew in that horror-village. He drove himself forward faster.

He drank mud water, foul with grit, to assuage a burning thirst.

The world was gray now. There was no longer need for groping. But it was a ghastly, grisly grayness. At any moment phantoms might loom in the mist. There was light enough to examine his arm. Mercifully he could not see how bad a wound the bullet had made, what had happened. It was too near his shoulder in the back.

“I’ve got to go on! I will go on!” he cried indomitably.

The fog showed no prospect of lifting. It was still a world without form and void. Dimly conscious in his direction, treading now on the firmer ground that bordered the steppe’s road, Nathan went on and away into nothing, nothing! Only fog!

Once he heard a horse approaching, slopping through the quag. Frenziedly he left the road, drew into the deeper mist, flattened himself to earth. Horse and rider passed him about a hundred feet to the east, a high-hatted rider on a dirty, creamy pony. Then quiet again—ethereal quiet—the journey—on and on—*and on*!

The fog of the world and of life was having a last great rubble with Nathan.

There could never be another fog like the fog of that night. There could never be another grayness quite like that last awful morning.

A couple of hours after dawn Nathan began drawing on raw nerve to make that journey. He had no prospect of finding food. He had no prospect of finding any one, even if he made the railroad. Trains over the railroad ran days apart now. He was far closer to death than he suspected.

But the blind instinct to live, to win an objective, drove him onward. And the road and the hills kept his footsteps true. Hour after hour, mile after mile,—still he staggered onward. Little six-inch steps at times now. Fog! Fog! Fog!

Had the sun risen? Could the sun be shining above?

The fog was luminous—different somehow. It seemed so.

“It’s got to lift sometime!” he cried brokenly. “The sun’s shining somewhere. The sun is always shining somewhere. I must find it. I must!”

How long he had been traveling since he awakened on damp ground and fought himself to his feet, he had no way of telling. Whether the sun had risen and was shining brightly above, he did not know. How close or how far he was to the railroad was equally vague. But Nathan, following that straight, muddy, northern road, came at last to a turn. The road bore off at right angles to the eastward.

He stopped, swaying dizzily.

“I didn’t come to any such corner last night,” he cried. “I know I didn’t! If I’m down in a valley—in a

defile—somewhere around here are hills. I'm going straight northward and see if I can't find hills. Then I'll climb somehow to the top and try and get my direction—see if I can locate the railroad."

It was not a decision to be taken lightly. So long as he kept to the road, that road must lead somewhere. If he lost that road by wandering away into the hills, he might never be able to find it again. Yet could he always follow it through lowlands, always stumble and stagger onward down in fog? He had to make that decision. And he did make that decision. He decided to climb upward on to the heights and trust to the sunlight above to set him aright.

The sunlight above to set him aright!

Anyhow, that climb started. For he found a hill almost directly ahead of that abrupt turn in the road to the eastward. That is why it had turned,—to avoid the grade.

It might not have been a serious climb for a normal man. But for a man exhausted and broken as Nathan was exhausted and broken, it was Golgotha in earnest. This was its only redeeming feature: as he dragged himself up, it became quickly evident that the world was growing brighter about him.

Yes, somewhere above the sun was shining, shining gloriously!

Up, up, up! On hands and knees now. The fog was thinning. He knew, because somehow the air felt warmer in those moments when his body was cold.

Because he was turned face downward, crawling tortuously, he did not see that sun when first it was discernible through the vapor.

He had to stop many times. When he started again

he wondered in the back of his splitting head and grinding consciousness where he was finding the energy to make that ascent. At times he was so ill with vertigo that his stomach was racked; perhaps it was only the intuitive fear of falling and rolling back that long and sharp slope to the bottom—into the fog again!—that kept him conscious.

He was clawing upward a few feet now, then stopping half-hours, it seemed, for rest. His tongue was swollen. He could not shut his eyes for the agony. He tried to swallow and his throat refused to function. It came to him that in those self-commands to go on, the voice was not his own. It was no voice at all. He was making crazy, growling, guttural sounds.

And then—*the sun*!

Raising his eyes after one of his pauses for rest, hanging weirdly above him he beheld a ball of pale lemon, lambent in the heavens. Was it the sun? Could it be the sun?

Of course it was the sun! Nathan laughed at himself for the question. He did not realize his laugh was a crazy cackle.

Nathan climbed out of the fog.

He emerged from the fog-belt in the space of a hundred feet, left it below him entirely.

It was not quite the top. Not yet!

But when he had climbed out of that fog-belt into the warm, enervating sunshine, he saw the top.

Yes, he saw it, and he saw something else. The wounded, groping, clawing, climbing man raised

tortured body from above the last mist-wreath, a hundred feet below the very summit of the grade. But as he raised blistered eyes toward that top—what was it?—an illusion? It must be! No! It was not an illusion!

There on the peak, swathed in the Sunlight Glorious, Nathan saw—*a woman*!

Queenly and tall, she was, Diana of the Morning! Calm eyes were gazing afar across limitless billows of night mist. Sunlight glinted on breeze-blown tresses. About her arrow-straight figure floated in beautiful folds a cape of blue with a scarlet lining. She was a white woman, and blue and scarlet cape was the field uniform of the American Red Cross, the *Greatest Mother in the World*!

Nathan was hideous with grime and filth. Blood was caked upon him. One arm hung useless. He had to pull himself that last hundred feet by inches. But when he knew it was not an illusion, not a mirage of glazed eyeballs and mangled imagination, he uttered a cry, a piteous cry, and held out his one good hand.

He held out his one good hand to Woman Beautiful on the Hill Top—Woman Beautiful at the Summit—who seemed waiting there for him to come up, though the last hundred feet he came sightless and staggering.

That was the one big time when Nathan held out his hand in agony of body and spirit to Womanhood and Womanhood responded as a ministering angel.

Woman Beautiful started at the cry, turned her gaze down, beheld him. Then——

Swiftly she started down the grade—to greet him —to reach him—to give him the final help he needed

to realize attainment—to reach the pinnacle whereon is Victory.

Woman Beautiful came down. In her eyes was all Tenderness. On her face was Sympathy Infinite. She uttered a little cry of compassion. She caught his hand.

“You poor, poor fellow!” were the words that Nathan heard. “You’re hurt! Let me help you!”

Regardless of his broken body, no woman had ever spoken to Nathan in that tone before. Tears flooded across his glazed eyes then. Moisture welled in his throat. He wanted to speak, to answer. He could not.

Let her help him! No woman had ever said that to him, either.

“Lean on me!” came the invitation from her wealth of compassion and tenderness. “You’ve only a little way more to go. Make a little more effort. Then you can rest—up in the Sunlight!”

He could rest—up in the Sunlight!

The third miracle happened then. The broken man felt his arm being lifted across a woman’s shoulders. And suddenly by his side the resilient, supple strength of a woman sustained him. He felt a woman’s effort added to his own. He felt her almost lift him. He never knew that a woman could possess such strength. She spoke with compassion, she asked to help him, she placed his arm across her shoulder, she sustained him, she added her effort to his own, she lifted him, she gave him her strength—all she had to give, all that he needed; she literally bore him upward to the summit. He reached the Hill Top.

It was all Sunlight.

A thousand feet away was the railroad. A long train of a dozen white cars stood there, great carmine crosses emblazoned upon their sides, the glory insignia of the great Red Cross. The engine had been detached. Train crew and guard of soldiers were using that locomotive to shunt off piles of charred and smoldering wreckage—to clear the track—that the Red Cross on its mission of mercy might "carry on."

Into the last car broke the woman in blue and scarlet. She interrupted the doctor in charge.

"Come quickly!" she cried. "A wounded soldier! I went off to that point of land to the south while they were clearing the track. As I stood here, a horribly hurt man crawled up the slope out of the valley fog. He's stretched out on the ground in collapse. Come quickly!"

A stream of white-clad figures poured from the coaches, across the level plateau to the edge of the ravine. Two young surgeons bore a stretcher.

They picked up Nathan and laid him upon it. It was the work of a few moments to bear him back to the train.

"An American soldier! One of our boys!" cried Doctor Cleeve. "They probably attacked the train last night and captured him and he escaped from them!"

It was mid-afternoon when the Red Cross train was able to proceed again, into the deeper heart of Siberia, bearing Nathan backward. But he was among his friends—his countrymen—people of his blood and homeland.

He awoke in a white-iron berth, gauze bandages about his head, his left arm in a sling, bound tightly

against his body. It was night. The great mercy-train was clicking steadily westward.

“Where is she?” he cried wildly, as he raised himself on his good elbow and addressed the young doctor, nodding by the window.

“Where is who?”

“The woman—who came down the hill—the one who helped me to the top!”

“She’s asleep! It’s the middle of the night. You’ve been unconscious and in delirium. Feeling better?”

“Who is she? Where have I seen her before? Or was she just an angel! And her face from my own imagination?”

“Miss Theddon found you, old man. She’s a new nurse, just out from the States. Joined us from Manila. You’re a lucky guy!”

“Theddon? Theddon? What’s her first name?”

“Madelaine, I think. Madelaine Theddon.”

“What part of the States does she come from?”

“Somewhere up in Massachusetts. I think I heard her talking with Doctor Cleeve about Springfield.”

“It wasn’t illusion!” cried Nathan then. “It was my girl of the Star!—My girl of the Window—out here—away out here—in Siberia! Oh, my God!”

“You know her, old man?”

“I saw her face once in a star,” affirmed Nathan. “I ——”

Another doctor heard Nathan’s wild declamation and entered hastily.

“Delirium!” announced the first. “He thinks he

knows Miss Theddon. Better give him another shot, Jack. He’s pretty near done for!”

But it was not delirium. How could they understand?

CHAPTER XV

THE AMETHYST MOMENT

I

Nathan had been too toughened by eighteen months of soldiering to remain long indisposed. What he wanted more than all else was sleep,—hours and hours of sleep.

The man never would have become so exhausted in so short a time as a night and a morning and a journey through fifteen miles of muddy slough, if he had not lost far more blood from the wound in his arm than he realized, and if that flight had not been made in pitchy darkness which turned his overwrought emotions and racked imagination inward and sapped his nerve force with even far more deadly effect than the injury to his shoulder. Therefore, when the mud and blood and filth had been washed from his face and body, his wounds sterilized and bound, and his mind fully saturated with the consciousness that he had been saved and the whole horror was a thing of the past, his invalidism was short-lived.

They kept him under opiates the first day and night. The second morning he awoke, raved for a time, was made to take food, then went back to sleep again. The third morning he sat up, called for his clothes and got them. There was small room on that train for invalids to remain invalids for the luxury of it. His clothes had been cleaned in the time intervening. He dressed with a doctor's help. But he felt dizzy after breakfast when he tried to smoke and lay down on his berth again. He must have fallen asleep, for when he awoke it was high noon and the train had stopped. Far out on the expanse of hard brown steppe, it had turned upon a siding to permit an eastern-bound train of "empties" to clear.

Nathan arose and looked out of the window. The world was surfeited with sunshine. Never had there been such a day. The small white-enameled compartment in which his bunk was located was empty. Off across the prairie he saw doctors and nurses strolling. A warning whistle would bring them back in time. Beside, they could see the western track for miles, straight to the far horizon. Nathan suddenly wanted to be out there in the sunshine too.

He discovered that his leg, where the jagged nail had penetrated, had been cauterized and tightly bandaged. But it gave him no especial distress. The cut in his forehead, when dried gore and caked muck had been washed away, had turned out to be a two-inch gash above his right eye which a bit of adhesive plaster covered. His wounded arm, in which the feeling had begun to return about noon of the previous day, was tightly bound against his body. Thirty hours of sleep had brought back his strength and rebuilt his shattered nerves. Yes, Nathan suddenly wanted to be out there in the sunshine too.

There were several khaki coats on the bunk above. He swung one around and got his good arm into its right sleeve. He pulled it as best he could over his battered shoulder and fastened a couple of black-copper buttons at the throat. An officer's cap hung on a hook in the passageway. Nathan went out into the iron vestibule and down the steps.

He had not seen Madelaine since she had helped him to the hill top. The car to which she was attached was far up forward. Nathan had been hurriedly carried into the next to the last coach. He wanted to find Madelaine, however, and thank her. But most of all, he simply wanted to gaze into her face, to see "in a close-up" his Girl of the Window. His stunned brain had not quite assimilated yet that he had found her, far out on the other side of the globe, deep in the lands of the Tartars.

"What the devil are you doing out here?" demanded a sharp voice behind him. Nathan turned to behold one of the surgeons.

"Soaking in sunshine," was his simple response.

"You're supposed to be sick—for another day, at least."

"Sick? Hell! I'm all right. All I needed was sleep. And I guess I got it."

"But, man, you may take cold in those wounds."

"I'll be hanged if I'm going to stay in there and be fed beef tea while the rest of you people enjoy yourselves outside on a day like this!"

"Were you on that smashed train we had to clear off the track?"

"Yes," said Nathan. Briefly he recounted his

experience. Doctors and nurses gathered around as he talked. Madelaine was not among them.

“Fortunes of war!” observed one of the surgeons philosophically, when the terse recital was ended. “Think of all the poor devils who have failed to make their hill tops in time.”

“Can I ever forgot them?” asked Nathan huskily. “I wish I could!”

II

His stiffened limbs ached for action. He begged a cigarette and started northward over the plain.

The air was balmy with a lingering suggestion of Indian Summer. But there was no haze. The flatness of the earth only accentuated the vast arch of the sky. That sky was sharp cobalt. The earth had mellowed to a golden brown, awaiting the snow. And against that combination of cobalt and golden brown, far on ahead, Nathan suddenly saw a furl and flash of deep scarlet, a vivid splash of color as the noon breeze, blowing from the ends of the world, caught the cape of a lone Red Cross nurse and rippled it slightly ahead of her.

She was walking pensively as Nathan came up. She was leaning slightly backward against the breeze. Her loosened hair was blowing about her temples and face. In the crook of her right wrist she carried a book, her forefinger keeping a place in the pages. Soul of the sky and the earth and the wind and the distances, she seemed somehow,—a picture for an artist!

She paused at his step behind her. Nathan paused also. He did not wish to frighten her. The woman

turned. Slowly they inventoried one another, their eyes met.

Twenty-nine years were focussed in that moment.

The man saw his Woman of Vague Dreams before him in reality. She was straight as a Norway pine, exquisitely turned as a Venus de Medici, dark as a Castilian. She was fragile of ankle, strong of thigh, deep of breast, soft of shoulder.

On her finely chiseled and sensitive features lay a slight pallor. Her lips were half-parted. Great brown eyes were faintly startled, inquiring, lucid with an infinite delicacy and tenderness. She was a woman with a big soul! It was all there, on her features.

Madelaine beheld a man ten feet from her, unlike any man she had ever seen. He was a head taller than herself, agile of carriage, cordy of shoulder and bicep, sure of tread, controlled of muscle and nerve. His features were burned to the hue of brick. His gray eye carried as true as a rifle ball. And his mouth!—His lips were classic; every mean and petty thing he had risen above, every heckling trial he had met with infinite patience, every hell he had groped through because he believed that to go on was self-obligation and that somewhere above a sun must be shining gloriously, the whole long chronicle of what he had lived was all concentrated in two cable jaw muscles and the manner in which he closed his lips.

He also had calm eyes—now.

His strong, virile body, war-hardened, was clad in a uniform that indicated no rubber-stamp soldier. His khaki shirt was left loosely open at the throat, disclosing a chest as tough as leather. He wore his cap at a rakish, he-man angle and his forehead wound and bungling shoulder only accentuated his

virility instead of making him clumsy.

The woman slowly viewed his face and his frame. And a queer thrill shot deep and true, far down into the innermost reaches of her being. Here was a *MAN*!

Two pairs of calm eyes met in that moment. Face to face, eye to eye, they looked upon each other and those glances held. Male and female, worthy of each other, made for each other, they met at high noon under an infinite cobalt sky on a spot as level and far-flung as the Tablelands of Eternity. And all around and about them was Sunshine. It had to be in the sunshine, that!

III

The woman was the first to speak.

"Why! You're the soldier who climbed toward me day before yesterday, out of the fog."

Nathan's voice was steady.

"Out of the Fog, yes!" he replied. "And you were the Good Angel who saw me trying to get out of the Fog and came down and helped me to make the Top."

"I suppose we should introduce ourselves, as there's no one apparently to do it for us. I am Madelaine Theddon from Springfield, Massachusetts."

The breeze stopped blowing for a moment. All sounds softened into eternal silence. Even the sunlight waited. Nathan never took his eyes from that cameo face.

"Forge is my name, Miss Theddon," he said. "Nathaniel Forge! I'm from Vermont."

Off over the rim of the world, washed by the crisp whitecaps of a mazarine sea, once was a coral island which no man's chart has ever compassed. There had never been a gray day upon that coral island. The sunlight started there. Deep in its heart were bowered valleys and acres of flowers, and in the vesper hour sweet notes came down the evening silence, played upon reeds. It was the island of Arcadie. And far, far back before the lid of Pandora's Box was opened, loosing its swarm of griefs and troubles upon the world, Everyman dwelt there and in the starlit dark Someone came to him, Someone who was part of himself—and covered him—with the wealth of her hair.

The gods were jealous of those who lived upon that coral island. They destroyed it. And ever since, Everyman has been hunting, hunting, up and down the worlds, for the one who came to him as a Whisper and a bit of Incense, in that dark. Sometimes that search ends beautifully. Nathan was not so far wrong in his youthful poetry after all.

"Forge!" cried the woman. "Nathaniel Forge!"

"Yes," the man answered. He never knew why she spoke his name as she did. He only knew that, gazing deep into her face, he saw the blood die out and an expression come as though she would cry aloud. He knew that she dropped the book and half-raised her arms toward him.

A man's brain may play queer pranks in life's Great Moments. Came to Nathan then some lines he had written long ago, even as it was coming to the woman, intuitively, subconsciously, that both of them, in some far, previous incarnation had met so, had stood so, had spoken so,—long before.

"... the toil and tears we may know, dear heart,
  Must some day reach an end;
Through miles and years we must search sometimes,
  Ten thousand for one friend.
Yet some great noon in the sun-glare bright,
  In some vast, open space,
You'll stand, flesh-clothed, with your arms outstretched,
  And triumph on your face.

"I know few words will be needed then,
  Lament nor name nor plea,
We'll let our eyes speak the message sweet;
  'Grow old along with me!'
The soul of man has a thousand lives,
  Yet Love has only one,
That leaps alive to the Glory Cry:
  'Dear Heart, the trek is done!'"

Nathan had builded better than he ever knew. It was his!—and hers!—that noontime. The trek was done.

Madelaine's eyes were starry, starry as they had never been before in all her days. This copper-hued, clear-eyed, lean-jawed, firm-voiced man was Nathaniel Forge! This was the one who had written a little poem which she had folded away in lavender and old lace and placed in a little casket deep beneath her Inner Shrine, turning piteously from the poignant fantasy that it could possibly have been meant for her.

Romance? What was Romance? *This* was Romance! This was Romance—the height and the depth and the width and the breadth of it—idealism unfathomable—the most beautiful thing in the world.

On a thousand nights in her orphaned heart she had wondered what he could be like, how he could appear, how his voice might sound. But that wonder

had been forcibly sent away, off to the mystic vales behind the sunset where all our little unborn wishes go. Kismet, however, could be kind. This was a world after all in which action and reaction could be equal. There were still rewards and fairies. The man of her little heart-locked romance stood before her in the flesh at last. And he was all that she had ever dreamed a man could be and more.

Yes, it was all there,—all there on his face.

“Let us walk together, you and I,” said Madelaine, when her heart throbbed again and the great cog-wheels of the universe turned once more.

But in the woman’s suggestion lay a far deeper significance than Nathan grasped at the time.

IV

They fell into step and moved off, side by side, across the stubble. The sunshine sang and the breezes rioted. What mattered it that they stood in a land of blood and junk and chaos, with war roaring across the horizons and all the world on fire? There was a cobalt sky above them and the world stretched true into the western Infinite. It was a long way to the horizon, a very long way.

“Miss Theddon,” said Nathan, “life is very queer at times, isn’t it—in some of its coincidences and dénouements, I mean?”

“Yes,” replied Madelaine, scarcely recognizing her own voice. She was trying to credit that this romantically garbed, erect-figured, firm-footed, steady-voiced man by her side was Nathaniel Forge. She felt rather light-headed about it. She did not note just where they were walking. She did not care.

There was a sky and it was blue. There was sunshine and it flooded over them. There was a horizon, and as they walked, it moved even farther away.

“Because, Miss Theddon, this doesn’t happen to be the first time I’ve seen you, I believe, though I dare say you never knew. Some day I’d like to tell you. Not now. Please don’t ask it. But somehow I feel I know you very well, that I’ve always known you.” He laughed lightly. “After all, Massachusetts and Vermont are very close together, aren’t they?”

How could she tell him? Could she tell him? She heard herself speaking, as though she were a third person, listening to the conversation.

“And I feel that I know you too very well indeed. Though I’m not yet quite over the shock of meeting you, away off here in the heart of Asia. You—you wrote a poem once——”

He lost a step in his abrupt surprise. Then he recovered himself.

“While I was seventeen I had a period when I wrote a few rhymes, yes,” he affirmed. “Every fellow does, I fancy. Only some write them worse than others.”

“One of those poems happened into my possession. I found it in a newspaper. It—it—interested me. I kept it. I wondered who you were and—why you should have written such a poem.”

“Which poem was it? I wrote several.”

“I’ll tell you that—some day—when you tell me where you saw me before,” she answered. It was sincerely spoken, not coquetry.

“We find we know one another and we meet out

here! It is almost too much to credit."

On the mellow brown steppe they were two figures silhouetted against the sky, a bronzed man in khaki and a beautiful woman in blue and scarlet. They were walking rather close together.

In the far distance sounded a long-drawn whistle—the east-bound freight. They had to return. But their Amethyst Moment had slipped into Memory!

V

"Look here, Forge," cried a young surgeon angrily, when he came through the train a quarter-hour later, "what the devil did you say to that Theddon girl that she should come back, lock herself in her compartment and shed tears all over the place? The nurses up front are all talking about it."

"Say to her? Tears? Me? Why, I didn't say anything to her. Is she weeping?"

"I said so, didn't I? What the devil's happened, anyhow? Have you ever known her before?"

"From the beginning of the world, old man!"

"You're bughouse!" snapped the doctor. "You haven't come out of the ether. The beginning of the world! Night before last you were seeing stars. You're a nut! Jack, where's that morphine? Give this coot another shot!"

CHAPTER XVI

SYMPATHY

I

Snow began covering Siberia east of Baikal. It seemed as though winter arrived in a night. Still there were many mornings when the high, cold sunshine glinted in a trillion jewels across thin snows of early November and the nipping air was like wine, piercing a world suddenly frozen hard as wood. It was such a morning when the great white train finally moved in off the eastern steppes and began that all-day crawl around the southern and western shores of Baikal, up toward Irkutsk. Sunshine, sunshine! Cobalt blue and sunshine! If Nathan remembered Japan as a land of laughter, he remembered Siberia as a land of Sunlight Glorious. The night in black fog was only a dream, a nightmare, which had slipped in between some flaming sunset and a singing sunrise. And the sunshine glinted now on the far-rolling whitecaps of Baikal as though the water reached up and scooped nets of it from the air and rolled it over into liquid sacks of shimmering green until that imprisoned

sunshine burst and made evanescent foam and swashing water laughter, icy cold.

The train was headed for far Western Siberia, in toward the Ural Mountains—Ufa, Samara and the Volga—where a thin line of valiant, ragged Czechs were stemming the Bolshevik tide eastward. Yet it dropped hospital and medical supplies and occasionally a surgeon, as it went along. It would stay a week in Irkutsk. The only patients it contained to date were unfortunates who had been picked up en route, like Nathan, pro-Ally *soldat* who had escaped from Bolshevik camps or with eyes blinded and tongues pulled out had been turned loose in great Siberia to perish in agony for daring to question the political acumen and sociological sagacity of an ex-anarchist and a Bronx dish-washer.

Crowds gathered quickly at stations where the train stopped,—stolid, smoothly boarded, wooden stations resembling American freight houses in towns of ten thousand inhabitants, stations with queer, Tartar filigree and scroll work decorating the side gables, and all painted a militant mustard yellow. Madelaine beheld what Nathan had been familiar with for over a year. Flat-faced, gray-whiskered peasants in lambskin hats, green blouses, knee-length boots, who might have stepped from the pages of Tolstoi; tall, burly, chinless young men with long sandy mustaches, childlike blue eyes, massive hands, in dark green military caps, ragged civilian coats, calves protected from winter cold by spirals of coarse juting; big-bellied, deep-chested officials who seemed all the same age—around fifty years—in drum-major hats of black lambskin dented at rakish angles, dressed in great overcoats that forever required brushing, and possessing hands that always needed

warming; youths with big legs and small ears, wearing cadet caps, blouses buttoned at the left shoulder, belts with big front buckles resembling closed nickel cigarette cases, long trousers like cotton overalls that bagged at the knees and flopped about each ankle like a sailor's; women with dough-like faces, no breasts, prominent abdomens and raw hands, who wore mannish coats and swathed their heads in brilliant shawls until their features could hardly be discerned; Khirgese desert folk in suits made from undressed skins; shivering Chinese in black cambric, old felt hats and pigtails who tried to eke out a living selling corky cabbages piled in baskets swung at opposite ends of a five-foot pole; ponderous Mongolian Tartars in mountainous ulsters of goatskin and no hats, with their cues wound atop their heads and most of them forever accompanied by a long cattle whip; little children in over-size hats and caps, braving the killing wind in cotton clothing, —strange indeed was the aggregation which gathered miraculously when news of the great "*Americanski*" train permeated each railroad settlement. And all around and about were dogs, hundreds of dogs—half-starved, ravenous, snapping, snarling, wolfish, with wild, greenish eyes—who watched for scraps of garbage and fought over them, the stronger driving off the weaker and leaving them animated creatures of mere skin and bone, to perish of slow starvation.

They reached Irkutsk in the night. Next morning Nathan went off to find the Consul and Hartshorn and report his abortive attempt to get through to Harbin. He was absent all day. It began to snow about four o'clock. Hartshorn entered the office car with a scowl.

"They're holding a dance over-town to-night because of the arrival of all the Red Cross girls," he announced; "a last bust before they go in-country."

"Well," demanded Nathan, "what of it?"

"I'd like to go and I can't. Somebody's got to look after these cars and be here in case the Czechs want anything."

About six o'clock Madelaine accidentally encountered Nathan up the platform of the great marble station.

"I'm not going to-night," he said, in response to her question. "I'm looking after the office car so Hartshorn can go. The poor fellows here haven't had a holiday for months, and my life lately has been pretty much all holidays, especially—the past week."

"I should very much like to see the Red Triangle outfit," said Madelaine.

"And I'd like you to meet some of the Czechs. They're the finest chaps on earth! They call us Y. men the 'Little Uncles from America.'"

"It wouldn't require much persuasion to make me forget they were giving us a dance to-night," said Madelaine softly.

II

The Y. cars serving the Czechs had been permanently shunted off on a western spur, a mile south of the big main station. They were great Manchurian freight cars, sheathed inside and made habitable with doors, windows and stove-pipe chimneys. All of the service and recreational paraphernalia supplied to Red Triangle huts in

France was also supplied to these club cars. There could be no huts in Siberia. There was no trench fighting. Armies maneuvered too swiftly, principally by rail.

Every Czech in every car arose as Madelaine passed through. An American Red Cross nurse! They held their caps in their hands. They were gentlemen, every man of them,—college-bred—lawyers, professors, doctors, artists, high-caste tradesmen. In one car Madelaine halted in astonishment before a painting in oils done upon the boards of the inside wall from materials which came from God-knew-where. It was “The Burning of John Huss,” the great Bohemian patriot, executed with a craft fitting to hang in any art gallery. The graceful young officer in charge spoke English. He laughed deprecatingly.

“Ah, it eese nothing. One man, he paint eet because he have much time and nothing other to do.”

Madelaine and Nathan came finally to the caboose car, Hartshorn’s combination office and living quarters. In addition to the sheet-iron stove and shelf-table were a desk, an oil lamp, a few wooden chairs. Nathan lighted the oil lamp and poked the fire, throwing in several new billets of wood. It was then about half-past eight.

“Let’s sit here and rest and—talk,” begged Madelaine. “The crowd won’t return until midnight or after; there’s no necessity for hurrying back.”

Nathan placed a chair for her so she could dry her damp footwear and skirts. He threw off his coat, for it was bungling and uncomfortable. Madelaine insisted upon it. She insisted, too, that he smoke; she saw the stem of his briar protruding from the breast

pocket of his shirt.

“I know you want to smoke,” she laughed. “A man looks so gloriously comfortable and relaxed when he’s ruminating over his pipe.”

“I can’t fill it,” returned Nathan lamely. “Not with one hand. It’s of no consequence.”

“I’ll fill it for you,” declared the girl. It was not an offer. It was a simple statement.

Nathan surrendered pipe and tobacco tin and she filled his briar. She had no nonsense about it. She did not affect to be coy or awkward, or act as if men who smoked pipes were some type of monster who occasionally devoured women and little girls. She simply filled it and tamped the tobacco down hard and that was the beginning and end of the whole matter. Neither did she act as though either pipe or tobacco should be handled with tongs. She might have been filling men’s pipes for a livelihood since her school days. And when she handed it across, and the pipe was drawing evenly, she made him pull the low box on which he sat over close to the comfortable stove near her feet. Then as Sigurd might have sat at the feet of Brünhilde “with the flames all around them, while she sang him the sacred runes, of war, of pity, of safety, of thought—wise words, sweet words, speech of great game,” so Nathan sat before Madelaine for the first time that night and once more in his life the clocks of time went unwound.

Outside, the snow was now falling heavily, smothering the city, burying them in. It hushed all the sounds of the world. No wind stirred. The flakes were great polls of wool that piled quickly. So it would snow for a week, two weeks, and create the

winter-bound Siberia of old-time story and conception. They were alone, these two, in the heart of great Asia. Alone together! Little else mattered! With one big talon hand wrapped about the briar, a strong forefinger pressing into its bowl from time to time, Nathan leaned forward, half toward Madelaine, half toward the little stove.

They sat in silence for several minutes, a silence so great that Nathan could hear the woman's wrist watch ticking distinctly. Finally Madelaine said:

"You and I have an acquaintance in common, I believe. Bernice Gridley. Isn't that so?"

"You know—Bernie—Gridley?" Nathan forgot to smoke, so great was his surprise.

"We attended the same preparatory school at Mount Hadley, Massachusetts, for a time."

"Then you—you—must be—the 'Springfield friend' with whom she went abroad. That is—I mean—was supposed to go abroad."

It was Madelaine's turn to be startled.

"You know—about Bernice?"

"Her father, Caleb Gridley, is one of the best friends I've ever had. If it hadn't been for old Caleb—God bless him!—I'm afraid I wouldn't have done much with my rhymes—or anything. He's been the only real father I've ever known."

"But how did you know—about Bernice?"

"Her father told me one night. I forget what started it. He was feeling pretty blue over it, although he wouldn't say much. Bernie and I were rather good friends—once."

"What do you mean about Mr. Gridley being the

only real father you've ever known? Isn't your own father living?"

Nathan swallowed with difficulty.

"It's a long story—rather sordid—too long for me to hope to explain."

Madelaine noted the choke in his voice. She studied his well-shaped head and muscular, capable shoulders. Some live cinders had dropped into the stove's open ashpan. They still burned. Those ruddy flames lighted his copper countenance. What a specimen of a man he was!

She loved him. Already she loved him. Deeply.

"Perhaps I understand better than you think," she replied calmly. "I happened to be in Paris, Vermont, one night. I met a queer old philosopher who ran the livery stable—I've forgotten his name. He told me about you—much!"

"You've been in Paris!"

"I remembered—a little poem of yours I had saved—had first appeared in a Paris paper. I stopped off there—to look up the poet. Naturally, I was interested to see what he might be like.—It was a rather unfortunate time. You had recently suffered a serious business setback. I decided to postpone my good wishes until a more appropriate occasion."

"What night was it? Tell me frankly. Was it while they had me—locked up?"

He was so candid that his question demanded an answer equally candid.

"Yes," she replied. Then after a time she leaned forward. "My dear boy," she said softly, seriously, "you've kept things inside yourself, repressed and

unvoiced so long, you've done yourself an injury. Why not tell me all about them? Won't you believe I'd like to be your friend?"

"It's a long story," he repeated. "It's the story of almost my entire life. And nobody wants to hear that!"

"I want to hear 'that.' And there is much time—before midnight."

Then, as New England would express it, "one word led to another", and before many minutes had passed Madelaine Theddon was adroitly drawing from Nathan all the hot, hard story of his sordid, perverted, mediocre past. He scarcely realized the girl was thus intriguing him. A great, relieving freedom lifted him, gave him one long, wide-open opportunity to unburden his tired heart. At times his voice broke with the stress of it.

He began where all good stories should begin, at the beginning. He did not boast and he did not depreciate. He took no undue credit for himself and he made no maudlin, insipid bid for compassion. He did not spare himself and he did not spare others. He hewed a straight, simple, naked narrative of fact and experience—and let the chips of blame or censure clutter where and whom they would.

The green billets burned lazily in the little stove. The smoke from Nathan's briar curled upward and after shaping into sweeter pictures of the future than it could ever make of the past, it wafted out a slightly lowered window at the back.

And Madelaine listened. She was one of those big women whose ability to listen is part of her birthright—her maternal heritage. When Nathan spoke frankly and fearlessly of his experience with

Carol, and why the Gardner girl had returned to Ohio, she interrupted for the first time.

“But couldn’t she see it was because of your great, clean love for her that you couldn’t soil that love with anything sordid? Wasn’t she big enough to realize you didn’t want your idol to have feet of clay of your own modeling?”

Nathan sighed and shrugged his shoulders. He made no comment.

Then he told of his life with Milly, the cheapness, the shallowness, the depression and handicap of it. He told of the petty bickerings and the reasons for them; the hideous, mediocre, unsatisfying slovenliness of her home while he hungered bitterly for beautiful things without knowing how to satisfy that hunger. He told the incident of the repainted Victrola as an illustration of six discouraging years. He could afford to laugh at it now. He did laugh. But Madelaine did not laugh. She was very close to tears.

When he came to the incident where old Caleb had brought the pink rosebuds to the child’s funeral and then read Nathan the Twenty-third Psalm in the hotel afterward, Madelaine laughed, strange as the statement may sound. But it was not in mirth. It was to counteract the tears which had brimmed over. She smeared them away with her naked fingers, not bothering to draw out her handkerchief.

Nathan told of his business struggle with his father; the neurotic extravagances of his mother; the death of Milly after her liaison with Plumb. Then he came to that night in Chicago when he had visited Bernie and had acid poured on his quivering flesh because of his infirmities. Madelaine paled a moment. Then righteous anger flooded her face.

"And Bernie said any such thing? Acted in any such way? Twitted you for things you could not help? I'd like to pull her ears!"

No woman had ever declared before that she would like to pull any one's ears in Nathan's behalf. It was a new experience for the lonely man and it overwhelmed him. Especially when Madelaine went on:

"I don't think your hands are homely. I've watched your hands ever since we met. I think they're the strongest, most virile hands I've ever seen upon a man. If I were in deep trouble, unable to protect myself, I should very much like to have hands like yours clenched into pile-driver fists, striking blows in my behalf! That for Bernie! She's absolutely heartless and a little vulgarian herself, beside. I think she's horrid. Oh, you poor boy! You haven't mentioned a single girl or woman who's come into your life or gone out of it who's been anything but a heartache and a handicap. Hasn't there been one, Nathan—not one?" It was the first time she had called him Nathan. But it was spoken too naturally to be crude or forward.

"I've told you the whole story," said the man simply, thickly.

He put out his hand in a gesture, that old, old habitual groping motion, as though feeling for some one or something by his side. But now, for the first time in his life, that hand did not grope fruitlessly. It grasped a woman's hand, soft, strong, human, electric in that contact!

"I beg your pardon," he cried, startled.

"There's no need for begging my pardon, dear boy. Somehow I feel you and I are going to be rather good

friends. Some other night I'll return your confidence by telling you my story. But to-night belongs to you." She waited a moment and asked:

"And you never did any more with your talent for writing after your father stopped you?"

"I couldn't. I never had the heart. Mr. Hod, editor of the local paper, hurt my feelings one night by telling me he couldn't print any more of my rhymes until I'd stopped a certain wail and—and—well—he said I ought to sing! But I couldn't sing. There was no song in my heart. I gave up the poetry nonsense for good."

"No! Not for good. You will write again, finer things. You will learn to sing. I feel certain of it; you will learn to sing!"

Nathan laid his pipe aside and sat with his big talon claws at his right temple to hide the emotions playing over his face. As he seemed disposed to silence, Madelaine continued:

"It's almost too much to understand, dear boy—how you've stood out true to yourself and your ideals against such a background. Most boys would have succumbed. But you kept the faith with yourself. That was glorious. Such a constancy makes me want to sing. There are so few who keep the faith and go on, plow on—fight on!—through everything!"

"I haven't done anything yet," was Nathan's answer, "not anything that really counts. I've felt as though I were waiting to get my fundamentals straight, my feet on firm ground. Then I'd really go on. Then I'd really plow ahead. Then I'd fight in earnest! When I've won, maybe I'll sing again. Yes—perhaps!"

The heart-cry beneath his brave optimism and blind faith in the Ultimate Good was not lost on the girl. Lost on her? It surcharged her, overpowered her, surfeited through her and under her and about her till her calm eyes glowed starry again. It was like him. He would say it. She knew it years before—expected it.

And Bernie had made her believe that this man was a provincial, a "hick," impossible! Poor Bernie! She had wanted a man who could wear a monocle without looking silly or lead a cotillion. And he was so big that little tinsel-worshiping Bernie couldn't see him. So she struck him, scarred him, wounded him without knowing, discounting all Gentlewomen by her narrowness.

What this man needed was simple, pitifully simple. He needed some one in his life with the capacity to love greatly. All else would follow as a matter of normal dénouement.

"Dear boy," she said huskily, "relax! Don't worry any longer. Let all the past and pressure ease away. Let's even forget that you're a man and I'm a woman. Let's see if we can't just be good friends for a time—and help each other. You have nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide, nothing to worry over, nothing to hold you or handicap you any more. You have courage. You have strength. You have inherent ability. You have hunger for beauty and divine discontent which the world needs more of. You have that great, indefinable, invaluable thing which the world calls Personality—your greatest asset! All life lies ahead of you. It's flooded with color and sunshine. And you're 'leaping as a strong man to run a race.' Wonderful! Start that race! Start for the Higher Hill Top. You can do it. All you need is some

one to believe in you. Well, maybe there are far more people believing in you than you've ever dreamed. Keep the faith with them, even as you've kept it so far with yourself. Be true to your high calling wherewith you were called. Everything which has gone before has been Education. You have reached Commencement now. Ahead lies the world—the Battlefield! Go in with your Strongheart singing. Oh, dear boy, you deserve it so! I know you deserve it—the spoil—and the Hill Top!"

"God!" cried Nathan. He spoke the holy word in a way that kept it holy. A woman telling him this!

There was a pain like a knife-thrust in the back of his throat. He sat like a man turned to stone, scarcely daring to move. But he did move. He turned his face and looked up into—calm eyes. Calm eyes? But starry eyes too. They could be both. Verily they could be both.

With the self-assurance of the wise nurse—the woman of medicine perhaps at the moment—who knew what her patient needed more than all else for swift recovery—Madelaine gently drew Nathan toward her. She opened her lap.

Nathan's face went down into that lap. That strong face was awash with hot, hard, terrible man-tears, though all the girl saw was a slight, intermittent, noiseless contraction of his broad shoulders.

But his one good talon hand stole out—halfway around her waist. A grip of iron!

It was the end of the trek for Nathan. In that simple privilege, that soft lap, those cool, gentle hands that stroked his hair, the soothing touch on his bowed back, the whispered words of comfort and incentive, the lad came to know at last the great,

indefinable, unfathomable solace of a loving woman's ministering tenderness. He did not want a mate—not then. He wanted only a mother. And he got a mother. He got a mother-spirit glorious. Richly it was his, for the taking; how richly he never dreamed at the time. There was no less respect nor mate-love for Nathan on the girl's part in that moment, because he wanted the mother in her. If he had not wanted it, she would have been disappointed. Other things would come afterward—perhaps—after he had found himself, satiated his starved, emaciated soul with her gentle sympathy and wisdom of his need.

It was a strange scene to occur far in the empire of the ill-fated Romanoffs. New England was twelve thousand miles removed at that moment. And yet at the ends of the earth these two who needed each other so greatly had found Arcadie. And all was well!

Heavier and thicker fell the snow outside. All sounds were muffled. The world was shut out. The odorous oil lamp sputtered fussily—a perturbed chaperone. Pleasant crackling of flame leaped now and then in the little stove. Yet the war had been fought for this moment. Years before, this tiny car had left the Moscow shops for this moment. It had been drawn to Irkutsk and left precisely here for this moment. All things on earth had moved forward and existed down to and for this moment. And Nathan felt that whatever happened now, life from this moment would never be the same again—not quite the same.

In his life there was now a *Woman*!

CHAPTER XVII

ENTANGLING ALLIANCES

I

It was cherry-blossom time in Japan.

Not only had the war ended in precisely the way the war should end, but Nathan and Madelaine had lived through that horrible winter of 1918-1919 in the typhus pest house that was Siberia and come through unscathed.

It had been an overwhelming revelation to Nathan of the woman he was growing to love with all the untwisted, unleashed, latent forces that were best within him during the horror days of that winter. Cool, poised, positive, Madelaine had never flinched, never complained, never shirked the most terrible and revolting of situations. For two months she had lain down to sleep each night in a medical train side-tracked but fifty feet from carloads of frozen corpses piled like billets of wood on freight trains in the forty-below-zero weather, waiting wholesale interment far outside the city in the spring.

Nathan had been obliged to leave her in January.

The central Siberian Government at Omsk had fallen. The Czechs were departing for home. Steadily and deadly, the bloody hand of the Lenine Government was reaching out for crazed jurisdiction over all the Russias. Nathan made the long trip out to Vladivostok and remained there helping to wind up the post-war activities of the Red Triangle. Then he went down to Japan. From January to the last of April he did not hear from the girl, and there were nights when fear that she had succumbed to the typhus tortured him so that the furrows in his cheeks and forehead were like saber scars.

But the nightmare ended. He had gone down to Tsuruga to meet her. A typhoon had churned the Japan Sea to a two-day fury. She had been ill. With a stab of compassion Nathan beheld how weak and spent she was. They dined in the little European restaurant on the second floor of the ticket building at the length of the wharf.

“And you succeeded in getting sailings?” asked Madelaine.

“On the *Siberia Maru* for the twenty-first. We’ve almost ten days to rest and look around Japan. I’m sorry you look so tired. You need the holiday!”

“How glorious it will be to get back to God’s country,” the girl returned, “where there’s law and order and cleanliness and decency. Where you can address a stranger on the street,” she laughed, “and have him understand you at once!”

After lunch they had taken *kurumas* across Tsuruga City to the station where the train was being made up for Yokohama. Gradually Madelaine recovered her buoyancy of heart, shutting away thought of the Siberian horror which no panacea in the world but

time could cure. In fact, there were periods in the reaction when she was almost childish in her effort to live now only for the present and the future. All that day they had followed the great northern sweep of the Inland Sea whose colors and vistas were like a painting on a Japanese screen. They had reached Yokohama at seven o'clock.

They were like lovers on their honeymoon already. They changed into civilian clothes. In the next few days they visited Tokio, Nikko, Fujiyama, the Great Buddha and Torii at Kamakura.

It was cherry-blossom time now in Japan. And in cherry-blossom time in Japan came that night when Nathan asked the Girl-Without-a-Name to take his own and be his wife.

II

He had not meant to ask her to be his wife, not then. But the night before they sailed he had gone with her on a last walk about Yokohama, their final contact with the quaint, droll, beautiful empire of cloisonné, and iris, of weird distances and romantic shrines, of—well, just Japan.

It was a moonlit, lazy-warm May evening. They sank down to rest finally in the little park opposite the International Y. M. C. A. The great treaty port was hushed, that fantastic, pregnant, unreal hush which permeates all Nipponese cities by night, even though they know little clash of traffic by day. The hour was late. The park was deserted. Street lamps had been extinguished; the moonlight made them superfluous. The exotic shrubbery, the great yellow moon peeping over the top of a gigantic pepper-tree, the sharp, intermittent cleek of the cicadas and other

night insects singing out of tune around them, now and then the light of a pink-paper lantern bobbing along on the shafts of a distant rickshaw turned that park into a Garden of Dreams.

Madelaine was clothed in a white frock, white pumps; she carried a white parasol splashed over with quaint figures in pink. Nathan wore pongee and a Panama. They had fallen into talk about the future; what each expected to do when they reached home. They sank down upon a wooden bench just off the main pathway and Nathan drew aimless marks in the powdered trap-rock with his stick.

“I suppose I should go on with my medical studies,” Madelaine observed. “But somehow—oh, dear!—they seem so colorless and prosaic now, after what has happened in Siberia. I feel I have paid my debt there. Oh, laddie, my whole life has changed so! Things that I thought so great and vital have shrunken to such inconsequence. And others which have been only vague instincts and intuitions seem to matter more than all else in the world—even its sufferings just now. I don’t believe I can explain it so you’d understand.”

But Nathan did understand.

“Madelaine,” he said slowly after a time, “I received a letter from Ted Thorne about a month ago; he’s my sales manager who sent me out here in the first place. Mosely, manager of our New York office, was killed in France. The man who took his place can’t handle the work. Ted has offered it to me. It carries ten thousand a year, now. You remember me telling you how I expected the position once, but felt I lost caste at Mrs. Mosely’s dinner party? Well, I’d like to go to New York now and try again. But—but——”

"You have a ten-thousand dollar position awaiting you? How perfectly splendid!"

"Madelaine, I can't go back to what I left—the emptiness, the petty troubles with petty people, the groping around blindly for social cues, the—the—loneliness, Madelaine! I can't go back to half-a-life again. Despite all the horrors of war, I've been happy out here!—I've found happiness out here. I want it to stay. It must stay! I can't go down into the Fog. Not again. I feel I've gained a little hilltop. I mustn't lose even that partial height. I can't."

"Nathan," came the girl's whisper, "do you know what you want?"

Did he know? The poet in Nathan spoke then.

"Yes," he cried hoarsely. "I want to go on. I want to leave sordid mediocrity behind me forever. I want fine, rare, delicate, beautiful things about me. I want to live in an atmosphere of them and a home of them. I want to feed my heart and my soul upon them. I want to make them a part of me. I want to gain from life every last iota of artistry and softness and richness it has to give. I want to do my work with a song in my heart. I want every hour a golden moment and time just something to pass away. I want money and opportunity to indulge that deep and vital impulse that once prompted me to express myself in rhyme. Do I know what I want? You ask me that! Yes, I know what I want! I want all of these things. Not to imitate somebody else or because I was once a poor, distraught young colt working in an abattoir for a dollar a day. Not that! But for the sake of beautiful things and one hundred per cent. living in itself—because beauty is—next to godliness! Yes, it is! But there's something I want more than all of that, Madelaine. I want the woman I first saw above

me on a Hill Top, standing in glorious sunshine looking off across a far country. I want the good angel who saw me wounded and exhausted, struggling up from low-lying Fog, and came down to me and gave me her strength to make the Summit. I want the woman who listened to my foolish, pent-up heartache that winter's night in far-away Irkutsk and opened her lap and told me that nothing else mattered except lack of belief in myself. I want the woman who's been patient and ministering and inspiring in a thousand hours since—to go home with me, Madelaine—to dwell with me—in a Palace Beautiful, dear girl—whose windows look out upon Delectable Mountains. I want you, dear Madelaine! And my heart is filled with such rich, mellowed love for you that it chokes my throat. You stand for all of the things I've totaled, dear girl. You're the best and biggest thing that's ever come into my life. I want you—and I want you terribly!"

A pause. An insect cheeping somewhere under boxwood.

"Then why don't you take me, foolish boy?" Woman Beautiful laughed softly.

Hushed Japanese night, the moon riding hazily above the rakish branches of eucalyptus now, cicadas singing on into eternity, paper lanterns bobbing far across elfin dark! They stood amid the trillion blossoms of cherry trees whose petals sifted all around them, and Nathan knew for the first time in twenty-nine barren, heart-breaking years, the sensation of a real woman's soft arms about his neck and the sweet, scented, delicate impress of a real woman's kiss upon his lips, returning his caress with a warmth and a tenderness that fused his heart and his soul and made them as one forever.

The white parasol was lying on the bench. No one was left in the park but themselves. The moonlight was again shining into a woman's face as they stood there for an instant and Nathan held her close. But she was not weakly flaccid in his embrace. Her body thrilled to his.

"Dear lad," she said in a faint whisper, "I've waited a dreary time for your strong arms around me and your hard-shaven cheek close to mine. Oh, I don't mean merely since the Great Noon-time in Siberia. Years before that, dear lad, years and years! Sunlit days, gray days, rainy afternoons, empty twilights, nights when I wanted to sob in the darkness—I thought of you and wondered where you were, and what you were doing, and if in your heart there was a little lonely ache likewise. I wondered how badly you needed me, dear lad, even as I needed you. For my heart ached for Romance, too, until it almost seemed I'd accept my disappointment and believe it had passed me by. But God is good. You're getting only a little orphaned girl, dear lad, found under a haycock on the edge of a wood. But she loves you—loves you a bit terribly—she has always loved you—loved you even before she knew your name, or where you were, or what the sound of your voice was like. You are her life and her world henceforth. She, too, has found her Other Half and her heart will never greet the sunshine coming across the hill tops in the morning without a song springing to her lips and tears to her eyes. It has been a bitter wait, dear lad, and the way has not always seemed clear. But the end of the trek—it is sweet, very sweet. We will go back, we will go home. And all the beautiful things you have wanted, that I can help you get—they shall come to you. All the artistry and softness and richness I can help bring to you shall surround

you. You shall do your work with a song in your heart also. Every hour *shall* be a golden moment. Time *shall* be a thing only to pass away. Oh, Nathan dear, I'm the happiest of women. We'll go home with the morrow. Together we will go home and dwell—in a Palace Beautiful—whose windows look out on Delectable Mountains, indeed!"

"To-morrow—at two o'clock—*home*!"

"Home!" she repeated. "Oh, Nathan!"

III

During that night before their departure, clouds blew in from the Pacific and blanketed the sea-coast country. They awoke the next morning to find a light drizzle falling. But it held up after breakfast and Madelaine declared, as she turned in her room keys:

"I've several purchases to make before we go on board. Let's go penny-shopping together."

They went out the west door of The Grand, brushing aside the eager, solicitous kuruma men and turned northward along the back street afoot. Madelaine wore a traveling suit of gray worsted, the short skirt permitting a light, easy stride. Her head was covered with a mannish hat of black velour, half the brim turned down. She cared little for the wet.

They picked their way through greasy streets, but always when it was necessary for the woman to walk ahead, the man's eyes followed her hungrily. Would he never become weary of simply gazing upon her? The sheer grace and delicacy of her every curve and line; her erect, supple carriage; her frank, fearless, appraising eyes; her perfect poise, regardless of the situation; the ephemeral expressions which played

upon her cameo features; the neatness of her hair at the back of her neck; what a thoroughbred she was to her finger tips!

They made many little purchases in stores and curio shops. Nathan could not buy her the diamond he wanted until they reached America; his funds were too low and he had no time to draw on home for more. Her diamond must wait until they reached New York. But it would be a—*diamond*!

They were gradually wending their way toward the Oriental Steamship wharf when a window of carved ivory curios caught Nathan's fancy.

"Let's go in and look them over," Madelaine suggested. "We've still four hours to spend somehow before sailing."

They went inside. The shop was arranged European style, deep showcases running along either side of the back. The proprietor laid out several trays and cases for their inspection. Then a Japanese boy came and jabbered at him.

"You excuse," the proprietor grinned. "I send Angleese man sell you," and he went to a door opening into a sort of workshop and called in an order.

The "English" clerk came forward, along behind the counter. Nathan's head was bent close to Madelaine's, examining an ingenious carving. Nathan turned to the clerk and held it out, his eyes still on it.

"What's the price of this?" he asked. As he asked it, he raised his eyes to the clerk's face.

He was looking directly into the features of his father.

IV

His father!

Separated by the width of the show case whose edges both gripped suddenly. Nathan and Johnathan gazed into each other's suddenly ashen faces.

"You!" cried Johnathan. "You! My—son!"

Johnathan had grown stouter but he had aged twenty years. Remorse, loneliness, self-pity and the ever-present realization that he was an exile had eaten into his features like acid. Both temples were white but it was a weak, rusted, moth-eaten whiteness. His eyes were more watery than ever and his mouth as loose, excepting for the petulant knots of muscles in each corner.

"Father!" the boy gasped huskily.

Madelaine frowned, then looked on wide-eyed. From his son's bronzed, muscular face, Johnathan's gaze leaped to Madelaine's, then back again. Ivory carvings were forgotten.

"What—are you—doing—out here?"

"I'm on my way back home from Russia," Nathan answered mechanically. His mind was still stunned with the drama of it.

"You have—been—to—Russia?"

"Siberia! Yes! I've been up there almost a year and a half, working among the Czechs."

Johnathan's body had not moved. Only his eyes and face. Again the father's eyes sought Madelaine.

"Up in Siberia? Alone?"

"Yes. But I'm not going back alone. This is a very

dear friend of mine. Madelaine, apparently I can introduce my father. Father, this is Miss Theddon. She is—going to be—my wife."

"Your—*wife*? What's become of——"

"Of Mildred? She died some time ago."

"My God!" cried Johnathan weakly. He rubbed the back of a puffy hand across his forehead. Down back of the counter he moved unsteadily to reach the intersection where he could come out from behind the cases. He had not acknowledged Madelaine or the introduction, by the way. It was a distressing moment for Madelaine but she recovered as Johnathan came up.

"I'm sure I'm delighted to meet Nathan's father," she said.

Johnathan gave her a slight nod and turned at once to his son. In so far as he was concerned, she might have been marooned on a ring around Saturn.

The tears were streaking down Johnathan's face. He raised his hands and gripped the boy by his elbows.

"How long have you been in Yokohama?" he cried hoarsely.

"Ten days. But I lived here three months before I went to Siberia."

"And you never looked me up!"

"I tried hard enough. But nobody knew any Johnathan Forge——"

Johnathan started at the pronouncement of his name. He shot a frightened glance around.

"My name is Smith!" he cried—"John Smith!"

"I couldn't know that, of course," returned Nathan dryly. He was beginning to recover from the shock of the encounter.

"You must come with me!" declared the father. "You must tell me all about Paris and—home. I will find a place for you to——"

"I'm sorry, father. But Miss Theddon and I are sailing for San Francisco at two o'clock."

"Not to-day!"

"To-day, yes."

"But—but—we've only just found each other."

"That's lamentable, of course. But I can't help——"

"You must put off your sailing." Johnathan said it as though he had settled the entire matter.

Nathan shook his head.

"Sorry, father," he answered. "It's impossible! We've been lucky enough to secure immediate passage, and we must get back. Miss Theddon is not in the best of health and I've got a New York job waiting that can't go begging another moment."

"My Lord! You're not going to run after we've just found each other! Not that, Natie, not that!"

"I'm not running. But I've been away from home a year and a half and we're expected back June first without fail."

Johnathan looked around frantically, desperately.

"No," he said after a time. "I don't suppose you would stay, not for me! I never cut much of a figure in your life, anyhow, did I, Nathan? You and your plans never took much account of your father, did they? Maybe if they had, I'd never have left home in

the first place." Again Johnathan smeared the back of his hand across his forehead. He turned to Madelaine. "For twenty-five years it was just like this!" he told her. "And you see what it's done to me." He submitted himself abjectly for general compassion and sympathy. Madelaine's voice was courteous enough but a bit icy as she responded:

"Your son has told me the whole story, Mr. Forge. I understand perfectly."

Johnathan was pitying himself too much in this closing phase of his domestic drama to interpret her sentiment correctly. He assumed that Madelaine was sympathizing with him against Nathan.

"He always was headstrong," began Johnathan promptly. "Went right along demanding his own way even as a beardless boy that couldn't——"

"Pardon, Mr. Forge. You misunderstood. I said your son has told me the whole story and therefore I recognize exactly where the blame lies."

Johnathan gaped for a moment. There was no mistaking her calm hostility. He turned to his son.

"Nathan!—For God's sake, don't go!—Don't desert me now when I've just found you again. I never deserted you, Nathan; for twenty-five years I did my duty——"

It was awkward to have his father suddenly begin to act so. Other customers had entered the shop and were beholding. Madelaine read on her lover's face the distress he was seeking a way to ameliorate, somehow. Her indignation rose.

"Really, Mr. Forge, is it quite fair to appeal to Nathan so? Because I've been under the impression you did desert him—and left him to face a somewhat

cruel set of circumstances."

"What do you know about it?" snapped Johnathan. "You're a stranger to us Forges——"

"*Father!* That'll be enough of addressing Miss Theddon so, please! And I suggest we find a place less public where we may talk."

"Yes, yes!" agreed Johnathan. "The back office here. They'll leave us alone. Come into the back office, Natie."

Nathan glanced at Madelaine. She nodded. They moved toward the back office.

"Your woman friend will excuse us," suggested the father curtly. "We have much to talk over in private, Nathan."

"Oh, no," responded the son. "I don't care to discuss anything I do not wish Miss Theddon to hear." And Nathan stood aside for Madelaine to precede him into the cluttered little workshop. Johnathan was not so courteous.

Johnathan, in fact, was piqued. In Madelaine he sensed an adversary. Immediately he took no care to keep concealed his estimate of her, of all women. They seated themselves, a smile of grim humor lurking about Madelaine's pretty mouth.

"First you will cancel your passage," began Johnathan doggedly. "You must promise me, Nathan! Remember, you'll never have but one father."

"I cannot and will not delay our sailing, father." Nat's voice was kind but firm. "Now that's settled, what about home do you especially wish to know?"

Johnathan produced a soiled handkerchief and

blew his nose. But he saw that because of the influence of a “female” undoubtedly, the son was the same adamant, bigoted colt he had always been.

“You might tell me about yourself,” he said lamely, petulantly. “You had a wonderful little wife, Nathan. What happened to her?” Johnathan said this for Madelaine. And he did not miss the pallor which took the humorous lip-smile from the girl’s features as he said it. He had a way to wound the girl, perhaps drive a wedge between her and his boy. “And your child, Natie! Little Mary was one of the sweetest tots I ever saw. What became of her?”

“She was killed by a truck a year before Milly died,” was the son’s rejoinder. He said it stiffly. He wondered—if his father was to be deliberately mean—if it might not have been better after all to ask Madelaine to wait until the visit was ended.

“That’s hard, Natie. It must have been awful; you thought so much of her. And Milly? I always loved Milly. She was such a wonderful little woman and did so much for you. I remember she was the only one who stuck by us in the factory the time you had that trouble with the help and they all walked out on you.”

“Milly was untrue to me,” returned Nathan with continued stiffness. “She ran away with that Plumb fellow and was killed—when a munitions plant exploded in Russellville, New Jersey.”

Johnathan assimilated this after a time. He murmured philosophically, “The ways of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. Blessed be the name of the Lord!”

Nathan grimaced.

"What else do you wish to know, father?" he asked —and waited.

"And now you're plunging into matrimony again *so* quick! I don't see how you can do it, Natie—out of respect to Milly's memory if nothing else."

Nathan kept his temper admirably. He could apologize to Madelaine for the insult afterward—an entire lifetime of apology.

"I owe Milly nothing. I told you she ran away with Plumb. Anyway, we won't talk about that. You're only dwelling upon it because you see it annoys Miss Theddon. What other information can I give you?"

Johnathan's manner changed.

"How about your mother?" he demanded like a challenge.

"Mother had a bitter time after you left us. She sold the Longstreet house but a smooth oil-stock salesman cheated her out of the money. At present she's living with Edith."

Johnathan turned to Madelaine.

"And among the things my son has told you," he demanded, "did he include, perhaps, an account of the twenty-five years of hell I lived with his mother? For twenty-five years she was my trial and my cross. I couldn't stand it finally. I had to get out. There was no other escape but flight. Human flesh and blood couldn't stand it, I tell you! Wait till you get to know her. Then you'll sympathize with me. There's righteousness and justice in this world somewhere and the wicked get their deserts."

Madelaine made no comment. The pause which ensued angered Johnathan.

“From the very night I was married,” he went on in a trifle higher tone, “the tussle began. Never once did she try to help me or stand back of me in my battle with the world. She nagged me and she fought me. She——”

“Possibly, Mr. Forge,” interrupted Madelaine. “But why tell me about it?”

“You’re marrying into the family, ain’t you? There’s—things—which you should know.”

“I’m merely marrying Nathan,” responded Madelaine.

The interview was going badly. Great tears continued to roll down Johnathan’s face and he blew his nose again and again.

“What business are you in, Natie?” he finally asked. He was an injured man. There was not a doubt about it. All the world had it in for him.

“I secured a position with the Thorne knitting mills,” returned Nathan. “I traveled for them a year and a half. Then they sent me out here to the Orient. I’m going back as manager of their New York office.”

“Well, Natie, you have your father to thank for that! If it hadn’t been for the business training I gave you, no firms would ever be offering you any New York managements at your age. Why, when I was your age I was lucky to draw twelve dollars a week. We worked for our money in those days.”

Nathan finally felt it time to put a few inquiries himself.

“How does it happen you’re working here, father? Money give out?”

Johnathan turned quickly and looked through the

window into a dismal yard.

“The curse of us Forges, Natie,” he finally responded, “has always been women. You’ll learn it one of these days!”

“How does it happen you’re working here? Money give out?” Nathan repeated.

“I started to tell you, if you’ll be respectful and wait a moment. Don’t be so hot-headed. Hot-headedness and lack of respect always were your faults, Natie!”

Nathan waited as patiently as possible.

“I came out here,” Johnathan went on, “seeking love and surcease from all I’d suffered. I met a woman. I thought she was in every way a woman to be desired, Nathan. I married her——”

“You married her! You were never divorced from mother!”

“Oh, yes, I was! Do you think I’m a bigamist? I got a divorce from your mother under the Japanese laws ——”

“Mother never knew about it.”

“I can’t help that.”

“The divorce laws of Japan, Nathan,” explained Madelaine with a faint smile, “are very simple. When a man grows tired of his wife in Japan he may dispense with her by merely walking out and leaving her, first informing the police to that effect, I believe. Then he contracts a new marriage by going to live with his paramour and duly informing the police to that effect also, giving his new residence. One of the Y. W. C. A. girls explained it to me.”

Johnathan ignored Madelaine. He went on:

"I got a divorce from your mother under the laws of Japan. I married what I supposed was a woman who'd be the wife I deserved—after all I'd been through back in the States. But she was like all women. I lived with her just two days. I was fool enough to intrust my bank account to her. The third day she was missing and so was the money. I've never got trace of either, since. I had to take a job."

Nathan flushed again with the new insult to Madelaine. But for an instant his anger was arrested by the announcement that his father had been flimflammed by an adventuress.

"Edith has six children now," he essayed, after a painful moment.

But Johnathan was not interested in the fact that Edith had six children. He went on in the same whine:

"I'm living from hand to mouth, Natie. I've been here the last three years—waiting on trade, interpreting for my employers because I learned how to speak a little Japanese. Think of it, Natie—waiting on trade for a godless heathen—me!"

"Under the circumstances it ought to be a very good position," observed the son.

The visit continued in this strain until noontime. Then they went out together to a small restaurant and had tiffin. Johnathan managed to get Nathan alone.

"Son," he cried brokenly, "you must loan me some money. I'm at the end of my rope. Some days I think there's nothing left but to jump in the Bay."

"How much money do you need?"

“All you can spare me,” was Johnathan’s modest request.

“I’m low on funds, father. I’ve got just about enough to get me back to Vermont. I wanted to buy Miss Theddon a diamond but have had to wait until ____”

“Could you let me have a thousand yen, say? That’s only five hundred and ten dollars!—in cash!”

“It’s out of the question, just now. I’ve only a hundred and eighty dollars with me and my passage across America will use up a hundred of that.”

Ultimately Nathan gave his father twenty-five dollars,—fifty-five ten-yen notes. Johnathan took them rather sourly. He placed more stock in the money Nathan promised to wire when he reached Vermont.

“Oh, my boy, my boy! What are you doing?” he next cried, anent Madelaine. “You’re fortunate enough for your first wife to die on you. Straightaway you go putting your head in the halter again! After all I tried to save you from! After all your father’s example! Oh, well! You deserve nothing but the misery coming to you! This is a just world!”

“Let’s not talk about Miss Theddon, father. She’s the sort of lady I’m afraid you wouldn’t understand.”

“Wouldn’t I, though? Don’t try to tell me there’s any kind of female I don’t understand! I’m older than you and therefore must know better. And never mind how many miles of land and water separate us, young man, remember I am always your father. I am always your father!”

“Just what has that to do with an understanding of womanhood?” asked Nathan quietly. The old, old

feeling of groping in a fog the moment he came in contact with his father came over him. He wanted to fight it savagely.

"Just you wait till you're married to her a spell—long enough for the 'new' to wear off! You'll see! You think she's fine and grand now, just because she's got a pretty face! But you wait! You'll be sorry not taking your wise father's advice. Just as you did once before. Wait till you see her running around in broken corsets or dirty underclothes——"

"Father, you're disgusting. Please change the subject!"

"You can't tell me nothing about women, young man! Didn't I live twenty-five years with one! They're all alike! And ninety-nine per cent. of 'em are bad—bad clean through to the spleen. But I'll pray for you, my son—I'll never cease praying for you!"

V

The *Siberia Maru* was prompt in casting off. Johnathan grew a bit abusive, then hysterical, as the hour drew near for departure. He clutched his boy as though he would hold him by force. Nathan waited until the last moment. Then he turned and extended his hand.

"Good-by, father," he said.

Johnathan's face resembled the hue of a drowned corpse when he said good-by in a whisper. Nathan hurried aboard. Hatches were being battened down, winches fastened, the gangplank raised, as he found Madelaine by the rail high on the promenade deck. Side by side they leaned over and watched the crowd

below. In that crowd Nathan finally located his father's upturned face.

Madelaine started to say something sympathetic to her lover, but the three-minute blast of the vessel's departing whistle drowned out her voice.

Slowly the liner backed from her little stall in the great port. A steam tug at her prow turned her southward.

Nathan lost his father's figure in the crowd, then found him again.

Johnathan was using his handkerchief alternately to smear his face and then wave the little flash of white as bravely as he could.

"Have I done right by him, Madelaine?" begged the son brokenly. "For heaven's sake, tell me if I've erred?"

"You have not erred, Nathan. This is a world in which our sins punish themselves—always."

Nathan looked back as the ship's great engine-beat started, a throbbing which would not cease until they paused in Honolulu harbor, ten days later.

A lone figure was on the farthest point of the dock. A tiny white kerchief was rising and falling weakly. Then an incoming liner hid it from sight.

CHAPTER XVIII

EAST IS WEST

I

That journey homeward!

The backlash of a typhoon blown up from the China Sea made rough sailing the first two days of the voyage. Passengers kept to their staterooms. But the third evening Madelaine dressed for dinner.

She had a dinner gown in her trunk which had reposed in the Tokio Y. W. C. A. during her absence in Siberia. When she joined Nathan in the passageway after her toilet was complete, the man failed to recognize her for an instant. She actually had to speak to him as she approached. Then a thrill shot through him at sight of her loveliness that burned to the roots of his hair.

She was a sensation as she preceded her lover through the crowded saloon a moment later.

"*'Sst!* Get onto the peach!" Nathan overheard a little undersized Hebrew whisper swiftly to a fellow diner as he and Madelaine passed one of the door tables.

They walked afterward on the upper deck in the mellow starlit darkness, a light scarf about the girl's bare shoulders. Those stars hung very luminous and close again. But now they were merely watchwords, hung over the sea.

Off by the tarpaulined lifeboats in the shadows cast by the massive ventilators, the two finally leaned over the rail. The moon was coming up. It came up while they stayed there.

The man's arm stole around the girl's waist. He drew her close. And she sighed contentedly in that embrace and relaxed against him.

"Happy, dear?" she whispered.

"Happy? Madelaine, there's a dull, poignant ache way down inside—that I'm going to awaken soon and find it all a dream. I can't explain it. The world is changed. To-night—this moment—I'm the happiest man in it and I'd go through it all again if I thought that in the end I'd reach the luxury of this moment."

"We're going to have a big church wedding, laddie, dear—if you'll agree. There must be lights and flowers and laughter and music—a surfeit of it, because we've wanted it so long, both of us. Besides, it's the last thing mother'll be able to do for me. It would break her heart if she couldn't."

"You've written to her about—me?" Nathan asked thickly.

"Do you think I could keep it to myself, you foolish boy? And she's going to meet us at the Springfield station and you're to stay with us a few days before you go up to Vermont and close your position with your mill people."

"When will it happen, dear—the lights and the

laughter, the flowers and the music?"

"I'd like it to be the first of October, laddie. Mother will certainly want that much time to prepare. But never mind. The weeks will go quickly. And you'll be right near-by in New York. You must come up every week-end. And I'll be in New York to do my wedding shopping too, laddie. Also there's the question of our house. We'll want to settle that in the meantime."

The man was silent. The moon came up out of a tropical sea and made a pathway of silver straight to their feet. His voice shaking with emotion, he finally said:

"Madelaine dear, there's something I've been wanting to speak about for a long, long time. It's about myself. In a way I'm glad you saw father. Maybe you can understand why I've wanted to be a little bigger and better than he has shown himself. But I haven't had any one to coach me, dear. I've grown rather hit-or-miss and had to get the corners removed in a hard, rough way. And I'm afraid they're not all removed—far from it."

"Coach you?"

"I know I'm rough and crude. In a lot of ways Bernie was right. I know there are times when perhaps I shock you with those crudities. But it isn't because I haven't the desire to learn. If you'll only be patient, I'll try my best——"

"Let's not talk about it, laddie. Of course I know you'll try your best. I've seen you eager to do your best so many times it's often brought tears to my eyes. You never knew. Of course there are old habits you've been almost thirty years forming that can't be broken in a moment. They're deeper than your conscious mind. Yes—I know all that! I guess it's

because you're trying so hard that I've gone on loving you more and more. No man need despair of becoming a polished, courtly gentleman who has a basic love of beauty in his heart. All else is a matter of practice and contact. Anyway, you suit me, and if you keep on the way you've been going the past six months, at forty I'm going to drop right down on my bony old knees and worship you—the little tin god that I've made!"

"No woman ever talked to me as you do, Madelaine. It would be a pretty cheap fellow who couldn't respond to your 'handling.' You don't scold or preach, like all the rest, and make me more self-conscious than ever. There's something you radiate that simply won't let a fellow be a boor while you're around. And I love you! Dear God, how I love you! What can I ever do to show it? I wonder what?"

"Well, dear, just now you might kiss me," Madelaine responded, pinching his hard ruddy hand. "For the present that will be quite sufficient."

Music started somewhere on the decks below.

"A waltz!" cried the girl. "Come on, Natie, let's dance."

"I can't dance," confessed Nathan bitterly.

"Well, what the stuff-and-nonsense difference does that make? I'm here to teach you, am I not? Come on, you horrible troglodyte! You're going to get your first lesson in waltzing under the absolutely impersonal instruction of your Girl-Without-a-Name!"

And he did.

II

A dream, a dream—all a dream!

The lights of Telegraph Hill showed nebulous through the evening coast-mist on the night of the twenty-fifth. The following day they were on their way through Nevada. They reached Chicago on the twenty-ninth and Albany eighteen hours later. Thence they traveled in a chair-car to Springfield.

Madelaine had time to call her mother on the long-distance telephone in Albany. Mrs. Theddon was meeting them with the motor at the Union station in Springfield. And as all journeys must have an end some time, even a Dream Journey, the steel girders of the railroad bridge across the Connecticut finally vibrated to the dull roar of their incoming train. A moment later they had crossed over the stone arch with the brilliant illumination of Main Street, Springfield, stretching north and south. The train came to a stop. Gracia Theddon espied them through the Pullman windows.

Nathan turned to help Madelaine down the steps. Never was there such a reunion.

“And this is Nathan!” cried Mrs. Theddon. She did everything but kiss him. “It makes me happy to greet you because I can see you have made my Madelaine so happy! Come, the car is waiting. We will go up at once.”

A chauffeur seemed to materialize out of atmosphere and appropriate the suit cases. They passed through the big waiting room to the portico steps on the south, where a limousine throbbed softly.... And as Nathan followed into that car and the driver closed the door, the man who had always known crude and sordid things, even though he rebelled against them, had an overwhelming sense of

peace. He was finding his own. A world of beautiful things awaited him, beauty and richness,—not for cheap, provincial show, not because they had to do with The Best People, but beauty for beauty's sake because at heart he had ever been the artist. It was not the awed provincial finding himself suddenly amid patrician environment. It was fine, rare, delicate atonement at last with all the best things which deepen life and enrich it, the delectable attributes toward which mankind has aspired on all the long climb from mumbling over bones in the river bottoms of the Neanderthal age to the twentieth century and as Nathan had once expressed it—"art drawing-rooms softly shaded at midnight." The worship of beauty had become a religion with Nathan. It stood for God. And what is there irreverent in that?

It had never occurred to Nathan that he was "marrying money." He knew in a general way that Madelaine's foster-mother was wealthy. But when the limousine rolled under the Long Hill porte-cochère and old Murfins, gray-haired now—what hair remained—was waiting for them in the opened doorway, the home into which the young Vermonter passed brought the realization to him with perturbing force. He felt immediately chagrined. He was impatient to start his work and show these people who were accepting him for their own that he was worthy of their confidence.

Dinner was served almost as soon as Nathan could groom himself. And after it was over—though they sat for a long time over their coffee while Madelaine tried to convey to her mother a faint idea of what the two had experienced—they went out upon the wide veranda at the back of the house. The place was

softly lighted and awning shaded. The broad sweep of the Connecticut was calm as a mill pond at their feet, the serried lights of the South End bridge prinkling in the water as the afterglow died upon the distant Berkshires.

III

Their trunks had arrived and been carried to their rooms during dinner. It was shortly after eight-thirty when Madelaine exclaimed to Nathan:

"I know what let's do! Suppose we slip upstairs and dress in our army clothes to show mother how we looked in the field! I think it would be jolly!"

Nathan complied. It took him a quarter-hour to make the change.

"It's not exactly what I'd wear on parade," he apologized grimly on his return.

"I imagine Siberia was no tea party!" returned Mrs. Theddon. She was as happy as a young girl herself this night, though she had faded much through worry over her daughter. Her hair was almost iron gray now with that anxiety.

Madelaine was in the center of the veranda, turning about to show her mother a rent in her cape where a stray Bolshevik bullet had penetrated one night beyond Omsk, when old Murfins appeared in the doorway.

"Mr. Ruggles is calling, Miss Madelaine," he announced. "Mr. Gordon Ruggles!"

Gordon!

From the Great High Noon the one slender shadow cast upon Madelaine's happiness had been the

thought of Gordon. She stood for a moment irresolute now. Then to the servant she said evenly:

"Please show him upstairs—the library. I'll be up directly." Madelaine turned to Nathan. "I want him to meet you. But not just yet. I must talk to him first."

Gordon was standing before the west window, looking down on the Connecticut with his back to the room when Madelaine finally entered. It was the same apartment where she had bade him good-bye—offered him her lips—which he had not taken. He was still in his uniform and she knew when she beheld it, as well as the man inside, that he had not played at war.

"Gordon!" she cried, coming swiftly forward. She held out both hands.

He did not speak. If he was surprised at beholding her in a nurse's outfit, he gave no sign.

War had taken its toll from Gordon. It seemed as though his fine patrician mold had been cast into the Great Furnace and when the dross had been melted away he was pure metal but hardened somehow. He was thin; he looked as though he had suffered much.

"I'm sorry to intrude to-night, Madge. But I couldn't help it. Forgive me! Under the circumstances I had to come!"

"Oh, I'm *so* glad to see you! And it's perfectly all right!"

He grasped her outstretched hand and bent above it. It was very neatly done, very much the appropriate thing—for Gordon.

It was not until he had been called to meet Nathan

and Madelaine saw his peculiar gait in crossing the room that she knew he had not returned as he went away. Gordon had lost his left leg at the knee in the Argonne, but aside from a stiffness in his stride, no one might suspect.

"I've intruded to-night because I'm going to Chicago and thence out to Kansas at once, Madge. And I wanted to offer my best wishes. I'm glad, Madge—glad—that you—are very happy!"

"Gordon! You know?"

"Aunt Gracia told me. I was discharged from the hospital in January. Aunt Grace allowed me to read certain portions of your letters about—*him*! It couldn't be, Madge—you and I. And in fairness to us both, I ought to add that I felt it the night I went away. At least I felt I couldn't take you—with clean hands."

"Oh, Gord!"

"You had known me so long—I had grown up with you and showed myself such a rotter before you straightened me out—that there would have been little real romance in it, between you and me, if I had been the man. I felt a little bitter over it when I first heard. But a fellow learns a lot of things in such a Big Show as we've just ended. He learns not to whimper if luck goes against him. But aside from that—there was yet another reason."

For a moment they surveyed one another. Of the two, Madelaine was the most perturbed. Perturbed because after her half-year propinquity with Nathan, everything which her fiancé possessed stood forth so sharply by contrast with the man who faced her now.

Nathan had calm eyes. Gordon's eyes were not

calm. They were troubled. Nathan had hard-muscled jaws and philosophical lips. Gordon had—well, just a mouth, and it was a bit too harsh. Nathan carried himself gravely, shoulders well back, feet on the ground. Gordon had a proclivity toward a slight, slender, patrician slouch. Nathan had talon hands, a man's hands, made to grasp, create, build, deal sledge-hammer blows. Gordon's hands were lithe, pink, neatly manicured, made to handle a cigarette gracefully.

Yet Gordon was no less a man than Nathan. He was simply a different type of man.

Comparing the two now, however, Madelaine understood why she had never been able to abandon herself to Gordon. Being very feminine, she had hungered for the virility of Nathan's jaws and hands and iron arms.

"You're going to Chicago and Kansas, Gordon? Why?"

"I am going to be married, Madge."

"*Married!*"

"I have told Aunt Gracia why. When I'm gone, she will explain. You think it strange perhaps—after what happened here in this room when we parted. But when I knew I had lost, with you—and then one night Over Across when I got in a pinch where I had no assurance I would live until morning, I did some vital thinking, Madge. I found there were many things in my life which, if I had the chance, I would rectify. I was spared to rectify them. I did a rotten thing by another girl once, Madge. And I choose to think I lost you because I dared approach you without my debt to another woman paid in full. At any rate, without trying to make a hero of myself in

this distressing explanation, I—well—I found the girl loved me very dearly and had married another man whom she did not love because he was willing to have her after—after—well, to speak the brutal truth, in army slang—after I'd 'made hamburg' of her life. We're to be married, I say, and we're going out to Kansas. I shall try to nurse the girl back to—to—what she was when I met her. My treatment made her a nervous wreck."

Madelaine was very pale as Gordon made this confession. She backed against the table and whetted her parted lips.

"Gordon," she whispered huskily, "—is it Bernie Gridley?"

"Yes," said the man simply. "And I want you to know that even if you had not found Mr. Forge, and had returned willing to accept me, I should still have pursued the course I'm taking now."

For a moment Madelaine surveyed him. And then she saw the clean-cut character in the thing he was doing. With her intuitive understanding of psychology, she realized that the very best side of her cousin was disclosing itself now.

"Gordon—was that—why you would not kiss me on the lips—the last time we faced each other in this room?"

"Something of the sort, Madge. Yes."

"Gordon, this is a very manly thing you're doing. A big thing!"

"Please don't make it any more distressing. I'm not doing it from any hope of praise or sense of duty. I'm doing it because I found a new thrill in shooting straight, after you gave me the incentive to stop

sloughing, Madge. And—I've learned more—in France. Miss Gridley can never be to me what you have been, Madge. But then, I don't deserve you, and never did. I can make Miss Gridley very happy. I can nurse her back to normality and health. She has very great confidence in me. She loves me greatly. She was very tender when she heard I had returned and was confined in the hospital. She visited me every day. It will not be at all difficult to love her for that tenderness. All of us have the capacity to love, I find, Madge, when the basis of love is service. And there is usually a Great Circumstance where we eventually find we can serve—very beautifully. Please don't weep, Madelaine. Your mother—my aunt——"

"Mother doesn't need to tell me anything, Gordon. I understand. I cared for Bernie in her dilemma. And I know now why she would not tell me her lover's name. You were a relative. There is much that is fine in Bernie. But, Gordon, it hasn't had a chance. Oh, I'm so overwhelmed with everything turning out this way that I don't know what to do or say."

"I bothered you to-night, Madge, because I delayed my departure almost ten days now, awaiting your return. I had to see you and say this personally. I felt it would be yellow to leave it to a letter. I am leaving for Chicago at midnight. Bernice and I are going to Pittsfield, Kansas, as soon as we are married. I am going out to manage an iron works out there. If we're unable to return east for your wedding, I want you to let me offer you all my good wishes, now—to-night. Forge is a lucky dog, with your life in his keeping. I feel sure he appreciates it. You would not love him enough to marry him if he lacked the capacity for such appreciation."

Madelaine moved across to Gordon then. She lifted

her hands to his shoulders and stood looking up into his war-hardened face.

"Gordon," she said softly, "you're doing a big thing. You'll be happy because you are doing it. I can see it in your eyes already. I know you will make Bernie's hard life very rich. But I want to say more than that. I want to tell you that I have loved you—loved you from the night you came to my room down in Boston and showed me you had taken stock of yourself and your birthright and were going to play the man. It wasn't a romantic love, Gordon. It was the love of a sister for a very dear brother. And that love is still yours, Gordon. You may carry it away with you and retain it always. God has been very good to the homeless waif that is myself. He has given me a very dear foster-mother. More than that, he has sent two fine, virile men into my life. And they hold my heart in their powerful hands between them. What more could a girl ask?"

Gordon took both hands and kissed them again. And Madelaine, placed one arm around Gordon's neck—drew him down—kissed him on the forehead.

The man blindly fumbled in his pocket. He pulled from it a little wine-colored box of plush.

"I want you to keep it, Madelaine. To remember me by, in the years ahead. Aunt Gracia let me have it, and I had the stone put in a slightly different setting. Please wear it—on your right hand—as a sort of personal wedding gift."

She let him slip the ring on her right third finger.

"I want *him* to meet you, Gordon," she said.

They went downstairs and across to the porch door. As she came through, she heard her mother's

voice explaining something to Nathan, who sat with his elbows on his knees, leaned forward, face thoughtful. “—and the war sent their value up scandalously and Madelaine will get almost a million that will require a good business man’s oversight ——” Mrs. Theddon stopped abruptly and raised her eyes to her daughter’s crimson face. “Well, dear?” she stammered, as though she had been caught in a misdemeanor.

“I want Nathan and Gordon to meet. He’s here in the drawing-room.”

“Have him out, by all means,” declared Mrs. Theddon, arising.

Gordon’s tall figure stood outlined for a moment in the veranda door. It was Mrs. Theddon who introduced them.

Two weather-bronzed men in khaki, fresh from the wars, looked in each other’s eyes,—level and straight. Then their hands came together.

“... and there shall be neither east nor west,
Nor pride nor pain nor birth,
When two strong men meet face to face,
Tho’ they come from the ends of the earth.”

CHAPTER XIX

VIA LOHENGRIN

I

While perhaps it may perturb strict sticklers for etiquette, nevertheless my own marital status was ignored and at Nathan's earnest solicitation I was best man at his wedding.

Never did weeks speed past so swiftly as they did that summer. October was approaching almost before we realized it, least of all Nathan. What with acclimating himself at his new work, house-planning with Madelaine in those roseate New York days which followed, attending to the thousand and one details having to do with his approaching state as a benedict again, he was grateful when the time separating him from the Great Day narrowed down to a week, then three days, then two, then one,—grateful entirely outside his anticipation of having Madelaine with him permanently.

Three weeks before the event, the invitations had been mailed, and it was pathetic when Madelaine applied to her lover for a list of those he wished to

invite to the nuptials.

"List?" he laughed sadly. "It's a rather short list, dear girl. The Thornes, Caleb Gridley, Mother and Edith, old Sam Hod who published my first bally poems in his paper. And—and—that's about all, I guess. Bill and his wife, of course, though Bill's acting as best man."

It was a pretentious wedding. It seemed as though everybody of consequence in Springfield was invited. Madelaine's maids of honor were old school chums from Mount Hadley days. The gifts covered two great tables, facetiously mentioned by Murfins and old Steb in the servants' quarters as "the great American pickle-dish exhibit". Two days beforehand a rehearsal was held in which every one seemed as painfully self-conscious as possible and managed to get twisted up and in each other's way and permit confusion to reign supreme. But through it all Madelaine never once lost her head and was its soul and guiding spirit.

The ceremony was scheduled for four o'clock, and Christ Church was a mammoth conservatory of flowers a day and a night beforehand. Then the evening before the great day, Mrs. Anna Forge and Edith arrived in Springfield, and Madelaine went with Nathan to the station to meet them and have dinner with them, that the mother might meet her son's new wife informally.

II

Nathan was a little taken aback when he saw his mother and sister. Mrs. Forge had lost height and weight; she was a poor, pucker-faced, broken-down, little old lady. Nathan knew her to be fifty-three. She

looked seventy. He felt a heart-stab when he saw her clothing, it was so poor and threadbare and out of taste. And Edith!

Edith was now the “mother of seven!” Verily! She had grown into a tall, awkward, raw-boned woman with a coarse face, sloppy cornflower hair and a hat which resembled a cross between a basket of flowers and a fried egg. The broken status of her corsets was immediately noticeable when she had removed her outer cloak, and her skirt hung lower in the rear than in the front. She was messy—alongside Madelaine—and looked as though she had hurriedly dropped a gummy baby in a clothes basket while she threw on any clothes lying handy to come to her brother’s “swell weddin’.”

Mrs. Forge clung to Nathan hysterically when she met him on the station platform. And she wept openly when Madelaine took her unceremoniously in her arms and kissed her. They went to the Worthy for rooms and dinner.

Madelaine waited in the ladies’ parlor while Nathan went up with his relatives. Edith first entered the room which Nathan had reserved as though her footfalls profaned the very carpets.

“My Gawd, what class!” she cried blankly. “Nat, is she worth a million dollars—on the level?”

Nathan laughed. That was the only feature of the forthcoming alliance to mar his perfect happiness. Madelaine was worth a million dollars. It was awkward.

“I guess so,” he responded carelessly.

“You guess so! My Gawd, don’t you know? I should think that’d be the first thing——”

"I'll have to go back and stay with Madelaine," the brother interrupted. "Come down as soon as you're ready." He counted out money. "Take this, mother. And to-morrow morning buy yourself something out of the ordinary for clothes. Please! I wish it!"

When he had gone, Edith flounced down on the bed, discovered the resiliency of the springs, and bobbed up and down, testing them.

"She's a cuckoo, Ma!" declared the daughter, anent Madelaine. "But I bet a hat right now there ain't goin' to be much family visitin' back and forth! Lord, if she ever come into my shack, and Joe and all the kids piled in to give her the once-over, somebody'd have to stick their feet out the window to leave room to breathe. She'd take more gorgeous space than all the rest of us put together, includin' a wardrobe trunk!"

"I think she's a dear," announced Mrs. Forge. "She's so democratic."

"I'd give ten dollars to know what she sees in Nat, though. Huh! It warn't so awful long ago we was all takin' Saturday night baths up in Paris and undressin' together in the kitchen because the upstairs rooms was cold. A million bucks! Can you beat it, Ma! Wonder how much her hat cost?"

They went down into the Worthy dining room. Madelaine chose a table beside a north window. Mrs. Forge and Edith promptly put on their "manners."

Mother and daughter—absolutely dumb in the presence of a colored waiter and a million-dollar-bride-to-be—said they guessed they wasn't a bit hungry, and yet at each of Nat's suggestions from the menu they nodded their heads avidly. Madelaine tried her best to put the two at their ease, but it was

a sorry business. Mrs. Forge and Edith “knew how to behave in company,” which was to act as stiff and unnatural and wooden as possible and assume that every one in the dining room was watching them like jewelry thieves.

The Indian summer night was lazily warm. The windows were open. Over in the southwest corner a group of Dartmouth alumni men were holding a reunion supper.

“My stars!” whispered Mrs. Forge to Nathan, “they’re drinkin’ licker! You don’t drink licker, do you, Nathan?”

Nathan affirmed that he did not drink “licker” and then he turned his head away and looked out of the window upon his left as the college men broke into roistering song.

Outside on the curbing a young man stopped and gazed up into the room.

“Madge,” said Nathan thickly, “one night, several years ago, I stood outside like that, and looked up at a fellow and girl sitting here just like this——”

A quick exclamation. Madelaine had overturned a water glass.

“Was that you, Nathan?” she cried, astounded. “So that’s where you saw me first? Well, foolish boy, just for that, the title of your damage-making little old poem was ‘Girl-Without-a-Name.’ And I was conceited enough to think it was written for me, and no one else.”

“Perhaps,” said Nathan gravely, “it was! Who knows?”

Edith was rather glad to see Madelaine tip over her

water glass. It just went to prove that even The Best People, Millionairesses, those who Had Money, did such things. She cast a glance at her mother as much as to say, “You see! She isn’t such a Thingumbob after all. She tips over her water glass at table!”

III

The Day!

For perfection of weather, only one other day in Nathan’s experience had surpassed it, the high noon in Siberia when he had seen a splash of vivid scarlet against sharp cobalt and golden brown.

I made a trip up to the church around noon for some detail, when the florists had called their work complete. I stood by the door for a moment and felt prayful with the beauty and portent of it. The chancel had been almost smothered in fine palms. There were banks and vases of cut flowers on the altar. Wreaths were draped about the reading desk, chancel rail and choir stall, and a rope of flowers cast across the center aisle instead of white ribbon, reserving the first six pews for relatives and special guests.

Anticipating her daughter’s departure by a few minutes, at a quarter to four Mrs. Theddon entered her car with old Amos Ruggles, who was to give the bride away, and who never looked more vacuous or pop-eyed in his life. Arriving at the church, she entered on the head usher’s arm and then to the door came the motors of the bridal party.

Vestibule and center aisle were cleared of guests when the bridal party arrived. Doors to street and church were closed. At five minutes to four, the bride

and her maids assembled. An electric word came to Nathan and myself, waiting in a side room behind the chancel, that Madelaine and her party had arrived. The organist was on the alert for the opening of the great doors at the far end of the center aisle. The ceremony was a matter of minutes.

It is popularly accepted that a groom a few moments before his marriage must be flustrated, senseless and speechless, a comic object generally and only acceptable because if he failed to put in appearance the wedding machine might have a minor cog missing somewhere, causing it to rasp horribly. As a matter of fact, most grooms are quite cool and collected,—at least outwardly. They may misplace a few little things of minor importance, such as hats, railroad tickets or sense of humor. But on the whole, they really know a surprising lot of what it's all about and why they are there and what the outcome of the entire fuss may aggregate. Nathan was no exception.

He had not seen Madelaine that morning; he had breakfasted and lunched with me and we had reached the church at about three-forty-five. I was agreeably surprised at sight of him in his wedding clothes,—black cutaway, gray trousers, white waistcoat, gray suède gloves. It came to me with a smash that my little freckled-faced friend of the Foxboro schoolyard had flowered into a handsome man. Not the Gordon-Ruggles, matinee-idol type of handsomeness, but the rugged individuality of the male who has his fundamentals established, who has found himself and carries the whole struggle on firm features.

"Well, Bill, old man," he said, as we waited for the great signal, "it's come! The day and the hour we

talked about one night down the Green River in the old red scow. Remember?"

"Yes, Nat," I returned. "How can either of us forget?"

"There is a God, Bill. And He is good. We talked about Him too, if I recall correctly."

"At least I've never doubted," said I, "that He's on the side of the chap who tries to do the best he can."

Those were the last words I ever spoke to my lifelong friend as a single man. At that moment word came that Madelaine was ready.

Into the chancel he went behind the rector and I followed. Outside the communion rail he stood facing that great church of faces, manner grave but easy, a man in perfect control of himself.

Neither of us chanced to be looking at the end of the mid aisle when the sexton opened the big doors. A sudden peal of music from the high organ over our heads announced that Nathan's Woman Beautiful was advancing to become his wife.

The wedding was on!

The ushers came first, walking two and two with the train of bridesmaids behind. A vast, motionless hush fell over that church as the wedding party moved toward the chancel and the bride came into view. Several women had their handkerchiefs ready to enjoy themselves. They did. At the profusion of autumnal flowers, the afternoon sunlight flooding richly through the huge stained-glass window high on the left, Madelaine advancing behind her maids on the arm of old "Am" Ruggles,—a choke came in my own throat, I'll admit, and I teetered on the verge of making an ass of myself and spoiling my make-up

generally.

Madelaine was wonderfully gowned, with a sweeping train. From her dusky coiffure fell a long tulle veil. She carried a mammoth bouquet of American Beauty roses. Her face was flushed. She was happy in that moment; it radiated from her.

She slipped her hand from old "Am's" arm and the music suddenly died away. The church was very quiet. A pause.

"*In the name of God, Amen!*"

There was no blur in Nathan's mind now, no wonder what another girl was doing, no wandering memories. He was paying attention. Oh, very much he was paying attention.

Old Amos waited beside Madelaine during the preliminary exhortation. Then Madelaine gave her maid of honor her bouquet and when the rector demanded, "Who giveth this woman away?" old Amos allowed he gaveth this woman away with an "I do!" which suggested he had kept the words locked in his system for weeks, for months, and the relief of letting them explode at last was almost sleep-producing. Then he turned, and his saucer eyes demanded, "Now, bless my soul! Whereabouts do I find myself, anyhow?" And finding himself at a wedding and the observed of all observers, he spatted his way to a pew seat and sat down and twirled his thumbs and looked wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove. And the wedding went on.

Nathan was married again. The ceremony was finished. The blessing was spoken. And the man was glad, glad.

With her left hand on the arm of her new husband,

Madelaine turned with him to leave the altar. At that instant the great organ was given its leash. Thunderously above us all, it pealed into a ringing march of triumph. The very church arches shook with the delirium of it. The little flower girls who had brought up the rear of the procession now turned and were prompted forward. And down the aisle my friend and the woman who loved him moved forward to happiness on a carpet of flowers.

Millions of unborn men and women are yet to be married and given in marriage. But no wedding ceremony will ever pass off with such velvet perfection and infinite smoothness.

In the vestibule Nathan received hat, gloves and stick. The Theddon motor was waiting. In a moment the pair were seated therein and it had eased away from the Chestnut Street curbing.

Alone in the limousine, as it purred down South Main Street toward Long Hill and the wedding reception, Madelaine was the first to speak.

“Well, laddie, I’m yours,” she said simply. “And I’m so happy that it’s my turn to dream now. And I pray the dear Lord I never awake.”

Nathan’s great talon claw stole out and completely obliterated her right hand.

“You’ll never awaken if I can help it, dear,” he said huskily. “And I have a quaint idea that I can.”

Yet there was more happiness in store for them that afternoon.

IV

The Theddon drawing-room was opened to its

fullest and banked with more flowers. The motors which had followed began to empty bridesmaids, ushers and invited guests. Bride and groom stood before a solid screen of cut flowers with Gracia Theddon in silver-gray.

And almost the first person to appear with congratulations and good wishes was—old Caleb Gridley!

If Nathan lost his head that day, it was when he recognized Caleb and blinked at him stupidly. It was their first meeting in two years. Gridley had been "out west" on farm mortgage business for the People's Bank and as usual had barely arrived in time for the ceremony. But it was because old Caleb had changed that Nathan stared in stupefaction. Was this—could it be—old Gridley of the tannery office?

Caleb was clean-shaven and dressed in afternoon clothes which the most fastidious authority on male attire could not criticize. His iron hair was no longer a wiry, unruly mass. A heroic barber had conquered it and old Caleb with his ponderous size, big shoulders, flawless clothes, was the most distinguished man in that drawing-room, not excepting the groom himself. He still had the paving-block jaw. But his ugly, tobacco-stained incisors were gone. He displayed two rows of fine, even teeth, though he did remove them at night "to get some mouth comfort in his sleep" as he expressed it afterward.

Old Caleb had suddenly emerged from a chrysalis of small-town mediocrity into a gentleman of the world. He had left backwater and stroked out into strong, main current. He was a personage of parts.

But still more than his altered appearance was

making Nathan stare. It was the tableau occurring near the door. Old Caleb had come face to face with Gracia Theddon. And Madelaine's foster-mother was very near to fainting. She had one hand at her heart and the other was clutching the edge of a table behind her.

"Caleb!" she cried hoarsely.

"B'damn!" was all Caleb could articulate. Showing that in a flower-banked drawing-room amid bevies of ladies, there were still a few trifling irregularities in his culture that left room for improvement.

Nathan stepped forward.

"You know Mrs. Theddon, Mr. Gridley?"

Caleb beheld his altered protégé as in a daze. "It was an afternoon of daisies," or dazes, as Edith expressed it afterward.

"You an' me writ a poem about her once, didn't we?" was the tanner's perturbing demand before those wondering guests. "Know her?—Bub!—Bub!—To think it's all ended here—Gracie Hemin'way!"

Mrs. Theddon fought for self-possession and won.

"Mr. Gridley and myself knew each other very intimately when we were in our twenties," she announced.

The guests were arriving and crowding in and old Caleb had to give way. But he gripped Madelaine's hand with a palm which had thrown hides for twenty years and could not exactly be described as "moonbeam." He cried huskily:

"Ma'am—you got the finest boy in the world, b'damn if you haven't! Only you got to see the unholy scrapes he can get into, to find it out. Same

as me. We writ poetry, once, ma'am. B'damn if we didn't write perty good poetry. I congratulate you, ma'am. This is a scrumpshus occasion—a dam' fine one!"

Madelaine laughed merrily.

"You're so good, Mr. Gridley. You're going to be one of my dearest friends, because you've been Nathan's. He's told me all about you. He said you were the only real father he'd ever known."

"Did he now? Well, just goes to show what excellent judgment he's got! Haven't had much time to do no letter-writin' or send presents, but I guess it ain't too late to pay my respects and show how I allus appreciated Nat's readin' me poetry. Take this here. I gotta go see a man!"

Caleb said this last suddenly and a bit wildly. He had no man to "see" but he did have to get away before he choked so tightly he could only gurgle. With his declaration, however, he pressed a bit of heavy, crinkled, folded paper into Madelaine's palm.

Madelaine laughed again and thanked him and handed it to her husband. Nathan shoved it in the pocket of his waistcoat. The reception was well over before he thought to look at it.

It was old Caleb's check, drawn on a Boston bank for ten thousand dollars.

V

But Mrs. Nathaniel Forge, née Theddon, never knew how truly she spoke, nor significantly, when she declared that old Caleb was to be one of her dearest friends because he had been Nathan's. And

for a reason entirely apart from her husband.

After her supper to her bridesmaids, Madelaine slipped upstairs to change into her traveling suit. Her mother had been unpardonably missing for over an hour. Having occasion to enter the upper library, Madelaine drew back aghast.

Her mother was in there alone with old Caleb. Her mother was sobbing. But her mother was merely exercising sweet woman's prerogative to weep gloriously and copiously, in proof that she was happy, happy, happy.

Madelaine turned blank of face from what she had seen. She met Nathan on the stairs. She caught her husband and spoke in swift and stupefied whispers.

Nathan grinned. Yes, he did!

"Oh, well, Girl-o'-Mine," he admonished. "We needn't be selfish and demand a monopoly of all the happiness that's going around to-day. The springtime of life is all fine and wonderful. But we've got to admit there's many a love flower that blossoms in Indian Summer. And it's usually all the more fragrant and exquisite on that account. Where's the telephone?"

VI

In their rooms at The Worthy that night, after Madelaine and Nathan had left town, Mrs. Anna Forge and Edith locked their door carefully. Mrs. Forge had read in newspapers of "strange men" who "prowled" around hotel corridors.

"*Whew!*" cried Edith, flopping down in a rocker and sprawling her ungainly legs. "After all that class,

I'm plumb bowled over. My Gawd, Ma, think of it! And Natie's gotta spend all the rest of life livin' up to it. Poor Natie!"

Mrs. Forge stood by the window, holding to the lace drape and using a badly overworked handkerchief as it was needed at her features. Whatever else might be said for Mrs. Anna Forge in her sunset years, she had not forgotten how to weep.

"I think it was all heavenly, Edie. For one afternoon—for the first time in all my life—I just reveled in it. And I think Natie's the luckiest boy in the world."

"Baggin' a million dollars? You bet! But think of havin' to sit around all the rest of life on your manners and never darin' to open your mouth for fear o' puttin' your foot in it! Gawd, it'd have me in a sanatorium in a month!"

"Nathan's got what he wanted and deserved. He can't help but be happy with that beautiful wife and surrounded by fine things."

"Sufferin' catfish, Ma! You don't mean to say *you'd* wanner live up to it, too? Then it ain't hard to see where Natie gets his crazy ideas for swell things and manners. You can knock Pa all you wanner. But he's my dad and I'm his girl. And I kiss my soup at table if I feel like it, and if I wanner I loll 'round the house in a blanket. That's my privilege. No airs to me. You always know just where to find me. I'm honest!"

And Edith fully believed that she was and remained smugly content, the "mother of seven."

Mrs. Forge not answering (Mrs. Forge, in fact, living over the glories of that wonder-day with the lacklustre gone from her pin-point eyes and her

pinched face softened, for the first time in years), Edith finally concluded:

"Say, Ma! Wonder how quick it'd be safe to 'touch' Nat for a couple o' thousand—and stand any show o' gettin' it? Joe's gettin' awful restless lately with so many kids to support. And a couple thousand would give him a swell start in the express business. Nat oughta set him up. It's his duty. After all, he can't sneak outta the fact that I'm his sister!"

CHAPTER XX

HILL TOPS

I

Their baby was born the following August.

The day of its arrival, Nathan paced the cool, impersonal corridors of the maternity hospital like an animal crazed, obsessed with the necessity of getting relief by tearing something.

He had often smiled over the acclaimed nervousness and general distress of certain young fathers, awaiting the arrival of their first-born. He was not smiling now. Suppose the child should cost Madelaine her life? What youngster could ever compensate for the Woman Beautiful who from the first had made matrimony almost an idealist's dream? If he lost Madelaine, he could understand how fathers could hate their offspring.

But there was to be no occasion for any such unnatural attitude. At twenty minutes past three o'clock, a nurse came down the elevator and accosted him with a cheery, knowing smile.

"Congratulations first, Mr. Forge," she cried. "You

have an eight-pound son. Everything's perfectly normal and your wife's doing lovely."

A son!

A hot knife went straight through Nathan's heart and into his soul.

"Come back about six o'clock," the nurse advised him, though Nathan scarcely heard. "You'll find your wife in Room Eighty-eight."

A few minutes later Nathan left the hospital. He sped blindly for a florist's to buy flowers, flowers—millions of flowers. He was boyishly obsessed to buy flowers.

Madelaine was dozing when Nathan entered her room at six o'clock. She turned her head toward him, lifting eyes that were still hollow and slightly glazed with suffering. But when she recognized him, a coy smile showed about her delicate mouth.

"Well, Mr. Man?" she demanded. "And now what have you to say? *We—have—a—son!*"

Nathan, down beside the bed, buried his face in her soft mother-throat.

"If there was only something big I could do to show how much I love you, dear," he cried thickly, "—oh, God, if I only knew what to do——"

"Do? I thought we settled that—the night on the steam-ship—coming back from Japan? A similar 'do' will be quite sufficient for the present also."

She held up her lips. He did.

It was not until the following morning, however, that Nat saw his son. The nurse entered with a heavy roll of flannel and laid the baby in his arms. Gently Nat pulled aside the blanketing and a tiny hand came

up. It was groping in its new-born blindness,—groping, groping, groping.

But it did not grope fruitlessly. That exquisite, shell-like little palm found a great talon claw,—the life-twisted hand of its father. And it gripped that calloused Thing tightly. It could always grip that calloused Thing tightly.

Nathan's only comment came in a whisper. To his boy he spoke a promise:

"There shall be no Fog for you, little son. As you grow along—your dad—will understand!"

II

Hill Tops!

It was a night in November. Darkness had fallen early. A fire had been lighted in the open grate and the big southern living room was pungently warm. Shades had been drawn, shutting out the dreary autumn afterglow. Aside from the ruddy gleam of the crackling fire, the only illumination in the apartment came from the pedestal lamp beside a piano. The lamp had an old-rose shade. All the hues and angles of the room were softened and blended by its richness.

Nathan came down the wide front stairs, tying the cords of his dressing-gown as he descended. He turned into the living room. A few feet inside the door, he paused.

The room was perfect. White, mahogany, and old rose was the color scheme. The ceiling was shaded and the furniture was heavy. Yet so deftly had the latter been arranged and so perfect the spacing, that

the room had an air of fine distance and perspective; relaxation and rest was the result and it soothed like an opiate.

The man's artist-eye could neither miss nor pass lightly over the proportion and fastidiousness that gave the room its character,—the sense of perfect order without the least sacrifice of comfort. A few oil paintings filled appropriate spaces upon the warm brown walls. Smaller corners held etchings and exotic prints that Madelaine had brought from Japan. The dull polish of the piano, writing desk, music cabinet, table, reflected the glint of the firelight. An exquisite sculptural study showed at just the right point in the corner across the heavy divan drawn up before the grate. And as Nathan inventoried these things, a deep sense of peace grew upon him. It entered into his being with the atmosphere he breathed. An old phrase he had used somewhere before whispered softly again in his subconscious mind, something about "—art drawing-rooms, softly shaded at midnight." This was home,—his home! One born to such things might never appreciate them as Nathan could appreciate them now.

He moved across. From the carved black cherry box on the end of the reading table he found a Havana. His evening paper was there also. He picked up the paper and went round the divan. He sank down before the fire, but after lighting the cigar with all the ceremony of a priest kindling a sacred altar flame, he did not read.

The wind rose and drew the flames higher into the deep, broad flue. Somewhere out on the Avenue rose the gear-clack and purr of a 'bus. It was a wild, melancholy night outside. It would rain or snow

before morning. But wind nor weather had no part or parcel with that home, inside. The room might have been in a castle in Spain for all the drear outside weather had to do with its comfort. The man felt with an overwhelming emotion that he had reached a safe harbor,—the hinterland of peace.

Madelaine had been overseeing bedtime rites in the nursery. Nathan's cigar had scarcely an inch of finely powdered ash before he heard his wife's step on the stair. As though he had never been in the room before, as though it were all a dream, he turned his head as she came across.

She had put off her dinner frock and was clothed now in silken lingerie—soft, trailing, beautiful things that accentuated her height and perfect figure. Like a cameo against ebony she fitted into that room; had she not been its creator? She paused and adjusted her hair. Beautiful hands they were, that gleamed white and deft in the half-light,—slender, characterful hands for taste and resolute purpose.

"Junior was a perfect dear about going to bed," she remarked as she gave her tresses a final pat and turned toward her husband. "I'll flatter your conceit enough, Mr. Man, to say that he grows more like his dad every day."

Her voice was vibrant and mellow, like the room and the house. Queer how thoughts enter a man's mind. Nathan could not help contrasting Madelaine's ordering of her home and child with Milly's. Milly—given even the same setting—would have had books, papers, interrupted sewing, baby's clothing—oh, damn Milly. A vast sense of fulfillment welled up in Nathan's throat. It veiled his vision for a moment. What if he had missed Madelaine that morning on the Hill Top?

Madelaine saw her husband was pensive. She drew a low cushion across before Nathan could get it for her. She sank down at his feet, and with a faint expression of amusement, her dark eyes fastened on the flames. She remained that way for a time, then leaned her head over against the man's knee. Nathan's hand stole down and smoothed her hair.

"Happy, dear?" she asked, as she had asked a thousand nights.

"I'm very happy, Madelaine," he said huskily, like a boy.

"It pleases me to have you say that," was the woman's comment.

"At the door, a few moments ago, I had to stand for a time and 'drink in' my 'art drawing-room softly shaded at midnight.' This sort of thing was what I'd dreamed of, so long, it—well, it hurt. Even now it hurts. But it's a sweet hurt. That's the 'hick' in me, I suppose. I can't get over it."

Madelaine smiled, a bit sadly. Reaching up, she drew the hand despoiling her hair down beside her cheek and patted it. (Milly would have reminded him curtly that he was "mussing her" or asked him if he thought she could do her hair a dozen times a day just for him to yank out of place—oh, damn Milly!)

"Nathan, dear," the wife whispered, calm eyes looking deep in the flames, "pride in one's home—appreciation of the efforts of loved ones to please, is never provincial; neither should a lifelong hunger for beautiful things hurt. I say that, Nathan, and yet you make me confess that you've not been alone in that hunger; you haven't been the only one who has come into a heritage of such things, to know that sweet hurt. And remember too, dear, without earthly

shadows we see no high lights. It's the wealth of life to measure our happiness at last by the price attainment has cost us."

III

"My Girl the Fairies Brought!" whispered Nathan, after a time. "I never want to think of her as coming from anywhere else. There still are fairies."

Madelaine arose at the end of a half-hour, despite her husband's protest.

"I'm only going above stairs to get an envelope, dear. It holds two pieces of brown mapping with a strip of newspaper pasted upon them. I want you to take them to an art store when you go down to the office in the morning. Have the slip of news-print remapped and put in a copper frame. It must hang over my writing desk—permanently."

"Newsprint? Copper frame? What's the idea?"

"I want my Rosary out in sight, where I can look upon it constantly."

She rumpled his hair. Then she leaned over the back of the divan. Her delicate lips were very close. He did.

IV

As I draw this intimate biography to a close, they are sleeping in my house, two doors down this upper hallway from my study. Nathan came to Paris this week-end to visit his home office about business in England next month. He made a motor-trip of it and brought Madelaine, Nathan Junior and Junior's

nurse.

Mary Ann gave a dinner for them to-night. Many of our friends among the Preston-Hill set, as our summer colony is known, were invited, notable among them Mrs. Percival Mosely. The Moselys have lately bought a summer place here in Paris at the instigation of the Thornes.

Mary Ann's dinner was very much of a success. It was aided toward that end by Madelaine,—mightily so.

A score of times to-night I caught myself staring rudely at Nathan's wife. With smashing beauty of face, figure and gown, and a personal charm beyond all clumsy male adjectives, she kept that table on *qui vive* with her *bon mots* and delicious repartee—eyes shining, cheeks flushed, ruby lips sparkling—and my cellar is not stocked with anything but pumpkins and last season's peach preserve, either. And the pride and happiness on her husband's face was entirely pardonable and heart-mellowing.

I would conclude with Mrs. Mosely's remark to Mary Ann at the door. Naturally Mrs. Mosely is a comparative stranger to Paris.

"I've had a truly wonderful evening," she cried, in her smooth onyx voice, "and I'm especially grateful for being placed beside that young Mr. Forge at dinner. I met him once in New York but really had no opportunity to make his acquaintance closely. Why, he told me more about Russia and Russian art than I've learned in eleven summers abroad. And as for poetry—he spoke of that new book that's causing such a sensation in New York: 'Life Lyrics of a Tanner', as though he might have written it himself. I should have liked to have known his parents. Truly,

they must have been most remarkable people. Why, I haven't met such a well-informed, intelligent, perfectly poised and smoothly polished young fellow in the last dozen years. I think he's perfectly charming!"

The "Life Lyrics of a Tanner!" It's a great book. An autographed copy lies here upon my desk, weighing down my high pile of manuscript. Pity it was published anonymously!

For the tanner isn't old Caleb Gridley. I'll tell the world he isn't. And that's not army slang, either.



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