

STUBBLE

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STUBBLE

BY
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First Edition

TO
MIS' KATIE
AND HER COURAGE

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PART I
MARY LOUISE

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STUBBLE

CHAPTER I

THE front gate screamed, a slow, timid, almost furtive sort of scream, and then banged suddenly shut as though it despaired of further concealment. Mary Louise gathered her sewing to her, rose to her feet, and looked out. It was raining. Through the glass upper half of the door that opened from the sitting room upon the side porch she could see the swelling tendrils of the vines that crawled about the trellis, heavy and beady with the gathering moisture. It was one of those cold, drizzly, early April rains that dares you by its seeming futility to come forth and do weaponless battle and then sends you back discomfited and drenched. A woman was coming up the walk bent in a huddle over a bundle which she carried in her arms. Mary Louise gazed searchingly for a moment and then, as the figure would have passed the door, on around to the rear of the house, stepped out on the porch and called:

“Zenie! Zenie! Come in this way. There’s nobody around there.”

Zenie raised her head in mute surprise and then slowly obeyed. She shuffled across the porch, and at the door, which Mary Louise held open for her, paused and looked about her in indecision. She was a buxom creature, of the type that the Negroes about the station would call a "High Brown," but without the poise and aplomb that conscious membership in that class usually brings.

"Mis' Susie in?" she ventured, after a careful survey of the room had assured her that such was not probable. And her care, relaxed for the moment, allowed the corner of the shawl to fall from the bundle in her arms, which forthwith set up a remote wailing, feeble and muffled, though determined.

Mary Louise raised a skeptic eyebrow at the discredited Zenie.

"Sshh!" dispassionately urged the latter, scorning for once public regard and continuing to gaze about the low-ceilinged room for the absent but much-desired Miss Susie.

Such callous indifference baffled Mary Louise, even while it answered her innermost questionings, and for the moment she was voiceless. "What in the world——!" she said at length and hated herself for the vulgar surprise in her tone.

Zenie turned away from the inspection and, finding herself and appendage the centre of interest, bridled with a timid pleasure, and then poked a ruminative finger into the swaddle of shawl and comforter.

“Yas’m,” she began in explanation. “Done brung ’im to show t’ Mis’ Susie. Didn’ know you wuz home.” Her manner had all the affable ease of a conscious equal.

Mary Louise rubbed her eyes. Time was bringing changes; Zenie had once been humble. Her voice rang with an accusing hardness. “I thought you’d shut the door on that worthless Zeke of yours.”

Zenie did not raise her head but continued the aimless poking in the bundle, which strangely responded to the treatment and was quiet again. “No’m. He comes roun’. Eve’ now an’ then. Zeke’s got a cah!” A momentary gleam from dark eyes lit like coals into a sudden flare, and Mary Louise was conscious of a pride that was fierce and strong, even if new. She felt suddenly strange, foreign, like an intruder.

Their eyes met, and this time it was Mary Louise’s that fell. She felt embarrassed at the question that arose in her. Of course Zeke was the father. Such a question to the emancipated Zenie would be paternally insulting. She countered skillfully:

“What’s—his name?”

Zenie shifted the bundle in her arms and then reached over with her toe and thoughtfully pushed the stove door.

“Name Nausea,” she replied softly, still regarding the door which refused to shut entirely.

“Name’s what?”

Zenie raised her eyes and smiled. It was a sudden unmasking of a battery in a peaceful landscape. "Nausea Zekiel Thompson," Zenie continued, gazing down into the bundle with the simplicity of a great emotion.

For a moment silence descended upon the room. Mary Louise could not trust herself in the customary amenities. She stepped over to Zenie and the younger Thompson and peered into the bundle, conscious as she did so of a slowly opening door beyond them. A tiny weazened face and two beady blinking eyes were all she saw. Zenie was making a curious clucking noise.

"Yas'm," Zenie went on, encouraged into an unwonted garrulity, "Mist' Joe done give 'im that name. Hit's from de Bible, ain't it?"

"Mister Joe?"

"Yas'm. Mist' Joe Hoopah." There was a cheery ring to Zenie's voice that had been wont to drag so dispiritedly. "He say hit come so unexpectedly an' all you kin do is make the bes' of it." Her face was suddenly wreathed in an expansive smile. "Mist' Joe done hoorahin' us—Zeke an' me. Zeke don' min'. Nossuh. He say de baby look lak him." She held the bundle up and looked at it in rapt contemplation.

Mary Louise's lips shut in a tight line. She turned away from the pair in distaste. But just then a light step sounded and her feeling was di-

verted. Zenie did not hear the advent of another character upon the scene so absorbed was she in holding the centre of the stage. "Think hit's a pritty name, don' you?"

Receiving no answer she raised her eyes and beheld Miss Susie, whose critical gaze enveloped her sternly. Zenie dropped her eyes again.

"So you've finally decided to show up again, Zenie?" Miss Susie clipped her words off short to everyone. She was a wisp of a woman with little hands as dry and yellow as parchment. Her voice had a quavering falsetto break in it and her laugh, when there was occasion, was dry and withery and short-lived like a piece of thistledown.

Mary Louise was watching with interest. Zenie struggled for a moment and then turned and faced the inevitable. There was a growing decision in her manner.

"H'do, Mis' Susie! Yas'm. I 'cided I'd drop in on you-all. Show him to his white folks." She looked at Miss Susie and smiled a most uncertain smile.

And then for the first time was the import of the visit brought fully to the visitee.

"So," Miss Susie exploded, "that's where you've been. Out of town! Humph! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Zenie looked as though she would like to defend herself, but it was useless.

Miss Susie went on inexorably, "That worthless Zibbie Tuttle has been tearing all my good linen and lace to pieces for the past three weeks. And now I suppose I'll have to put up with her for a few weeks longer."

"Yas'm," Zenie replied weakly.

"However"—Miss Susie pronounced it as though it were one syllable—"I suppose I can't help it. What is it? Boy or girl?"

"Boy," said Zenie, and with growing decision, "but hit ain' him I come to see you-all about. No'm. Thank you jes' as much. I jes' aim to tell you I ain' take in no mo' wash. No'm. Zeke he don' want me to take in no mo' wash. No'm."

"Zeke!" Miss Susie's snort was very ladylike. "Zeke!—and what has Zeke to do with what *you* want to do?"

"We'se ma'ied, ain' we, Mis' Susie?"

This was irrefutable, but more so the changing viewpoint. Zenie had tasted emancipation. Miss Susie shrugged her shoulders and left the room with short hurried steps.

Zenie turned to Mary Louise. "I'm tiahed of the ol' tub. 'Tain' no use my weahin' myself out fu nuthin'. 'Sides, this heah boy a heap o' trubbel." She shook her head doubtfully.

Mary Louise disregarded the confidence. "D'you say Mister Joe—Mister Joe Hooper—named your baby? How could he? He's not even home."

“Yas’m. Yas’m, he is. He come in t’ see Zeke this mo’nin’. Mist’ Joe lookin’ mighty fine.”

Mary Louise felt a curious sinking feeling of being shoved into a discard. And then Miss Susie came hurrying back into the room. In her hand she carried a small bundle of red flannel cloth freshly cut from the bolt. Zenie eyed her uncertainly.

“Here. Here’s something to keep out the cold—next winter. And you oughtn’t to bring *it* out in such rainy weather.” She went to the door and held it open in all finality. And Zenie, with much secret and inner scorning for a ritual so antiquated and a gift so obsolete, could do naught but depart. Miss Susie had somehow managed to keep the advantage, and the two white women watched the departing figure shuffle down the walk, out through the sagging, squeaky gate. The clouds had broken in the west and a soft golden radiance suffused the row of maples that lined the fence along the street, and the swelling branches gleamed with promise. Over toward the east a patch of blue sky appeared, and then the tip of a sickle moon thrust itself through and floated entire for a moment on a tiny azure lake. A little breeze came round the corner of the porch from the sunset. It was as soft and warm as an unspoken promise, and it flipped back skirt hems and twisted hair tendrils most inoffensively.

“Come, honey!” Miss Susie said at length, wrenching herself loose from the charm. “It’s getting late.”

Mary Louise stepped slowly off the porch on to the spongy lawn that stretched out to a summerhouse partly covered with the skeleton of last summer's vines. "Just a minute, Aunt Susie," she answered, without looking back. "I want to see how the hydrangea is coming on."

Miss Susie turned and closed the door behind her.

Bloomfield had a quality of unchangeableness. Even in the dead of winter you could tell with half an eye how it would look bedecked in its summer finery. Down the stretch of years, past many an intervening milepost, it always stood clearly envisioned to its sons and daughters both natural and adopted. There was about four hundred yards of macadam street lined with oaks and maples as old as or older than the meeting house of early Post-Revolutionary days which stood at the cross-roads corner diagonally across from the glary white gasoline station. Half-way down the street, in a cluster of elms, stood the remnants of an ancient tavern, whose front wall, flush with the sidewalk, showed occasional bullet scars on the rough red brownstone surface. Green outside shutters lay inertly back from dull leaded panes which reflected metallicly the orange glow of the setting sun, and over the door, which was squat and low and level with the pavement, an ancient four-sided lantern, hung from a bracket of rusty black iron, was gathering cobwebs in disuse. All this lay within Mary Louise's field

of vision from the summerhouse and yet she saw it not. She was staring abstractedly at a wary robin that had stopped to rest on a fence post, his beak all frowzy with the débris from a recent drilling. The McCallum house—her father's—stood at the other end of the row of maples on the same side of the street as the meeting house and a hundred yards or so distant. There was quite an expanse of greening lawn in front and to the south, whereon stood the summerhouse, and a tangle of rose bushes hid the decaying board fence which marked the southern boundary. Along the brick sidewalk stretched a line of ageing wooden pickets and about midway in their extent hung the wooden gate with the squeak. The house was frame, low and wide-stretching, with an inviting verandah about a cavernous front door that was dark and rarely open. People used the side door into the ell sitting room, and the brick walk leading in a curved sweep to this doorway was free from grass. A high wooden lattice separated the front lawn from the backyard and sheds and stables, and about this lattice sprawled in luxuriant freedom rose vines and honeysuckle, just now faintly budding into life.

Mary Louise stooped and punched a hole in the soft earth with a little stick, unconsciously uprooting a tender shoot thereby. A black beetle came scurrying out of the decaying baseboard at this disturbance and was summarily filliped off into the

greening wastes of lawn. Collecting herself, she next inspected the branches of the plant near by and finding sufficient promise of green, straightened up and flung back an escaping wisp of hair, with a sigh.

There was nothing particularly noticeable about Mary Louise unless it might possibly be a certain fine-drawnness. Her eyes, which were brown, had a sort of set focus on the immediate, and there were some fine lines from the corners of her lips to her nose. She was slim and straight, with small hands and feet, and her arms, which were bare to the elbow, might have been soft and round, were it not for a sinuous tension that showed itself in little corded creases right where a girl's arms should be softest and roundest. And her hair had a way of coming down at all times and in all weathers. It had never been decided whether she were pretty or not. That was something that had never mattered—to her, at least.

As she threw back her head she was conscious of a general escaping of hairpins and a loosening of hair. With a frown she dropped her stick and turned her attention from horticulture to coiffure. A low whistle sounded from somewhere beyond the rose vines, and as she turned, with her fingers in her hair and elbows protruding, she saw a man come swinging along the walk past the boundary fence, his eyes sweeping the house from upstairs windows to side porch.

Mary Louise calmly proceeded with her toilette,

making no sign. He caught sight of her, paused a moment, and then vaulted stiffly over the picket fence into the yard.

"Lo," he said.

She had a hairpin in her mouth and returned the greeting with a slight lifting of eyebrows. As her head was lowered and her chin tucked in, this was a sufficiently effective reply.

"Musta rained pretty hard here," he ventured, as, noticing the damage that the damp grass was doing to his trouser hems, he covered the remaining distance between them in a series of violent haphazard leaps.

The hairpin rendered her response unintelligible.

"How d'you find things?" gaining her side, and a bit more calmly.

Mary Louise deliberately tucked in one last recalcitrant wisp and pinned it down, and then turned to him. "Pretty well." Her gaze was level and critical.

"Aunt Sue better?"

She nodded. Then she turned and slowly walked within the inclosure of the summerhouse and sat down. He followed her and stood framed in the doorway.

"What's the gloom?" he asked directly, after a moment of silence.

"Nothing," she said, a little too brightly.

"Not interrupting anything, am I?"

Disregarding this: "What are you doing in Bloomfield?"

He laughed. "Aren't sorry I came, are you? This is Saturday. Times have changed. Maybe you don't know. Proletariat's riding high."

"They're giving you the whole day now?" in a mildly dubious tone.

He turned away. "No. But Uncle Buzz was in a jam, and—well, I thought I'd better come." He turned on her suddenly. "Keeping tab on me, aren't you? How'd you know?"

"I reckon I'd better, Joe." And then more softly: "Think it's the best way to do? Uncle Buzz's been in deep water before." She rose to her feet and walked slowly to the opposite entrance. "How are things—at the works?"

He was silent a moment. "Same old place. Take more'n a war to change 'em." He came and stood beside her in the doorway. The sun was making a last desperate attempt to lighten the general gray of the sky with broad shafts of orange, and as they watched, it settled slowly and then dipped behind the dim blue of the distant hills. As at a signal, a bird in a thicket somewhere over beyond them began a long throaty warble. Another answered over to the left. Faint, liquid trip-hammerings, they were, upon brittle anvils.

"It's a good thing some things don't change," she said at length, in a low tone.

“I reckon.”

They watched the glow fade from the sky, the broad bands of orange receding swiftly westward, while the cloud rim above the horizon cooled softly into pink and coral and a sudden soft patter of rain upon the dried vines and leaves above their heads aroused them. Without a word, Mary Louise slipped past him and ran for the house. He followed.

On the side porch she turned and waited for him, and he came and stood before her, hatless, in the rain. “I’d better be getting back before it gets any worse—see you in the morning?”

“Let me get you an umbrella.” She turned and was about to enter the house.

“No. Can’t use ’em. Get hung up in the trees. What time you want to start out? Nine o’clock? See you at nine.”

“That’s too early. Make it ten. I’m busy. Besides, it’s Sunday.”

“Comin’ at nine,” he called over his shoulder and started for the gate.

She watched his retreating figure as he darted along through the shadow, and then she slowly turned and entered the sitting room. A dim yellow light from a single oil lamp on the table over against the right wall was feebly penetrating the deep shadows in far corners. The low-ceilinged room seemed huge and cavernous, with deep niches and crannies and bulky, shadowy objects. Miss Susie sat by the

table with her knitting, her face yellower than ever, her hands feverishly restive. She raised her head as Mary Louise closed the door, and the tiny lines, accentuated by the lamplight, covered her face like markings upon an ancient scroll.

“Why didn’t he come in, honey?”

“I don’t know, Aunt Susie. He was in a hurry.”

“What’s he doing in town? Thought he’d gone back to work in Louisville.”

“I don’t know, Aunt Susie.”

Miss McCallum picked up her knitting. She sniffed. “No, I s’pose not.”

Mary Louise went over and kissed her aunt lightly upon the forehead, and then disappeared through a shadowy door back into shadowy depths. Directly came a sound of clattering tinware and then the faint echoes of a song, hummed, and slightly nasal. A smile flickered across Miss Susie’s lips as she watched her fingers—the needles flitting swiftly in and out.

CHAPTER II

THEY drew rein on a hill which sloped gently away to the town a mile or so distant. Over to the right in a cluster of trees gleamed the white fences and buildings of the Bloomfield Fair Grounds like a blob of paint squeezed on a dark palette.

Mary Louise turned in the saddle and took a long thirsty look at the western sky. "I love these days that are unplanned. They bring so much more when there isn't any promise."

Joe took off his hat and wiped his forehead, keeping tight rein in the meantime with his other hand on his roan saddler, who, scenting the home stretch, was restless to be off. "After which original tribute to my day, I hesitate to tell you that it has been a hunch of mine for over a year—ever since that first spring in Texas. Made up my mind if ever I struck God's country alive and in one piece, I'd treat myself to a great bath of this sort of stuff. Unplanned! Humph!"

Mary Louise's tight little mouth relaxed but she did not shift her gaze. "You forget. It was not planned—by me." On rare occasions Mary Louise

could slip from her matter-of-fact self into coquetry and back again before one realized. It was like the play of a lightning shuttle, so quick that one rarely caught the flash of the back stroke. Joe had erred before. He was discreetly silent.

"I love it," Mary Louise went on, flinging back her head, "every stick, every stone of it. That half mile of turf down Blue Bottle Lane! I'd give ten years of my life to gallop the rest of it through country like that." And then, as though startled, she bit her lip and was still.

Joe smiled as he watched her narrowly. "A woman's a mess o' contradictions. Whoa! You, too," he called sharply to his mare. "Thought you wanted to eat grass a little. Whoa!" He reined up the tossing head with difficulty. And then to Mary Louise, "You're a sort of self-inflicted exile, aren't you?"

Mary Louise turned from her musing and gave him a look of most effective scorn. "Put your hat on," she said coldly. "You talk better through it." She was backing her mount out from the thicket whence he had thrust his nose and was wheeling him about to point him toward home. "I suppose you'd leave your job in Louisville and come back here to live yourself—just because you loved the scenery!"

"Not such a bad swap at that." But she was off and away. One rearing plunge and he was after

her. Down across the grassy sweep of turf they fled, across a shallow ditch, past a stretch of willow thicket, around a jutting knob of rock, into an arching avenue of trees. It was like dropping into a cool, shadowy bowl, the first shoots and sproutings of baby leaves from the branches casting a delicate tracery of shadow on the golden-green shimmer of the grass. Through an open gate they shot, he close behind, out upon a hard metallic roadway of macadam. Here Mary Louise reined in her horse and Joe instantly drew up alongside.

"It's lucky the street came along to help," he breathed. "Twenty yards more——"

"Mary Louise reached up a hand to her hair in a futile effort to stem the havoc there. A moment of furious attempt to quiet the racing in her veins, and then, quite calmly, "It's all as it should be. We've got to look out for such things and take advantage of them. There are no ifs and buts about being caught. You didn't—that's all."

Joe opened his mouth to speak, stared at her a moment, and then turned away his eyes. They trotted along in silence, the shadows deepening and lengthening.

Directly: "When does your tea room open?"

"To-morrow. I'll be fine and stiff to start it off." Both question and answer had taken on a fine flavour of impersonality. Quiet again, with only the clatter of hoofs on the roadway. Directly they turned a

wide sweeping curve and before them appeared a wooden gateway set at the end of an avenue of elms, at the other end of which showed, dim and forbidding, a house with columns and a green roof. Joe dismounted and, unlatching the gate, turned and stood grinning at her.

"So you're really goin' to try it out?" His voice had the quality of self-questioning.

It broke in on her musings and she seemed a bit impatient. "Of course I'm going to try it out. Only there isn't much 'try' to it. It's bound to make a go."

"Some little difference between a merely commercial proposition and a popular charity like the Red Cross. There's no percentage in just guzzlin' tea for fun unless you're doin' it to keep Americans from starvin' or doughboys from itchin'. You know what I believe?" He turned on her suddenly. "You're just scrapin' up an excuse to—to——" He stammered, hesitated in indecision. "Tea!"

"Don't be maudlin, Joe!" Her tone was very cold. "If you must know, we need the money and—— Well, I guess I learned enough about *tea* and *tea rooms* in the past ten or eleven months to know whether one will pay or not—if it's properly run. Got awfully hardboiled while you were in the army, didn't you? Come, open the gate."

He was silent. Mary Louise usually could put him in his place. But thus put in his place, Joe could

assume all the irritable stick-to-itiveness of a child. "How about Miss Susie?"

He watched the shot. For a moment it had no seeming effect, and then Mary Louise, turning loose all the pent-up outpourings to inner questionings, in a fury of righteous self-justification: "You needn't think I haven't thought about that. You needn't think I'm shirking my duty in any way. If you *knew*, you wouldn't ask such a question. Before you left we were just on the ragged edge, and now—well, somebody's got to do something to bring the money in. The place don't make it." Her voice quieted down a little. "It hasn't been an easy question to solve. Come, Joe! Open the gate."

He watched her curiously. "But the servants? You've still got the servants, Matty, and Old Landy, and that half-baked gorilla, Omar. Why not——"

"Yes, why not?" She turned on him. "Why not shut down the place, too, as well as dismiss all the servants, and live in one of the old stone quarters? Why not? Why not let your heels run down if they want to? It's much easier."

Quietly he pushed the gate open and stood waiting, holding it for her. Something in his manner struck her, and she reached out her hand from her seat in the saddle and touched him lightly as her horse swerved past. "There, I'm sorry, Joe. But you just hounded me into it somehow. I didn't mean it's that way with you. You know I didn't. You see what I

mean? One ought to try. Ought to try everything first, not just give up because everything doesn't seem just right. I *have* thought about Aunt Susie, and it breaks me all up. But it can't be helped." She waited till he closed the gate and with a quick swing-up into the saddle drew alongside. Slowly they walked their horses up the avenue.

"I s'pose you're right," he said at length. "Only—only it has seemed to me that there's a lot of good time wasted doing useless things. Would you rather run a tea room than do anything else in the world?"

She looked at him but they were passing a bend in the road, and the sun, having dipped behind a jutting hill, no longer lighted up the dusky avenue, and Joe's face was in semi-shadow. "I'd rather hold on to what I've got than lose the tiniest portion of it," was all she said.

Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed. "If they could only see me now!"

"They? Who, they?"

His face sobered, but there was a momentary twinkle about the eyes. "Who? Oh, at the office." And then, as dismissing the thought, "Uncle Buzz know you're openin' the tea room?"

"No."

"Then you ought to tell him. Give you a lot of invaluable suggestions as to how to mix up little 'what-for-you's.' Get 'em comin' and goin'. Also, Uncle Buzz's got a mint bed that has parts."

“There’s some patronage we will be forced to do without,” Mary Louise replied primly. They were nearing the house and as they approached, someone in one of the front rooms struck a light and it could be seen moving, the shadows dancing on the walls.

“Don’t overlook Uncle Buzz,” said Joe with a chuckle. “Don’t overlook any discriminatin’ taste. You can’t beat these horses of his.”

“No,” agreed Mary Louise, “nor——” and then checked herself.

The roadway turned sharply to the left and finished off in a circle, one arc of which touched the steps of an open porch. These steps were sagging and decayed, and the porch was swept by the gentle eddyings of leaves of past summers that had sought refuge there and had been undisturbed by the ruthless sweepings of winds or brooms. There was a haunting odour of pine and something else that was damp and old and weary and forgotten, and a shrivelled wisteria vine that clung with withered fingers to a trellis at the house corner began to whisper at their approach. A yellow bar of light shot for a moment across the porch floor to their feet, then disappeared. It was the lamp Mary Louise had seen farther down the driveway, and directly the side door opened and the mellow glow of it sent shadowy rings of light out toward them.

“Joe! Joe!” called out an anxious voice. “Don’t make noise. Keep ’way from the back.” There

was a moment's silence and as Joe made no reply: "Come in this way, why don't you? Better way come in."

And then Mary Louise saw a hand shade the uppermost part of the lamp. Then there was a pause, and then a figure came across the porch, a short figure casting grotesque shadows, a bit stiff, a bit unsteady, like the rings of light that went out in circling waves behind it. It was Uncle Buzz. He came and stood on the topmost rotting step. He bowed. With one hand holding the wavering lamp, the other bravely cupped before his chest, he bowed.

"Pardon," he said. "'N't know there were ladies."

"Miss McCallum, Uncle Buzz," interposed Joe.

"Honoured, 'm sure," Uncle Buzz responded with another bow, lower if anything than the first, so that the tip of his little goatee came within singeing distance of the lamp chimney, and he straightened back with a start, only to stare about him again, vaguely hurt. Collecting himself again, "Knew there was reason shouldn't go 'roun' th' back. Le' Zeke take horses. Zeke! Zeke!" he called in a falsetto quaver. "Come in this way, madam," he added with grave dignity, but curtailing the bow.

For a moment Mary Louise was fascinated. Old Mr. Bushrod Mosby she had known for years—a veritable rustic macaroni, a piece of tinselled flotsam floating on backwater. He had always called her M'Lou; later occasionally Miss M'Lou. Now the

rhythm of some ancient rout was stirring old memories, and the obligations of host sat pleasantly heavy upon his befogged consciousness. He bowed again.

“No, thank you,” she summoned her resources. “We’ll be getting home. But we’ll just leave the horses here,” she added a bit hurriedly, anxious to be off. Echoes were sounding along a length of hallway and she was not desirous of the prospect of seeing Mrs. Mosby—Aunt Loraine—who was apt to prove a most discordant fly in the ointment of harmonious hospitality. So she turned to go, but turned too late. The door opened again and another figure appeared, a brisk figure, at which the dead leaves of the porch bestirred themselves in vague, uneasy rustlings. Uncle Buzz stepped meekly aside and Mrs. Mosby—Aunt Loraine—joined the group, giving him a momentary withering glance. She was an inexorable woman, an inch taller than Uncle Buzz, who stood five feet three, but she matched him whim for whim in her attire. Her hair looked black in the graying light; in reality it was splotched and streaked with a chestnut red, colour not so ill as misapplied. Her dress rustled as she swept forward and there were numberless faint clickings and clackings of chains and bangles about her. A high boned collar with white ruching helped her hold her head even more proudly straight, and the smile she shot Mary Louise was heavily fraught with a sickly sweet though rigorous propriety.

"You must come in, my dear," she lisped. "Such exhausting exercise! You wouldn't think of going one step further without resting. Here"—she reached out one hand toward Mary Louise, testing the meanwhile the security of the upper step with the tip of a shiny shoe—"the man will attend to the horses."

"Man! Yes," Uncle Buzz recollected with a start. "Zeke! Zeke!" he began to shout again. "Come here, suh!"

"Bushrod! Be still!" hissed Mrs. Mosby.

Almost was Mary Louise tempted to accept and stay, he looked so helpless, in such terrific danger, standing there blinking at them, his eyes vaguely trying to focus, and so mildly blue. His head with the graying hair so closely cropped gave him an odd appearance of boyishness, to which the smart little bow tie added not a little. He was trim, dapper, in spite of the fact that his standing collar was a size or two too large; in spite, too, of the tiny, well-trimmed goatee. He looked like a faun in trouble. With a shadow of distress crossing his face, he gave ground and backed away, the lamp tipping perilously in his grasp. Joe sprang forward and rescued it, setting it on the porch railing.

"We'd better be going, I reckon, Aunt Lorry. Miss Susie's all alone," he explained.

Mary Louise recovered herself with a start. What could she be thinking of, letting Joe make her

excuses for her? Somehow she felt a sharp little wave of irritation against him for it. She hastened to add, however, "Oh, no, Mrs. Mosby. Thank you so much. I really must be getting home. Aunt Susie *will* be worried. It's quite dark."

The little woman murmured something, and then, "And how is your Aunt Susie? I must call. Give her my love, be sure," all in one breath.

"I will. You must," agreed Mary Louise, and turned to go. And as she did so she caught a most lugubrious expression on the face of Uncle Buzz, a gradual lengthening of all the muscles on one side of the face, resolving itself finally into a prodigious wink, deliberate and malign. Fortunately, it passed in the darkness the regard of the partner of his joys and sorrows and roused no answering spark.

They made their adieus and passed on down the shaded avenue on foot. Mary Louise gave an odd little shiver as they walked out into the shadow, past the circle of the lamp on the railing. Uncle Buzz—Mr. Mosby—had seemed always just a piece of background, a harmless bit of scenery, a catalogue of amenities, a husk, a shell—she wondered how many other things. And now he was cropping out with a personality, had desires, problems, secret plottings, all behind the mask—a Machiavelli.

She was aroused by a chuckle from Joe. The chuckle jarred. She turned and frowned at him in the darkness. Their shoes crunched in the small

gravel of the roadway and then directly they came to the gate and turned along a wooden walk.

"Uncle Buzz's sure ripe," Joe's voice came out of nowhere. "Been ripe for over two days. Time he was being picked," he continued.

"Joe!"

"Oh, don't get shocked. You aren't, you know. It's nothin' new!" He paused a moment as if to consider. "Reckon Aunt Lorry's busy with the pickin' now. She'll hate you," he added as an afterthought.

"What for?" asked Mary Louise.

"For seein' him." Joe chuckled again and relapsed into silence.

They walked the rest of the way without speaking, around one corner past the old meeting house, beneath the low-branched maples, up to the McCallum gate. Mary Louise opened it and held it open, her arm barring the way.

"Well! To-morrow's another day," said Joe, apparently disregarding it.

"It's just as well," replied Mary Louise. "I'm not quite sure the army's helped you much, Joe."

"The army? Helped me?—I don't get you," he tried to see her eyes, puzzled.

"You're flippant—about things that are not trivial."

"Oh!" he laughed. "It doesn't always rain when it clouds. Wait till we get into some real heavy

weather. What's the harm, anyway? We should bother."

"That's not the only thing. You were making fun of Zenie's baby—just like it was a little animal. They might find out some day *how* you quoted from the Bible. Of course, there's no real harm done—but I don't like it."

Joe slid his hand softly along the top bar of the wooden gate till it touched hers. She drew quietly away. "Perhaps!" he said. "The old world runs along pretty well whether we bother or whether we don't. It doesn't make much difference what we do or what we don't. The old fellow's heart's all right, I reckon, and as for the niggers!—just as good a name as Loraine. My Lord!"

She stood silent, in thought. A faint reddish glow came to them from the curtained glass door of the ell sitting room. "Just a little sermon to start us out right—back to work. It *is* a serious business, you know, Joe—reconstruction! It's a big task. Let's not fall down on it or be trivial—shirk any of the responsibilities. Good-night," she added suddenly, giving her hand. "It's been a glorious day. I'll see you—in the city."

They parted, and he could hear her scrape her feet at the edge of the porch. The stars were winking through the branches of the maples and somewhere in the darkness a gutter was keeping up a monotonous dripping. He passed the corner and turned

back to the road with the overlapping elms, walking with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his eyes watching the road. "Humph!" he said after a while, out loud, and then began to whistle softly to himself, shuffling with his feet on the gravel in time to his whistling as he walked.

CHAPTER III

JOE HOOPER was not a handsome man. He was of that type so often seen in the South, tall, gangly, and very dark, with a sallow complexion and a general air of inertness that always misleads the stranger to the type. Insignificant looking, perhaps, but they will be found, on later acquaintance, to be worming themselves into general regard without effort. The law claims many of them and occasionally the raising of stock and the tilling of soil, though usually as proprietors only, it is true. Sometimes they are swept into strange waters where, if they float about long enough, they manage by some inherent mordant capacity to colour the entire complexion to their own. There are exceptions, of course.

Joe's father had lost his farm through foreclosure. It killed him. This fact and the presence of some alien strain sent Joe to Louisville which had some of the elements of the melting pot and some traditional elements of opportunity. He was twenty-four when he made this change. For two years he had resisted fusion and escaped opportunity. He had fallen into a job with the Bromley Plow Com-

pany and risen to the exalted status of stock clerk when the war came. The war, or rather the idea of the war, had proved a great relief to his imagination and he had enlisted at once, as a matter of fact, on the second day. This notion of service had been the one thing stronger than the influence of Mary Louise, which had been, it must be confessed, the main reason for his sticking as long as two years. The Plow Works had seemed a rather tedious road to a *Restoration* and the *Barebones Parliament* that sat in the inner office had seemed inexorably determined to make that road as devious and difficult as possible. He had escaped gladly. But the war had come to an end with him still in service on this side and he had at length returned with many things unsatisfied. One of these had been his idea about Mary Louise. She, too, had been swept into the vortex, into a mild eddy of it. The Red Cross had found her useful in the maintenance of a tea room for the enjoyment of the men at Camp Taylor. It had sounded innocent enough, but upon Joe's return he had found that she had in some way been galvanized. She was one of the war's changes; he, unfortunately, not so.

He did not know clearly just what he had expected upon his return, but then he had not expected the kind of return that he had experienced. There had been nothing epochal in it. Even his job was waiting for him; it seemed to him even the same routine

details. One file of correspondence that he had found upon his desk that first morning had had a singularly familiar look. It would always stick in his memory. First there had been a moment of high anticipation at the station with the taxi-men calling out the names of the hotels, and stretched across Main Street he remembered seeing a large banner flanked with bunting and with "Welcome Home" inscribed thereon. Then he had watched the familiar landmarks as he rolled southward in the street car with an odd little feeling of "Hello, there you are again"; and the Works, looming up in the distance at the end of the line, with its tall brick stack, was a sort of culmination. Not exactly a culmination, either, for he was conscious of a jarring note. Then the oak-panelled lobby, with the time clock, a sombre monitor, took just another grain of carefree satisfaction from the sum total of his feelings; and finally—his desk, and the worn, thumb-edged file! The first letter therein! "Recent shipments castings EE23, G143, F47, and J29 have come to us unannealed. J29 shows fins and sprues; the hole in EE23 is in most cases completely closed; and G143 and F47 are so rough that they will not fit into their respective sockets without machining. Will return same via local freight today." That was all. An Homeric welcome into very deep water! Such had been Joe Hooper's homecoming.

As for Mary Louise—well, there had been nothing quite so definite. He had met her at the tea room—there had been one final week of closing after his arrival—and he had not quite made up his mind about her before she had left for Bloomfield, beyond a certain stiffening of fibre, an aloofness that was new, and a business-like air that seemed to say “Come across,” that he did not exactly like. But then a week is not a very long time to get down to bed-rock with a person, especially when that person is busy ten hours out of the day and thinking the other fourteen about the ten that have just passed.

Four weeks had rolled around. It was the first of May. Joe sat at his desk absently fingering a stack of paper slips. They were reports from the various assembling shops advising him of the number of bolts of certain styles and sizes used in those respective shops that day. He was supposed to post these amounts in a stock ledger against the various sizes and styles and note the approaching shortages wherever they came. There were between fifty and a hundred slips. The window was open opposite his desk and a delightful breeze was curling up the edges of some papers which had been thoughtfully weighted down. Joe gazed, heavy lidded, through the window. An automobile, a long, slouchy black one, went whirling by with the tonneau full of girls. Their veils were streaming and fluttering out behind, many-hued and flimsy.

They were all gazing at the office windows as they passed. "One might think it was a reformatory or the county workhouse or something," he thought. He turned dully to the stack of reports and began to count them. He felt stale—flat.

He heard his name called, and turning, saw Mr. Boner standing at the corner of the partition looking at him over his spectacles. Mr. Boner was a tall, heavy man with nervous twitchings and anxious eyes that were eternally shifting about beneath their brows for something disturbing. He was responsible for keeping the warehouse filled, the warehouse whose books Joe kept, and it was his further duty to keep it filled as cheaply as possible. The threat of failure in either was what caused that eternal shifting. It was a sort of high-tension vigilance.

Joe rose to his feet, obeying the monosyllabic summons, and followed Mr. Boner around the partition. Mr. Boner rated a private office, where he could worm information, trade secrets, and occasional concessions from travelling salesmen. There was nothing social about the place. As Joe turned the partition corner and stood in the doorway, the old man had already seated himself at the desk. His fat hips completely filled the chair. He was apparently staring at something on the desk before him, but Joe could catch the occasional shifting glimmer of his eyes at the corners and knew he was

looking at him. Suddenly Mr. Boner turned to the inner corner of the desk, started to speak, strangled, and with difficulty recovered himself. His voice, when finally he did recover it, was so loud that it startled even himself, and just as suddenly he lowered it to confidential pitch. Joe had been a witness to this procedure many times before but it never failed to interest him. In fact, Mr. Boner was himself a study. There was an old-fashioned golf cap perched on the top of his graying head and his close-clipped moustache was silvery white, in marked contrast to the pink-and-white mottle of his cheeks, which hung down over his collar in folds, like some dependable old foxhound's. One hand lay fat and puffy on the desk, clutching a pencil in a nervous grip. And the middle of him—he seemed to bulk and fill out the entire chair—so incongruous with his little feet and mincing gait! It was as though as much as possible of his body were seeking to escape that all-devouring tension in relapse. How familiar it all was! Even during those months at camp the picture would recur and Joe would laugh softly to himself. Poor old duffer! He was a product of the plant just as much as ploughs and tillage implements were. How soon would *he* begin to show the indelible imprint?

The voice rose sharply. Joe realized that Mr. Boner was speaking to him—was speaking with great feeling. He came back to realities with a jerk.

“Out of carriage bolts two one half one quarter,” he was saying. It was probably the second time he had said it. He choked with emotion and had to seek refuge again in the receptacle on the floor at the left-hand corner of his desk.

Joe seemed unmoved.

“Book shows been out since April nineteenth.” The old man turned to observe the effect of his damnation.

Joe quivered but showed no sign.

“Make out memorandum cut down one thousand five one half by one quarter.” He spoke it explosively, keeping a furtive eye on that left-hand corner. “Have a surplus eleven thousand of them.”

Joe guiltily felt that the old man knew the stock books better than he himself. A little spot of red appeared in each cheek.

Mr. Boner shoved two sheets of yellow paper across the desk toward him. “I’ve reordered replacement one thousand five one half, cancellation one thousand two one half.” This with an air of satisfaction. There was nothing more to be done, patently. “Waste stock,” Mr. Boner muttered.

Joe turned to go.

Mr. Boner exploded again. This was not all, apparently. “Blue annealed sheets,” he called, sputtered, gripped the arms of his chair convulsively, recovered, and sat glaring helplessly.

Joe availed himself of the opportunity. “Have

a memo for you on the desk." In spite of himself his voice sounded nervous. "Just out of two sizes to-day." He waited.

The old man turned and bent his head over his work. *That* was over. Joe returned to his desk, got the memo, and entered the little office again. As he slipped the paper across an intervening table, Mr. Boner straightened from a stooping inspection of a lower desk drawer, and Joe saw him furtively wipe a knife blade on the leg of his trousers and then turn upon him a look of mildest blue. There was a bulge in his left cheek as round as an acorn. Neither spoke. A privacy had been violated. Joe felt like a "Peeping Tom."

Noiselessly he slipped around the corner, back to his desk. The breeze was still blowing merrily through the window and two clerks at desks across the aisle were shoving pencils and rulers and like equipment into their proper drawers with a smug sort of satisfaction shining in their drawn faces. He looked at his watch. It lacked a minute of five-thirty. Then he looked at the stack of reports again, paused, and with an air of sudden decision dropped them into an open drawer. Opening another drawer he swept all the movable articles on his desk thereinto, careless of the confusion he caused, seized his hat from a peg behind him, and strode across the office, out through the door, into the oak-panelled lobby. For a moment

he stood before the clock. Its hands showed five twenty-nine. He paused, then deliberately punched his number, descended the steps, and went out through the door on to the street. The whistle was blowing as he went down the walk. The street was deserted. He felt eyes somewhere on his back but walked on in apparent unconcern. He was conscious of a peculiar mixture of emotions, a little guilt, a little shame, a little furtiveness, and more than any, a lifting sense of relief, freedom. The air was light, cool, and invigorating. There was a pleasant crunch of dry dusty cinders beneath his feet. And then he saw a venturesome bluebird come darting across the open fields to the west and perch for a moment on the top strand of the barbed-wire fence of the Plow Works, a few yards ahead of him. It sat there swaying and watching him and, as he approached nearer, it took wing and darted across the Plow Company's grounds eastward toward the city. Joe filiped a wire paper clip after it.

"You had better turn around and go back where you came from," he called after it softly.

He proceeded homeward.

As he climbed the boarding-house stairs to his room he felt listless. For four weeks he had climbed those listless stairs. There had been one brief respite—the two days of Bloomfield with its easy relaxation. What lay at the end of the road? Whither was he tending? Mr. Boner's shoes? His

desk was the step next below the little private office. He laughed shortly to himself as he opened a bureau drawer and selected a clean white shirt. The touch of the clean linen encouraged him a little. He began to whistle. He had a "date on" with Mary Louise. He had asked her to go to the vaudeville. Two or three hours of pleasant forgetfulness, anyway. Mary Louise—the thought of her brought a vague feeling of unrest. For over two weeks he had tried to get her over the 'phone. She had either been out when he had called or had pleaded some other engagement. Finally he had got the engagement for to-night three days ahead. And she had as good as promised to see him right off, immediately after that week-end in Bloomfield. Stranger! Stranger in the city! That did not sound very much as if she were a stranger. He wondered what she could have been doing. She had met a good many people while she was doing Red Cross, probably, people in the army—men—officers, now in civilian life. Why not? And yet he had felt the least bit irritated and a little bit lonely. For *his* friends had scattered, it seemed. And then they had not mattered much. And he had rather looked forward to the coming summer with Mary Louise in town. Now he didn't so much. It was foolish, too. There wasn't any reason for it. A man shouldn't pin his resources down to one spot.

He washed, dressed, and then went to dinner at a dairy lunch around the corner. The boarding place

furnished breakfasts only. Then there was an hour and a half to kill before he could go for her. She had a room in a down-town apartment, not over three blocks away, and that would take but a very short time. He wandered over to the public square. Some old men were sitting on a row of iron benches lining the sidewalk, facing the street. They surveyed him critically as he passed by. He walked up and idly inspected the kiosk where the weather-bureau reports were posted. He noticed it predicted continued fair. Then he turned and walked in the street for about a block, gazing in shop windows. There was nothing in any of them that he particularly wanted. He stopped at a street corner and looked up and down both streets. A few desultory pedestrians were walking hither and yon, leisurely, with no apparent purpose. It was the lull of supper hour and there was an orange glow that penetrated even down to the streets which were mere canyons between sombre, artificial cliffs of masonry. To the west a small patch of open sky glowed sulphurously through a smoke pall. A city *was* a poor place to spend time in—really live in, he thought. And Mary Louise—he wondered if she thought so, too, she who had been raised in the greenest of all green country, in the widest and cleanest of spaces. Probably not. At least, it didn't look like it. A city was a good place to work in. One could work anywhere—if the work was all right. She had seemed keen about her work.

She probably had had a lot to do, getting things started. She'd probably not had much time. He might have missed her during her leisure hours. It was possible she was as desirous of some outdoors, of some clean air, some blue sky, as he was.

Almost with the force of a decision he turned and walked back to the square and sat down. He looked at the clock. It said five minutes after seven. There was still an hour.

He sat and deliberately waited.

The time eventually passed, and before he had really gathered together his thoughts into orderly array she was meeting him at the door of her apartment, a little flushed, a little hurried, quite brisk and apparently eager to be at the business at hand. There was also an air of preoccupation as if she were revolving over in her mind some previous matters of which the threads still remained untangled. In this respect there was change. The old Mary Louise had been as open as a wild rose, as freshly and sweetly receptive to whatever wind came along. She had gathered complexity, was more serious, laughed less, frowned more.

They walked along the street in the gathering darkness soberly, he returning monosyllabic answers to the perfunctory questions which she fired at him, brightly crisp. Like the questionnaire of a superior officer he felt. Then for nearly a block they said nothing. Glancing sidewise at her he caught the

straight, almost grim line of her mouth and the little pucker between her brows. As if realizing she was being observed she suddenly asked:

“What are you doing out at the Works?”

Joe paused a moment before replying. “When I was in Texas,” he began, “out in the sticks, we had a flood, and the road from headquarters was in danger of being washed away. Culverts too small. Had one nigger standing on the bank of one stream by the head of a culvert catching the sticks and brush and dragging them up on the bank so they wouldn’t clog up the hole.” He spoke in a quietly reminiscent tone.

She turned and looked at him curiously. “But I said, ‘What are *you* doing *now* at the Works?’”

“I know,” he continued, in the same tone. “That’s what I’m doing at the Plow Factory. Keeping the water running.”

She smiled, just a flash of a smile. “Doesn’t sound so bad, even if you are secretive about it. How did the nigger take care of his job?”

Joe looked up quickly. “Oh—he? He fell asleep. And then he fell in the creek.”

Mary Louise was watching him, waiting for him to finish. At last he seemed to have got her entire attention. “And then?”

“Then he got pneumonia—and died.”

They crossed the street. Up ahead the lights of the theatre gleamed dazzling white. The crowd

was getting almost too thick to permit conversation.

“You don’t like your job then?”

He flared into sudden unexpected defense of it. “Well, I haven’t gone to sleep on it yet.”

They said no more, for the task of passing the ticket chopper and then of getting settled in their seats was all absorbing. And then directly the curtain rose and Joe found himself slipping into a delightfully relaxed forgetfulness. He was being amused. His good humour was returning. He got an occasional glance at Mary Louise, sometimes during contagious gales of laughter that would sweep the audience, and saw her smiling slightly, mostly with her eyes; and was puzzled, for the humour was not that sort. Had he stopped to think, or had he been more experienced, he would not have been thus puzzled, for he would have realized that the sudden putting on of sophistication is always a puzzling thing.

But he banished the question and gave himself up entirely to enjoyment. And when the final curtain fell he rose to his feet with a faint inner sigh of regret. It was with high good humour that he gained his companion’s side outside the theatre.

“We’ll get a bite to eat down in the Rathskeller,” he suggested gaily.

“No, Joe, let’s not. This is enough for one evening.” She turned as if to start southward, toward home, but he seized her arm, laughing:

“Maybe it’s enough for you, but it’s not enough for me. Come on. Be a sport. You’ve been dodging me long enough.”

“Dodging you?” She was all hurt surprise as he hurried her along.

Joe’s method was improving. “Well, come along, then—if you don’t want me to think so.”

Mary Louise let it go at that. She came.

A revolving door that swept outward musty and yet alluring odours swept them inward. They descended a flight of winding steps to a subterranean anteroom of stone. Dim lights winked at them from stone niches and from a cleft in the rock to one side a prim little maid in a ruched white cap took Joe’s hat. There should have been a troglodyte attendant, instead. On the other side of swinging glass doors was much clatter and laughter and the indistinct voice of a woman above a rhythmic strumming and the bleat of a saxophone. The transition to this other side was sudden and bewildering. The glimmer burst into a glare, the dim echo swelled into a roar as the door opened, and Joe stood blinking, asking for a table for two. As he threaded his way between tables, past careening waiters swinging aloft perilous trays, a girl in a crimson evening frock came wandering carelessly through the aisle toward him, her hands clasped behind her back, her eyes searching the crowd sitting about her. Her figure was short and pudgy and so violently compressed

into her crimson gown that she seemed to be oozing out of a scanty chalice. She was singing a most provocative song and, catching sight of Joe as he struggled along, face uptilted, and, looking into his eyes most impudently, let him have the full import of her words.

Joe gave her a deliberate, knowing wink. With a careless shrug she moved away in search of more promising and sensitive material.

He passed, the toxine of gaiety mounting to his head, to a small table tucked into a remote corner, where the waiter was holding out a chair for him.

“Won’t do, George,” he said, refusing the proffered chair. “We can’t be buried way back here. We aren’t dead ones, you know.”

The waiter raised a deprecating shoulder but Mary Louise broke in, “Oh, don’t bother! This is all right, Joe.” She had already seated herself and was drawing off her gloves. Her face looked hot and weary, and long wisps of hair were clinging damply to her temples.

“Wish we could have had a table over there,” indicating two or three vacant ones near the orchestra and the base of the jongleur’s operations. “We’re out of it here. Well, at any rate, what are you going to have?”

She turned from a weary inspection of adjoining tables. “Oh, anything. Some lemonade, I suppose.”

“Don’t want to celebrate? This is our first party.” His eyes and smile were eager.

“No. Of course not, Joe. You know better than that.”

“Two lemonades,” he said to the waiter regretfully. Somehow it seemed like a waste of atmosphere, a waste of fuel, pulling a rowboat with a turbine—to be drinking lemonade in a place like this. Many bitter similes occurred to him, but he banished them.

“The old girl looks like a rash, doesn’t she?” he said, indicating the singer who was wandering about amongst the tables in another part of the room.

Mary Louise looked at him suspiciously. “How’s that?”

“She’s a-breakin’ out.”

Neither paid any further attention to this atrocity; she, because she willed otherwise; he, because he was blissfully unaware.

But her apathy was noticeable. He made one or two violent efforts to spur her flagging spirits and then, becoming touched by the contagion of her reserve, lapsed himself into silence. They sat and sipped their lemonades, thoughtfully inspecting their straws, dolefully ruminative. Their little table was like a blot on a snow-white expanse of joy.

Joe came to the bottom of his glass and made a vicious noise in the residue of cracked ice. He looked

up to see how she might be taking it and saw a gleam of pleasure pass across her face. It quickly subsided and gave way to a look of preoccupation. He was watching her intently now. And then she smiled and looked beyond him, stretching her hand out in recognition. Someone touched the back of his chair. He looked over his shoulder, saw a man's figure standing there, and then he rose to his feet.

Dimly he heard Mary Louise's introduction. It was a Mr. Claybrook or something like that.

"Won't you pull your chair up?" Joe invited.

Mr. Claybrook decided he would. He was a big man, a grave man, a man of considerable poise, and possessed of whimsical crow's-feet in the corners of his eyes. Mary Louise's apathy seemed to retire a little at his approach.

"Glad to see you survived last night," he said to her with a faint smile.

She flushed, and Joe felt a little roughness under his collar.

"How's the tea room coming? Roused out any hard drinkers yet?"

"Oh, we're not looking for that. We hope to make a few steady friends, but we're depending on the ebb and flow." Her colour was mounting, and had not Joe been so uncomfortable he would have seen how pretty she was. But he sank deeper and deeper into a sullen and unreasoning discomfort. The two had evidently had considerable in common before. He

felt awkward—knew of nothing to say. Claybrook, on the other hand, was enjoying himself.

And apparently sensing the tension in Joe's mind, and seeking to lighten it a bit, she volunteered:

“Captain Claybrook is going to help us put the tea room across. He was one of our best little patrons in Camp Taylor.”

Claybrook looked self-conscious; Joe even more embarrassed. And suddenly a strange look crossed her face and she broke off her explanation. Joe turned and looked in the direction toward which she was staring wide-eyed.

And across the room, weaving through the labyrinth of tables and bearing straight down upon them, came a strange apparition. With unsteady gait, his hand stretched out in caution before him and a watery smile upon his lips, came Uncle Buzz. An incongruously picturesque figure amidst smartness and glitter. His head was as sleek as ever and he had waxed the tips of his moustaches so that they stuck out jauntily as did the tips of his black bow tie. But his jacket was short and rusty and in need of pressing, of which fact he seemed blissfully unaware. For, having sighted them, he was coming on steadfastly, past pitfalls that yawned, with a smile upon his face.

Joe felt a peculiar exulting glow pass over him, whether at the sight of a familiar, friendly face or for some less creditable reason. Distress was plainly

written on the face of Mary Louise. Claybrook talked on, unconscious of what was coming.

And then Mr. Mosby drew up alongside and favoured them with an elaborate bow from the centre of the aisle. A hurrying waiter, being thus perilously presented with an unexpected hazard, made a desperate swerve in mid-flight and menaced an adjoining table with the contents of his tray. A glass crashed, a woman shrieked, and Uncle Buzz serenely proceeded.

“Don’t get up. Pray, don’t get up,” he said to Joe and Claybrook. “Saw you from the door and merely came to pay my respects. Miss Mary Louise, we miss you in the old town.” He turned to her gracefully, and Joe could catch the faint aroma of Bourbon, thus immediately accounting to his own satisfaction for the easy poise and manner. Mary Louise was lost. She watched Claybrook, who seemed amused, and Uncle Buzz went on, turning his attention to Joe. “And by the way, Joseph, if you can arrange to, your Aunt Loraine and I would like for you to spend Saturday and Sunday with us.”

Joe knew how much his Aunt Loraine would subscribe to this courtesy. It meant work to do, that was all. But he was amused, felt singularly light-hearted instead of embarrassed. Who can say he was depraved? His voice was kind and cajoling as he replied:

“What are you doing in town, Uncle Buzz? Isn’t

the store open to-day? Mr. Claybrook! Mr. Mosby!"

Uncle Buzz acknowledged the honour and then he turned on Joe a dignified but hurt surprise. "I come to town quite frequently," he said, clipping his words. "A Mr. Forbes of Boston wrote me to meet him here about some saddle horses." This was said quietly but with proper emphasis. Joe wondered how far it strayed from the truth. There were only two saddlers left, he knew. Uncle Buzz was swaying slightly to and fro and the little table was rapidly becoming the cynosure of all eyes. Mary Louise looked about her desperately. Uncle Buzz, smiling sweetly in the aisle, and threatening at any moment to shatter the illusion by falling prostrate, was entirely ignorant of her distress. The tables were reversed. Claybrook was silent; Joe held the centre of the conversational stage.

Suddenly Mary Louise arose. "We must be going," she said. She paused, gave them all an uncertain smile, and then she started rapidly for the door. Old Mr. Mosby looked mildly surprised, then accepted the situation as one too complex for his muddled brain. And Joe, after a first flare of anger, followed her in silence, leaving Claybrook and Uncle Buzz to contest the honours after him.

They parted in the lobby; Mary Louise with a bright spot on either cheek and her lips set in their tightest line; Claybrook suave and genial; Uncle Buzz

bewildered and in some way wistfully regretful. His watery blue eyes held in them an unanswered question that seemed too ponderous for utterance. Joe was silent.

He took her home, along the deserted streets as quickly as possible. For a long time neither spoke. Then it was some trivial amenity that she uttered to which he made even shorter reply. Up in the elevator they went, silently watching the floor. At the door of her apartment he inclined his head. "Good-night," he said, without offering to shake hands.

"What's the matter, Joe?" she asked, suddenly coming to herself and realizing the oversight.

"Not a thing," he said. "It's perfectly all right with me." He turned to go.

"Oh!" The exclamation was almost involuntary. She shrank back a little into the shadow. "It was a nice party."

He made no reply but acknowledged this with another slight inclination of the head. And then he started down the hall.

For a moment she stood and listened to the muffled sound of his footsteps upon the thick hall carpet, and then she softly closed the door.

CHAPTER IV

JOE had been right. There was a difference between an enterprise backed by popular sentiment and practically the same elements with the backing removed. In the first place, the patronage of the new tea room was not so brisk and what there was was more skeptically critical. There was not that carefree acceptance of things that overlooked deficiencies in the light of the cause they existed under. In fact, the helpful pressure that had held it all cemented had loosened. At the end of the first week the two cooks suggested a raise in pay amounting to ten dollars a month apiece. They did this in accord. And then, contrary to what might be expected now that the war was over, there was an insidious rising in the cost of everything, from table napkins to canned asparagus. Mary Louise began to feel that profits might not be so easy to estimate, after all.

Her coördinate, too, was constitutionally apathetic. She was a bovine creature who positively refused to get ruffled over obstacles, criticisms, or fate. Her name was Maida Jones. Two large pans of buns had burned. Mary Louise, seeking to fix the responsibility, had failed in doing so and was wracked

at the prospect of frequently recurring waste. Responsibility to be effective must be undivided. Maida had only laughed. And Mary Louise removed herself from the scene of her defeat and stood in the doorway of the tea room proper and stared bleakly across a vista of deserted tables at a languid and heat-ridden thoroughfare. It was going to be a "hit-or-miss" proposition, a careless, slipshod affair—this tea room—unless she did something to prevent it—and it was too hot. That was what was the matter. It was too hot. She brushed back the hair from her face and slumped. Behind her came the clatter of dishes. And then someone laughed, a coarse, raucous laugh. Mary Louise shuddered. The post-office clock boomed six and she suddenly realized that the day was over. There would be no belated custom, for the service stopped at six and the room was empty. Irritation gave way to discouragement. The day's receipts had been slim indeed. Just then she noticed an automobile roll up to the curb outside, and a man got out. She saw him start for the door, and for a moment she pondered whether she would accomodate him or turn him away. He opened the door. It was Claybrook.

"Hullo," he said, catching sight of her. "Afraid I'd be too late. Come take a ride."

That was exactly what she wanted to do. "I can't," she said. "I have to wait till they get through back there," indicating with a jerk of the

head those uncertain regions which had become suddenly quiet.

“Oh, let them take care of themselves. What is help for if you have to watch it every minute? Come on. It’s too hot to work any longer, anyway.”

She yielded. First she spent a moment or two before a mirror, tidying herself up, feeling as she did so a little thrill of anticipation. And then she stuck her head through the kitchen door and announced that she was leaving. “Don’t burn the whole place up, Maida,” she cautioned with a laugh as she caught sight of her sitting, humped forward in a kitchen chair, fat elbows resting on a table, placidly viewing a vast clutter of dishes that had not yet been put away.

Mary Louise escaped and clambered into the waiting car, into the vacant seat beside the driver.

They whirled away, turned a corner sharply, and soon were leaving the narrow, restricted streets of the down-town district which had been pulsing and glowing with heat all day. She caught a look at Claybrook in the seat beside her. He was as fresh and cool as though he had not been exposed to the weather at all. Instinctively she reached a restraining hand to her hair. It was blowing in wild disarray. A sudden stretch of stately old houses sitting well back on either side of the street, partly hidden by double rows of trees, caused her fresh doubts as to the fit-

ness of her attire. In her shirtwaist and skirt she felt like an intruder.

A man from the sidewalk bowed to them. So busy was she with her hat that she could not see who it was.

"There goes Wilkes," said Claybrook. "You remember Wilkes out at Camp? Had charge of the Post Exchange."

She hoped she had escaped recognition. As if for protection she slipped farther down in the seat and was less troubled by the wind. The neighbourhood through which they were passing was becoming even more fashionable, and aristocratic nurse-maids with their aristocratic charges, alike in white, starched, frilly things, were dotting the sidewalks on either side of the street, supplying a live motif to a prospect that might otherwise seem too orderly and remote. The lawns were beautiful, close cropped and freshly green, and frequent fountains sent a delightful mist across the pavement even to the street. It was all very cool and refreshing. She began to see where certain phases of city life might prove to be quite pleasant. The modern fleshpots may seem alluring not alone in retrospect.

At length they passed from the asphalt paving on to a roadway of yellow-red gravel, and up ahead, Mary Louise could see a stretch of open country and beyond, a ridge of misty blue hills. There was a double line of young maples on either side of the boulevard

and the fresh young leaves were rustling vigorously in the evening breeze as they passed. Claybrook settled down in his seat as they gained the boundary between paving and roadway with what seemed almost like a sigh of relief. He turned upon his companion a satisfied smile, meanwhile cutting down their speed appreciably.

"This is something like it," he said. "Pretty hot down your way to-day?"

"Terrible," admitted Mary Louise. "I don't believe those walls will get cool again before Christmas."

He smiled without answering, being occupied at the moment with a little difficulty in the traffic. Directly he was free.

"Rare old boy—the other night," he said, still watching the road.

For a moment she did not catch the reference.

"Down in the Rathskeller," he added.

A hot rush of confusion struck her and she made no reply, but he went on:

"I've often wondered what these people were like fifty years ago—living on top of the world, best farm land anywhere, fine old homes, lots of servants—nothing to do but enjoy life. Let it slip away from them, didn't they? Must not have known what they had." He had relaxed and was driving comfortably. And as though wrapped in a mist of his own musing he continued, his eyes fixed on the road before him, "I've often thought that if I ever got to the point

where I could afford it I would get me one of those old places—lot of land—stock it up well, fix up the house. I'd like to leave something like that to my family." He chuckled. "They might not appreciate it as much as I do, however."

"They might," she replied. "They might have just as hard a time trying to keep it as—as we have. Conditions might change again in the next fifty years."

He turned and smiled at her. "Hadn't thought of that." The crow's feet were thick about his eyes. "Who was the boy?—the one you were with the other night."

Mary Louise flushed in spite of herself. "Joe—Joe Hooper. You've heard me speak of him."

"Oh, yes. Lives in Bloomfield, doesn't he?"

"He did. Works here in town now—out at Bromley's."

He made no further reply, but somehow she felt an unuttered conviction, on the part of the man there beside her, of Joe's loss of heritage. And yet a certain compunction prevented her from making any explanation—that it was not Joe's fault. There was a sort of sacred inviolability about it. A hot little wave of feeling swept over her. She had treated Joe miserably. She had yielded to her feelings like a child. She ought to have been good sport enough to hide what she had felt. But she hadn't. She was a snob. She had hoped to conceal that she was not

their sort—Joe and Mr. Mosby. In a sense, she had been going back on her own people. As if she were trying to pass them—trying to keep up with the procession. And yet that was exactly what she was doing. But to show it!

The straight level path of the boulevard came abruptly to an end and the road diverged to the left and mounted swiftly, skirting the incline of a white, chalky hill densely covered with a tangle of scrub oak, buckeye, cedar, and much underbrush. The slanting rays of the sun were shut off abruptly as by a shutter and they rolled between stretches of shade that were mistily fragrant and cool. Even the upper air currents in the spaces above the road, up toward the sky, seemed shadowy and unharried by the fierceness of the passing sunlight. The motor settled down to the business of climbing, and once Claybrook turned to her with a look of appreciation.

“Some park, this.”

She hardly heard him, so intent was she on watching the road and the occasional glimpses, through the tangle, of declivitous stretches strewn with trunks of fallen trees and rank vegetation, down which the wind went wandering with vague whisperings. They had been suddenly transported out of the world of people into the world of hopes. The city had been left leagues behind.

They made a quick, sharp turn to the right, the road almost doubling back upon itself, and there was

a steep grade for a short distance, during which time Mary Louise caught herself leaning forward and holding her breath in an instinctive impulse to help the labouring car. And then they gained the top. Before them lay a tableland of many acres thickly covered with trees. The grass, in the open spaces between, was sparse, and there was much moss and lichen and drifts of withered leaves, dried by the sun of more than one summer; and here and there in the northern shadow of some gnarled trunk and in dipping hollows the leaves were packed close in a damp and moulding compress. Great streamers of wild grape-vine hung precariously from weary limbs and swayed to and fro gently in the wind that came mounting up the slope from the west and went dipping away to the eastward, leaving a soft, shuddering wake. It was as if a mellower spirit hovered about the old giant knob resting there, watching with its head all venerably gray, though the sunlight ere it faded was elfishly splashing the shadow with golden green, and little flecks of crimson and orange came flashing through the tangle of branches as they passed, making light mockery. And then the trees suddenly opened and they came out upon a flat bare knoll, where the road, making a loop, signified that its journey was over. Around the outside edge was a wall of loose stones from which the hill sloped steeply in all directions, and before them, stretching away for miles, lay the country through which they had

passed, all soft and green and gray in the distance. A huge smoke pall, its feathery top drifting slowly eastward, hung over a cup-shaped depression, and below it stretched a darker line, from which occasionally emerged a solitary stack, or above which a church spire, caught by an errant ray from the setting sun, would flash a momentary beacon. Slowly the mantle seemed to fade and mingle with the twilight, and even as they watched, a light flashed out, a single pin-prick of a light, and then another and another, as night, gathering in its intensity, swept over the valley, until it was met by an ever-increasing challenge. It was like a myriad host of fairy fire-flies, each diamond pointed, flickering, blinking, never still. And there settled on the under side of the smoke pall a lurid glow as of banked fires, waiting for the work of another day.

Mary Louise breathed a soft little sigh.

"It does get next to one, some way, doesn't it?" he said.

Rather to her thoughts she replied aloud: "To think of all those people living there, almost in the grasp of the hand. Think of them moving, scurrying about among those lights. It makes one feel it would be so easy to do things for them, move them about at one's will—from here. And yet——" She was silent a moment, thinking. "And yet even to be able to raise one's head above it all, to see—and be seen! Well——"

“That’s what I mean to do.” He spoke almost as if she were not there, and his voice, which was as though disembodied, and jarring a bit with its resonance, brought her back to the present.

“It’s a hard thing to do and I’ve come to think it takes sometimes a lifetime, but—it can be done.” He had turned and she could feel his warm breath in her ear. There was a note of assurance in his words and, as she watched, a change came over the scene before her and it all seemed like a huge graying blanket punched full of tiny, bright flat holes. Something had receded, escaped back into the darkness behind it all.

She made no reply.

“I wanted to tell you and it’s about as good a time as any. You may be needing some help. It’s not all so easy down there. And—well, if you need any help—make the way any easier for you—why, don’t hesitate to call on me.”

“That’s good of you,” she replied, and wondered at the lack of warmth in her own voice. “Perhaps I shall.” But she could not help feeling that in some way she had seen what she had seen—alone.

They sat a little longer in silence, and then Mary Louise straightened in her seat and called to him briskly:

“We *must* be going. Why, it must be eight o’clock. What have I been thinking of?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” he laughed.

“Come, take me home, man. Maida will think—all sorts of things.”

“You don’t have to answer to her, do you?”

“No. But let’s go.”

He stooped over and switched on the lights and immediately two long, ghostly streamers went searching out across the wall and rested lightly in the tops of some ragged trees on the slopes, bringing them grotesquely into focus, while myriads of tiny motes danced down the twin circular paths off into space. Directly there was a roar of the engine, with an occasional sputtering cough—for the night air was cool—and then Claybrook’s voice again:

“There really isn’t any great hurry. We can stop at the Gardens at the foot of the hill and get a bite to eat.”

“No, not to-night. Thank you ever so much.”

“But why not? We needn’t hurry then. It’s a pretty good place.” He seemed insistent, waiting, stooped there over the steering wheel.

“No,” she said again. “I must get home. Maida will be waiting for me and I’ve some work to do. And besides, I don’t want to go anywhere looking like this. I’m a fright, I know.”

He muttered something to himself as he threw the car into gear, and they went whirling around the circle of the road in reckless disregard for the menace of the rock wall. It was pitch dark as they made their way across the level top of the knob, with occasional

shadows of spectral limbs projecting their silhouettes against the sky, and once the jagged edge of a trailing creeper swished close to her head as they whirled along. Above the noise of the motor there was not a sound. Claybrook suddenly laughed:

“Some of the niggers down at the mill say this old hill is haunted.”

She clung to the hand-grip of her seat, her mind filled with a tangle of impressions, with a shrinking from the sepulchral depths below them, and an effort to recall in detail that vision of the city.

“I have to shake it off before I can be any more good. It’s like being moon-struck.” He took another sharp curve at reckless speed, the tires grinding on the gravel, the brakes screeching.

Mary Louise held her breath for a moment and waited. And then she touched him lightly on the elbow. “Oh, please!”

He laughed and for a short time was more careful, slowing down at the curves which came every hundred yards or so. “Feels like they’re coming after me. Like to get down to the level road again.” He made a quick swerve to avoid a pointed rock. “Must have been great, driving to the top of this with a horse and buggy. Not for me.”

And they were off again as swiftly as before. Twice they grazed the projecting roots of trees on the outside edge of the road by the scantiest of margins and once a board in a culvert snapped ominously

as they swept across it, and Claybrook laughed aloud. And Mary Louise, wide-eyed, sat in a frenzy of preparedness, her gaze glued to the winding, ever-dipping road in fascination.

Suddenly a shadow seemed to leap out upon them, out of the darkness—the shadow of a man. There was a moment's hideous clamour of the brakes, a sickening swerve of the machine, a man's shout, a sudden instant's flash of gleaming trunks brought sharply into focus, and then a slow, gradual letting down of her side of the car, inch by inch. She grasped the arm beside her to keep from falling, and then all was still.

A moment later she could see that they were balanced on the edge of a culvert; to her right was the darkness; up ahead, the lights were glaring impotently off into space. And then she realized that an arm was encircling her waist in an iron grip and that the motor was still thrumming and that someone was running around in front of the car and then peering off down the slope where they tipped so perilously. These things came to her in just that order. And directly she was on the road, trembling just a little and feeling very helpless, and Claybrook's voice somewhere over in the darkness was giving directions, sharp, irritated. To her knowledge he had not uttered a word during it all. She could hear them somewhere over there crashing about in the underbrush, an occasional word, an occasional suppressed

shout. Very unreal it was, with the stars shining faintly overhead, the black shadows all around, and those two shafts of light poking out into nowhere. She walked back to the inside edge of the road and sat down, and bye-and-bye she felt quieter. It had been such a childishly foolish thing to do and so useless. The minutes passed and she began to wonder what time it was getting to be. And then she felt a growing irritation and suddenly she was hungry. All she could hear was the threshing about of the brush and the sound of heavy dragging. Once she went around the rear of the car and peered down. She could dimly see that the rear wheel had passed completely over the brink, and below it lay a pile of sticks and brush. A little more and they might have rolled over, down into the darkness. She returned to her seat by the side of the road.

Just like a little boy he was, she thought—reckless, irresponsible, “full of the fullness of living.” And his tone, when she had spoken of the dead-level of life in the city below them and the problem of raising one’s head—“That’s what I mean to do”—had seemed so like the confident tones of a child on the threshold of life. Were we all like that, after all—lifted up for a moment so that we could see; blundering forward the next, blindly, into pitfalls of our own making? His very offer of help, there on the hilltop, had been naïve, and yet she was troubled by it. Why was he thrusting his stick into the still waters of her

life? And yet she had felt very much alone and in need of the realization of another presence.

And then suddenly she realized why and how it was she liked him. She liked to think of him as standing by, liked the realization of his strength, his confidence. He was big, he was good-looking, and there was a tonic freshness about him. He was good as a friend. And he needed watching over, needed guiding, himself. That made it all the better. And then she felt hungry again. But she was no longer irritated.

The roar of the motor roused her from her musings. There was a ripping, grinding noise and she could see the outline of the car move, sink back, and then lurch forward again. There was another whirring and grinding and then Claybrook's triumphant shout. She rose to her feet and walked over to him. They had succeeded. The car was standing, all four wheels on the hard, level surface, the engine racing like mad.

"Hop in," Claybrook called to her a bit shortly.

She complied and he reached forward to throw in the gear, when the man walked around in front of the car and held up a restraining hand. She saw then, for the first time, that he was a park policeman.

"Let's have your name before you go, friend," he said.

"But what for? There's no harm done. I thought I made it all right with you?"

"You did—with me. But then you're pretty

dangerous on these roads and I'll have to turn you in so that they can be looking out for you."

Claybrook sullenly complied. And then, throwing the car into gear, they slipped quickly out of sight. After they had rounded the curve, he turned suddenly to Mary Louise. "That's a new one on me. I tipped him for helping me get the car out, and then he turns and takes my name. You can't count on anybody these days—ever since the war."

"I think he has a sense of humour," she replied, laughing softly.

As they passed the road-house he suggested once again that they stop for a bite to eat, but upon her refusal he made no comment. The night was no longer clear; gathering clouds on the western horizon were gradually spreading across the sky, and as they crossed the line on to the asphalt paving again, it began to rain, a few scattering drops. At which she teased him about his altered driving. He laughed but made no answer.

But the shower did not come and directly they drew up at the curb outside her apartment.

"Don't stop," she said. "Don't bother. You must get in before the rain." She felt singularly good humoured.

"I'm sorry I made such a mess of things," he began clumsily, "and—and—you were pretty decent about it." It was a concession, but she could see he was rankled about something.

"I hope they won't fine you too much," she called after him as he started off. And then she walked thoughtfully into the hallway and stepped into the elevator and was carried swiftly upward.

"You've got to make allowances for them all," she decided mentally. "Yes," she added force to that decision, half aloud.

"What d'you say, Miss Mac?" inquired the elevator boy.

"I said, 'Seventh,'" she smiled at him.

She was met at the door by Maida with her hair in curl papers and a most prodigious yawning and rubbing of eyes. The ideal night life for Maida was that spent comfortably in bed.

"Thought you'd eloped," she ventured sleepily and then turned and shuffled off to the inner room. At the door she called over her shoulder, "There's a note someone left for you—about two hours ago."

Mary Louise looked on the table and, lying on a pile of magazines and newspaper supplements, was a plain, thin, white envelope. She picked it up and looked at it curiously, wondering from whom it could be. There was no address. She tore it open and read, and as she read she reached over one hand and steadied herself against the table. The note was from Joe, and laconic:

"They phoned me this evening your Aunt Susie had had another stroke. They said you had better come."

That was all it said. There was no expression of regret. There was no offer of help. She had a sudden rush of anxiety. But behind the anxious feeling was one of wonder and a tiny one of hurt. She laid the letter down upon the table and slowly and thoughtfully took off her hat.

CHAPTER V

THINGS had changed for Joe. It was as though he had been told that he had not amounted to much, that what he had come from had not amounted to much, and that in all probability he would never amount to much. Just how much had actually been suggested to him, and how much he had supplied out of the whole cloth of his imagination it is doubtful if even he could have said.

It was not the weather certainly. For the morning of the second day of May opened wide with promise. There was a lightness about the air and a clarity as Joe emerged from his lodging house from the ready-made breakfast which they doled out as though breakfasts were just like linen and towels and soap. The day would have made countless insinuations to a normal man. To some, it said golf; to others, a motor trip out to where a plethora of such bounties as it suggested might be available; and to others less fortunate—why, there was the “Ferry” just opening to hesitant crowds, with its band stand, its scenic railway, its forty-five minutes of vaudeville that was anything but mentally exhausting. It was an eloquent morning. But Joe turned a deaf ear.

His walk to the factory lay for a short distance along a pretty little park where, when the weather was proper, squirrels and babies and numerous other smaller, crawly things were wont to mingle together in democratic unconcern. But to him, this morning, it was just so much pavement.

He punched the time clock viciously as he passed through the office lobby and barely escaped collision with Mr. Boner as he turned the corner of the partition en route to his desk. Mr. Boner merely grunted. He bore in his hand a sheaf of orders for the mailing desk. He believed in getting an early start.

Joe sat down before his desk and gazed listlessly out of the window. The day arose before him in prospect, drab, desolate, and dreary. High up overhead, through the dingy panes, he could see the little fleecy clouds floating about in peaceful unconcern. May was a slack month. And at its end came June—June, with its four weeks' inventory period wherein each stick and stone of the entire plant, each ten-penny nail, each carriage bolt, would have to be listed, valued, and carried into an imposing total. It meant working late into the night under a pitiless glare with handkerchief tied about one's neck like a washer. It meant cramped fingers, and hot dry eyes, and a back that ached when it didn't feel crawly with infinitesimal bugs, and bugs that bumped and buzzed and then fell sprawling across

one's paper. Each item had to be entered upon the sheet. Each item had to be valued. Discounts had to be figured, extensions had to be made, figures had to be checked meticulously, and the whole thing eventually bound up in six or eight huge volumes which were then allowed to languish in the Company safe. He had been through it before. And the thought of it was intolerable. This was June. June and inventory and Mr. Boner seemed to him to be cut from the same piece. For neither did Mr. Boner escape. Instead, he came earlier, stayed later, and worked with more furious rapidity than ever. And he was Mr. Boner's successor—that is, if he hit the ball and worked hard enough to deserve it. The thought of the little boy whose mother gave him a nickle every time he took his castor oil manfully came to his mind as he sat and gazed out the window. When asked what he did with the nickles, the Spartan youth had replied: "Buy more castor oil with it." Joe wearily dragged one of his stock ledgers from the rack and opened it.

All that day, as he made his entries and checked his totals, came the thought, "Why am I doing this? What is it all for?" He was feeling the double edge of scorn no less keenly because only implied. Why wasn't he doing a man's work? Why was he humbly taking his turn in a servile and remote succession, where death's was the only hand that moved the pawns? Why had he come back to it? He dared

not confess the reason. The best he could do was admit to himself he had been mistaken. The rose tints had vanished from his sky and the path he had chosen was disclosed in all its drab ugliness. He had chosen it fatuously. The rose tints had been of his own making. He viciously snapped his mind shut on the thought. For a while he would feverishly clamp his attention to his work, while outside the sky continued serenely blue, and the breeze that drifted through his window was languorous and soft. But the work was too light. There was not enough of it, nor was it of the nature that demanded his absorbed concentration. He thought of Mr. Mosby, the unwitting cause of it, all. And yet he did not blame Uncle Buzz in the least. Rather he sided with him. They were both inferior animals—not to be mentioned in the same breath with progress, thrift, success.

Uncle Buzz had his troubles, too. He was book-keeper of the general store in Bloomfield, but he had never got to the point where he was absolutely sure of his trial balances. Nor had Aunt Loraine ever got to the point where she was absolutely sure of *him*, and he had had only the slightest hand in the management of what was left of the farm. The farm was Aunt Loraine's. But she always took what was necessary from what Uncle Buzz got from the store to make both ends meet on the farm, and that was, of late, becoming an ever-increasing dis-

tance. Uncle Buzz felt a proprietor's interest. He liked to speak about it as "his farm." Uncle Buzz would have loved to raise horses, thoroughbreds and saddlers, but for obvious reasons that had been impossible. But he went his jaunty way, waxing his moustaches, squandering his money on fancy neckties, taking his surreptitious nip with all the gay bravado of thirty years before, and getting seedier and seedier. He was a dandelion withering on the stalk. He had long since given up hope of being anything else but bookkeeper in the "Golden Rule," and indeed it was only the stock which he held in that institution that insured him the place such as it was. For Uncle Buzz was with age becoming more unreliable. His mind would play queer tricks on him. The figures would occasionally assume a demonic elusiveness and he could no longer carry his liquor with his former assurance. While outwardly he was the same suave, debonair old beau, he was beginning to have inner doubtings and despairs. And Joe, who had, as it were, taken up the pen when he had cast aside the sword, became for him a potential straw adrift on the downward current.

Uncle Buzz's message in the Rathskeller the night before had been cryptic to the others but plain enough to Joe. Uncle Buzz was in trouble again. Trial balance, maybe. There was no telling. As Joe finished footing up a long column of figures he

smiled. It meant another trip to Bloomfield on Saturday. And Saturday was the day after tomorrow. Thus the day wore on.

On Saturday, which was a day of the same pattern as its predecessors, at eleven o'clock Joe quietly rose from his desk, took his hat, and unostentatiously walked out of the office. He punched the time clock gently so that it would attract the attention of only the most observant of clerks, and hurried away, feeling that this repeated dereliction was bound to bring him some notice, even if the first offense had not. But for some reason he felt singularly indifferent.

An hour later he had forgotten it all. The dumpy accommodation train was bumping itself along at a great rate, puffing stertorously up the long grade past "Sassafras Hill," and then swinging itself around the curves that followed the river so desperately that passengers and freight alike—for it was a combination train as well as accommodation—were like to be flung from it, hurled into space as useless encumbrances to its desperate need of getting there. It would rush along madly for a mile or two, then give a wild shriek and stop, and after a great puffing and snorting, start up again.

It was such an enthusiastic train that Joe could not long escape the contagion of its enthusiasm. Ten miles out they came into a stretch of rolling meadow where the shadows of trees were like pur-

ple splotches upon the shimmering mist of the grass. A high wind had arisen that set the countless blades vibrating so that each bit of sun-swept meadow was naught but a silverish blurr, with the tree tops above it tossing wildly about. A little girl, holding open a gate for an old man in a buggy behind a placid old white horse, was all fluttering ribbon ends, and as they passed, her sunbonnet was torn from her grasp and flung over the fence, far afield. Joe could see her running after it as they rounded a curve out of sight.

At twelve thirty-five they reached Guests where Joe alighted. He was the only passenger of like mind, and aside from the station master who made a hurried exchange of sundry small express packages and mail there was no one at the station but a fat little old man in a brown derby and a red sweater, and with a very dirty face. This latter gentleman accosted Joe with a warning gesture, lifting his arm and pointing to the sky, and at the same time giving him a significant look, and then scuttling over to a disreputable motor car that stood beside the station platform. Arriving there he twisted his fat neck half around to see if his prey was following him, and being thus assured, clambered in. The car was very aged and trembling from some violent internal disorder, while the top was bellying off sidewise with a great flapping of loose straps and curtain ends till it seemed doubtful if the whole thing might hold together for another minute.

"High wind," suggested the Jehu, in a fat wheezy voice as Joe crawled into the seat beside him. Joe agreed without qualification. The old man paused a minute, gave him a sober, reflective look of far-away intensity, and then suddenly turned and spat precariously into the wind.

"Bloomfield?" he suggested with increased lightness of manner.

"Bloomfield," Joe agreed again. It was a pleasant bit of procedure, invested with the dignity of a formula, for there was no other town within a radius of many miles and no other road over which such traffic was possible. Still it had to be gone through with.

They started with a rush, being ably seconded by a more severe gust of wind than usual, and for eight miles it was a stalemate between the wind and the motor as to which could make the most noise. But in spite of it all Joe was enjoying it. There was a freedom in the uproar, in the wildly tossing tree tops, in the white clouds that went scudding high overhead. He had an insane desire to fling his hat high up in the air, as they rolled along, and see how far the wind would carry it.

At length they arrived. Out of courtesy, perhaps, the wind abated; perhaps it was because nothing boisterous would be tolerated along those silent old streets. But as they passed the tavern, one green shutter could be seen hanging by one hinge, moving

softly to and fro, and against the iron stair railing of the meeting house an old, yellowing newspaper clung for a moment and then dropped to the pavement. A very old man in a linen suit, followed by an old hound, was going through the door as they passed, and he pivoted on his stick and watched them. Here was the very essence of stability.

Reaching the central square, the driver swung his car in a majestic arc around the traffic post in the centre of the street and drew up at the curb in front of the post-office. There was a liberal sprinkling of small motors of the same general classification as the one in which they were arriving, parked with their noses headed toward the curb, at an angle. Uncle Buzz's figure suddenly appeared, hurrying from behind one of these, his face set in an earnest frown. He had evidently seen them from the "Golden Rule," diagonally opposite, and had come the most direct route, through the traffic.

"Well, Joseph, this is a surprise."

This, thought Joe, might mean anything. Either his Aunt Loraine had not been apprised of his expected arrival, or perhaps the old man had already extricated himself from his trouble.

"Any bags?"

"No. No bags." Joe was still holding the outstretched hand of welcome.

Uncle Buzz turned to the driver and dropped a coin in that worthy gentleman's greasy palm as it

lay inertly on the seat beside him. "That will be all," he said with great dignity.

The driver gave him a long look, heavy lidded—a critical look, a deeply thoughtful look—sniffed, and then turned to Joe, "Goin' back?" he asked shortly, as though there were nothing more now for any one to stay for.

"No," said Joe. "Not to-day."

The driver pondered this in his heart for a moment, came to a sudden decision, sniffed again, and turned his back on them both and proceeded to stretch himself out as far as the narrow confines of the seat would permit. Business was apparently over for the day.

Uncle Buzz led Joe across the street to the busy side. The contrast of their figures was striking, for Joe was over a head taller, and loose where Uncle Buzz was stiff.

Mr. Mosby turned at the curbing and with a confidential air: "We'll just get a bite to eat in here," indicating a tiny little lunch room crammed in between two ramshackle old frame buildings. "Your Aunt Loraine was a bit indisposed this morning."

This established one conclusion. He was at least not expected at home. More than that, he could not decide without further premises.

They occupied stools at a high counter covered with oilcloth. Uncle Buzz ordered rolls and coffee.

Joe took rolls and coffee. There was a period of silence as they waited.

Directly Mr. Mosby began talking in a low tone: "It's a rather fortunate thing you came up this week-end, Joseph. I was rather afraid you mightn't." He paused and Joe, while he felt reasonably sure of just what would come next, listened with polite interest.

"I've been troubled with frightful headaches this past week," he continued, "so severe that I could scarcely see the open page before me."

Joe murmured his regret over the cup's brim.

The old man paused and seemed to consider. Then hesitantly continuing: "If you could spare an hour or two this afternoon——?"

"Surely I can, Uncle Buzz. Easiest thing you know."

The old man breathed deep and long and set down his coffee cup. "It is a trifling matter of some forty-six dollars. Would you like to go out to Montgomery's this afternoon? He has a couple of two-year-olds that he will be shipping down for the Derby now pretty soon."

"I'd be very pleased to, Uncle Buzz."

And thus was the matter broached, and the matter accepted, without any bald reference to necessity, without the slightest violation to the tenets of hospitality. No reference was made to a previous understanding. Joe's visit was established on a

purely social basis, and as such it would be presented to Mrs. Mosby, whose penchant for alarm might thus escape stimulus.

They finished their lunch hurriedly and made their way across to the "Golden Rule," where Uncle Buzz led his charge with swift, silent steps back to the little private office in the rear of the store. Once inside, the door was closed and the books quickly opened upon the table. "They are always a bit impatient for the balance this time of the year," Mr. Mosby offered in explanation.

An hour's work sufficed to find the trouble. It was in the carrying forward of a single account. Once found, the rest was very simple, and at three o'clock Uncle Buzz slammed the ledger shut with an air of complete satisfaction, walked confidently through the door into the adjoining office with his little sheaf of papers, and returning reached for his hat. "Burrus is out," he said crisply. "We won't wait."

Joe likewise reached for his hat.

At the door the old man turned, and with a reminiscent smile and in a confidential tone, "There is a lot of personal jealousy in this firm."

Joe expressed no surprise.

"He's just been elected deacon in the church." His old eyes began to twinkle. "Great changes can take place in a man's habits once you hitch him up with apron strings. His wife has never thought so much of Loraine. And now he doesn't think so

much of me." He chuckled. "We were raised together, and I have a good memory." He opened the door and walked slowly toward the front of the store. It was empty of customers. A clerk stood leaning idly across a glass counter of notions looking into the street. Uncle Buzz proceeded calmly on, giving the clerk a pleasant nod. "She came from a farm back in the county. They say she had never seen a railroad until she was twenty-one years old."

The clerk inspected Joe thoroughly and critically and made no sign of having heard anything. And still Joe felt a bit dubious; indiscretion is like other normal weapons: it kills when one doesn't know it is loaded.

But Mr. Mosby was in rising spirits. They emerged to the street and turned the corner into the less populous thoroughfare, known commonly throughout Bloomfield as Pearl Street, and there they came upon Uncle Buzz's horse and buggy, standing as if carved from one and the same block of immutable immobility. Even the flies found little of excitement in lighting about the front section of the combination, and only one or two were buzzing about in the general neighbourhood in a dispirited manner.

The horse opened his eyes and lifted one ear as Uncle Buzz climbed in the buggy and took up the lines. But being complacent and particularly indisposed to anything as much like effort as resistance, the starting was quite without ceremony.

Eventually, and not too much so, they left the city streets, and soon were jogging down a winding little lane of the softest, yellowest earth imaginable. On either side, between the edge of the roadside and the snake rail fence, was a little bank all a-tangle with blackberry bushes, and here and there, with its roots protruding out into space, a gaunt and bare thorn tree or an occasional walnut thrusting its branches over the road. Beyond, the fields lay in cool, serrated rows, deep brown and freshly fragrant. The woodland which hung about in the background beyond the fields would occasionally sweep down and cross the road, and then would come a stretch of checkered shade on the yellow earth, and the lifting, expectant sound of high wind in top branches. And sometimes, in the heart of such an arm of woodland, the old horse's hoofs would echo hollow on the warped and mellowing boards of a tiny bridge, and there would be a momentary slip and gurgle of water underneath, on down through the ferns. Joe felt steeped in calm.

Mr. Montgomery was not at home. Nor were the horses. They found they were a week late. An old Negro whom they encountered just within the paddock gate so informed them: "Yessuh. They done took 'em down t' Louisville, las' Monday."

They left him scratching his kinky gray pate in meditation.

Uncle Buzz was disappointed. The little excur-

sion was thus deprived of its sparkle. There was a something about going out to see racehorses—— Well, at any rate, Uncle Buzz was disappointed. He showed it on the way home. Perhaps the fading sunlight, the lengthening shadows, had something to do with it. And the wind, too, that had come with the morning and kept up its bluster all day, had died to a whisper, so that a cluster of last year's corn-stalks standing in a fence corner were merely indifferently wagging. It may have been just a reflection of mood, but as they were rounding the brow of the hill above Bloomfield and could see the dip of the meadows to the creek and the white fences and outbuildings of the Fair Grounds away off to the right, the old horse stopped and gently switched his tail. And Uncle Buzz let him stop.

“Do you know,” he said, and his voice was reminiscent and uncertain, “I've been thinking lately we ought to sell the place and move to town.”

Joe looked up at him curiously. “Why do you think that, Uncle Buzz?”

Mr. Mosby pondered, as the horse, feeling perhaps the slight pricks of conscience, resumed his way at an imperceptible walk. “Well,” he said, “this country is not what it used to be. All the other towns, Guests, Fillmore—all the rest of them—are on the railroad or interurban. They have the advantage of us.”

Joe was watching him unperceived. The old

man's face had lost its aggressive jauntiness. There was an odd pucker about the brows. His mouth, above the well-trimmed goatee, seemed small and indecisive. Joe could see the clear blue veins on the back of the hand as it listlessly held the lines.

"Business has been a bit slack this past year. Seems like it never got over the war. And prices are high, too. Can't get a nigger to do a day's work for you for less than three dollars now," he added fiercely. And then lapsing into his former vein again, "I wonder——"

Joe waited. "Wonder what, Uncle Buzz?"

The sun made one of its perceptible drops, just as though its setting was a matter of notches. A little cool breeze came up to meet them from the creek bottom as they moved slowly downward.

"Why couldn't you get me something to do in Louisville? How about the Plow Company? They must employ a great many men." He laughed a bit shrilly. "I've always thought I would like to live in Louisville."

Joe was aghast. He felt as if it might be some old lady demanding of him pink tights and a place in the front row of the ballet. However, he checked the exclamation that rose to his lips. But for a moment he did not know what to say. Uncle Buzz—wanting to go to work at Bromley's!—An ancient and decrepit Whittington!

"But you've been here so long, Uncle Buzz!" he managed at length.

"So I have. All the more reason. I'm getting in a rut. Besides, I'm getting tired of Burrus. Narrow-minded scoundrel! He throws out hints about Zeke bringing me my whiskey over from Fillmore. As if it were any of his business!" He subsided and silently contemplated the depths of Burrus' degradation.

Joe laughed softly and at the same time felt the sharp little warning edge of an intuition. Uncle Buzz was slipping, and he knew it.

"I wouldn't be in a hurry," he suggested at length. "Bromley's is full up. All those men coming back from the army, you know—I'll keep an eye open for you if you want me." It was most incongruous, the patronizing air that had crept into his voice, the tone that invariably greets the unemployed, wherever or whoever he be.

Uncle Buzz brightened. "Do," he said.

They drove through the gate and up to the house. Aunt Loraine profusely reproached her husband for not advising her of Joseph's arrival. "It's a shame. Here at the last minute. You might have at least sent me word, Bushrod."

"We had to go out in the country," Uncle Buzz replied with decision.

And so they supped meagrely on fried chicken and rice and gravy and hot biscuits and coffee. And

afterward they sat in the high-ceilinged back parlour, in candlelight, and watched the glow die from the western sky. And Aunt Loraine asked him about the "season" in Louisville, and once she asked him about Mary Louise. And bye-and-bye Uncle Buzz began to nod just like a sleepy little boy, and with the prospect of a long, well-filled to-morrow, Joe suggested that they go to bed. And then there was a moment's pausing upon the threshold of a yawning black door beyond which things smelled mustily sweet, with dusty shadows that crept across the matting from a shielded lamp; and later a most delicious yielding of one's self to the cool envelope of soft white sheets, and a moment's wide-eyed staring at the ceiling; and then forgetfulness.

Sometime later—it seemed hours—Joe was awakened by the clatter of an automobile somewhere beneath his window. For a moment he lay still and wondered and then, the bustle continuing, only in a much subdued and muffled manner, he got up and in his bare feet walked over to the window across the matting and looked out. He saw an oil lantern sitting on the edge of the side steps, and he saw the open screen door. And then from a black shadow a short distance away, behind the old lilac bush he remembered so well, he saw a figure emerge, carrying a glass jug. The figure was Zeke's, stooped over and shuffling, in the same old peaked cap he had always worn. And in the jug was the apotheosis

of Mr. Mosby's contempt for Mr. Burrus, and as it passed the light it gleamed and sparkled with a deep golden malevolence. And hearing steps on the porch, and voices, and fearing lest he might be seen spying at the window, Joe crept back to bed. And directly he heard the familiar roaring clatter of a car starting up somewhere down below there in the darkness, and after a while—silence. He fell into a deep and satisfying sleep.

CHAPTER VI

MARY LOUISE had the power of concentration over her determinations as well as over her desires. Once having decided on a course she could keep herself driving at it without ceasing. If she made a digression, it was with eyes set on the goal, and for the reason that to so digress was to find a more facile path and save time in the end. Her past attainments had been gained apparently without effort, for in the little world she had known at Bloomfield all had been hers to do with as she desired. And then had come the eighteen months in Louisville, with its awakenings, its gradual undermining of her old standards and conceptions, and its whetting of the keen edge of her desire.

She had been made to see her facts in another light. Those things that had been wont to be considered as axioms and irrefutable postulates in her daily acceptance were suddenly seen as the most ephemeral hypotheses. The desirability of Bloomfield and the lustre about the name "McCallum"—two rocks upon which she had builded the edifice of her confidence—were found of a sudden to be but shifting sands, hard-packed enough on the surface,

but subjected to the most insidious and devastating undertow. Many a weaker spirit would have thrown up his arms and dived with desperation overboard in search of solid footing. But not so Mary Louise. She had a momentary whirl at negation and then a firm and ever-increasing determination to build her own footing. If Bloomfield and the McCallum family were not all they should be, she would make them so, to her own satisfaction at least. Money was the one thing needed, she soon found or thought she found, and money was the thing she was determined to get, enough of it to accomplish her purpose. When she had started the tea room she had not had the slightest idea that she could possibly fail to do just exactly what she wanted.

As she read the note that Joe had left for her, the news of Miss Susie's illness caused her temporary distress. But her mind did not dwell for long on the distressing part of it, but got busy with the problem in hand, went into conference with itself over it, analyzed and dissected it to its complete satisfaction, and then put out the resulting dicta on the bulletin board of her consciousness. The particular "Thou must" was in this case "Go to Bloomfield." And inasmuch as Mary Louise never under any circumstances thought of disregarding these highly accurate mental dicta, go to Bloomfield she did. She went the following morning, which was Friday. And it must be said that in spite of the attention which was

focused on the immediate difficulty before her, which was, "What to do with Miss Susie," her mind kept straining at this barrier for continued and reassuring glimpses of the ultimate goal ahead. Still, she loved her aunt, and the realization of her suffering was to her genuine pain.

As she entered the sitting-room door, she found the little old lady propped in a rocking chair just inside the doorway with a patchwork quilt across her lap, tucking her in. There was no appreciable change. She was as yellow, as parchment like as ever. Her eyes perhaps were brighter; indeed they seemed almost to have a heat of their own as Mary Louise stooped to kiss the cheek held up to her.

"Why didn't you let me know sooner?" she chided.

"There was no reason for you to come at all," Miss Susie responded briskly. "Some people haven't enough questions to decide for themselves. Have to go about hunting for other people's problems."

"But you weren't going to sit up here and not let me know anything about it?" Mary Louise took off her hat and came over to the rocking chair, toward which she dragged another, and seated herself. She reached out and took one of the little blue-veined hands and stroked it gently. "You weren't going to sit up here and let me know nothing about it? That's not what you promised."

Miss Susie's fixed, inexorable expression did not change. But she was pleased—was feeling softer.

Unconsciously she liked Mary Louise to assume that patronizing, superior air toward her. She said nothing and began to rock softly to and fro, staring through the doorway.

Mary Louise continued the gentle stroking. Bye-and-bye she ventured softly, "You're right sure you're feeling all right now? What did the doctor say?"

Miss Susie turned on her, mouth snapping shut. "Doctor! Who said I had to have a doctor?" The look in her eyes, as she turned them full upon the girl, was one in which defiance mingled with alarm and struggled for mastery. For Miss Susie had waged a long and losing warfare with disease and she quailed before the emblems of surrender if not from the enemy itself.

Mary Louise for the moment let it go at that. After the air had appreciably cooled she ventured again: "I don't suppose Mrs. Mosby knew how to reach me?" Miss Susie looked puzzled and she continued in explanation, "I had a note from Joe Hooper saying you had had a little spell—I suppose Mrs. Mosby 'phoned him."

Miss Susie gave a little snort. "And what would Loraine Mosby be doing meddling in my affairs? She hasn't called on me for years. Like as not it was that fool Lavinia Burrus. You would think she owned and was running the town. The salvation of Bloomfield weighs mighty heavy on her shoulders

these days—with her ‘*Dear Miss McCallum,*’ and her ‘*Poor dear Mrs. Hamilton!*’ I’ve a mind to tell her that charity, even of thought, begins at home—where it’s needed.”

Mary Louise felt a sudden sort of displeasure. She had adopted the devious method of getting at the true state of affairs, for that was the only way any one could get anything out of Miss Susie. And now she found herself getting interested on her own account. She had once supposed that it had been through Mrs. Mosby’s agency that she had been apprised. It now appeared that someone else—an outsider and a parvenu at that—had linked her name with that of Joe Hooper’s to send her word through him. It gave her rank displeasure. To be officially tagged as “Such and such” by a “one-horse” little town. Yes it was a “one-horse” little town. Her assurance slipped from her and in confusion she sought to investigate no further.

“Where’s Mattie? You ought to have something about your shoulders.” She rose to her feet and began poking about on the wardrobe shelf.

“Mattie’s not here,” said Miss Susie.

Mary Louise turned around. “Mattie’s not here?—And what’s the reason she’s not here?”

Miss Susie’s voice was acquiring calm. “She decided that this wasn’t good enough place for her. She couldn’t bear to think of all the money servants were getting down in Louisville—so she left.”

Mary Louise came back and stood before her chair. She looked at her aunt intently. "You mean to say she *left* you?"

"She did."

It was too much for Mary Louise's comprehension and she contemplated the fact bleakly. "Why, her people have been here on the place for four generations!"

Miss Susie's face was grim. "Ten dollars a week was too much for her."

Slowly the conviction was taking root. "And she has really left?"

Miss Susie nodded.

"And taken Omar with her?"

Miss Susie nodded again.

"And Landy?"

There was a moment's silence. Miss Susie, it seemed, would for the dramatic effect have preferred that the defection had been universal. "No," she said half regretfully, "Landy's stayed with me."

"And done the cooking, I suppose?"

"He did—after Wednesday."

"And Wednesday? *You* tried it until then, I suppose?" Mary Louise's tone was all reproach.

Miss Susie did not deny it.

They sat for a moment in dismal accord. Mary Louise had a sudden feeling as though the family were breaking up. All during the war the little corps of servants had remained intact. She had felt that,

the war over, the danger point had been passed. Also the reason for Miss Susie's little spell was now apparent.

Directly she asked more briskly, "D' you try to get any one else?—Zibbie Tuttle?"

"Zibbie's gone to town, too."

Another moment's depressed silence.

"And how about Zenie? She used to cook."

Miss Susie sighed. "Zenie's got her head all full of fool notions. She thinks she has to stay home and look after that worthless Zeke."

"And she won't come? You've tried her?"

Miss Susie shook her head grimly.

Mary Louise suddenly laughed. It was a dry, mirthless sort of laugh. "Looks like the Negroes are getting all the latest notions of progress, too. I must have put the idea into their heads."

"All except Zenie," amended Miss Susie. "She's old-fashioned."

"Perhaps I'd better be coming back." She stood by the door, musing.

Miss Susie reached over for her spectacles. There was an almost imperceptible flash in her eyes. "And be like Zenie?"

The shot missed. Mary Louise was turning over many things in her mind. Her little plans were being threatened and by circumstances which she had previously scorned to notice. Irritation and a restless desire to be up and at her obstacles were pre-

vailing over all other feelings. For several moments she pondered, gazing through the glass half of the sitting-room door, and then with a hurried, "I'll be back," she bolted from the room, out toward the kitchen.

When she returned some fifteen minutes later there was a look of settled calm on her face, and she busied herself making Miss Susie comfortable; for she had reached a decision and could think about other things. And the things that old Landy had told her had sobered her while they strengthened that decision.

That night she lay on a restless pillow. The sudden change from the rattle and bang of the city where all the little noises were swallowed up in a general roar was hard on her ravelled nerves. She missed the noise. She found herself painfully acute to all the little tickings and crackings and buzzings that an open country window brings to one's ears. There was an unpleasant smell of damp matting there in the dark room. And the wind, as it came souging down from the hill behind, caught a loose end of the roof somewhere over her head and made as though to roll it back. But it never did. Her bed was lumpy. It had never seemed so before. And there was not enough ventilation in the room. The two windows, placed side by side in the eaves, allowed no circulation. People in the country did not know how to live. Now she would knock that

partition away. There was no use having a hall at the head of the stairs, a hall that led nowhere except into one room. She would knock that partition away and make a single big room of the whole attic. And then the window in the hall would serve for additional light and air for the one room. Or would it be better to cut another window and run the partition lengthwise, thus making two rooms of it? That might be better. Two rooms were better than one great big barn of a room. Later on, perhaps, she would have it done. She fell asleep over the complexity of the problem.

The next morning she set out with dispatch to carry out her plan. She went to see Zenie Thompson.

She found that much maligned and misunderstood woman cheerily rocking her leisure away at the front door of her home. The air was warm and Zenie had, contrary to the tenets of her race's religion, thrown open all the front of her house, windows and all. The neck of her waist, which was a very old white one of Mary Louise's, was likewise frankly open, and as there was considerable difference in the respective sizes, Zenie seemed on the point of bursting from its doubtful whiteness into all her full-blown coffee-coloured creamness. She hastily pinned up the bosom of it a little as Mary Louise turned in at her gate.

"How do, Mis' Ma'y Louise," she beamed, rising to her feet and holding her offspring clutched at a

precarious angle to her shoulder. She stood with one hand resting on the doorpost and in her eyes expectancy. "Won' you-all come in?"

"Just for a minute," said Mary Louise, refusing the proffered chair and giving the room a hasty, critical look. Even in that critical look she could find naught to criticize. The cabin was a small three-room affair, set back from the street, between two vacant old storehouses. Zeke had white-washed it without and calcimined it within, and with the free air that circulated the place this treatment was enough to make the front rooms passable. Over the iron mantel hung Zeke's "Knights of Macabre" sword in its scabbard. Mary Louise looked for the white-plumed hat but it had evidently been put away. On the left wall, in a brilliant gilt frame, hung a coloured portrait of Admiral Dewey. The artist had in some way inspired a look of malign cunning on the face by shifting the position of the left eye a hair's breadth below normal, but the mouth and smile were benign. On a table to the right reposed a glass case with a base of felt and a rounded top—the mausoleum for an ancient bird creature that looked like a prairie chicken, very droopy and, in spite of its interment, quite dingy with dust. It was vaguely familiar to her somehow.

Zenie was watching the inspection with an eager, expectant look. When Mary Louise had apparently finished and turned to her again, she smiled.

“You ain’ eveh see ouh house befo’, is you?”

Mary Louise admitted she never had. And then to disarm any suspicion that she might have come for social reasons only, she attacked the matter in hand with characteristic vigour:

“Zeke’s not home much, is he?”

“Right smaht he ain’, no’m.” Zenie’s face was all expectant smiles. Not a shadow seemed to linger near it.

Mary Louise allowed her gaze to travel about the room. In the entire atmosphere of the place was no besmirching suggestion of toil. She returned again to Zenie. The latter was like some tropical flower in full bloom. She began, selecting carefully her ground: “You haven’t any place to put your baby, no one to watch him while you work, have you?” This was spoken with all the force of conviction.

Zenie’s face wreathed itself in another smile. “I ain’ do no mo’ wuk—not ontill Zeke he come home.”

Mary Louise paused and drew breath. She began again: “If there was somewhere you could put him, someone who could look out for him, or if it was so that you could keep an eye on him yourself—why, you could go to work again, like you used to.”

The brightness of Zenie’s smile began to fade. “Yas’m. Yas’m, reckon I could.” She turned her attention to the child in her arms and her voice, as she continued, was liquid soft. “Zeke’s doin’ so good

—I ain' aim to wuk out no mo'. Jes' keep house heah fo' him."

Then Mary Louise, sensing defeat, struck; struck unerringly for her objective which she judged to be the vulnerable spot; struck with characteristic vigour and direct: "I'll give you six dollars a week if you'll come and do the cooking for Miss Susie, for this summer." She paused and observed the effect.

Zenie had suddenly acquired all the coy graces of a maid receiving a long-expected proposal. She cast her eyes discreetly down, toyed at the rocker edge with her shoe, and smiled.

"You won't have to clean up the house. Landy does that. You won't have to do a single thing but cook." The speech ended with a rising inflection. Mary Louise's eloquent picture inspired even herself with hope.

"Mis' Burrus done offa me seven."

There was a momentary silence, during which time Mary Louise marshalled her routed forces. Directly she gallantly renewed the attack: "I'll give you seven then. And you can have all the time off you want, whenever you get through with the dishes." She had come, in a way, prepared for shocks, but the whirlwind manner of her recklessness was leaving her a bit breathless.

Zenie's face at once assumed a look of concern and lifting her head she pondered far-off possibilities. "Zeke, he home so little," she began, and her voice

had an ineffable sadness. "I likes to be home when he come."

"But you *can* be at home when he comes," Mary Louise explained with a patience which she far from felt. "You can get off directly dishes are done—seven o'clock every evening, I'm sure."

"I know," responded Zenie, still doubting. "But Zeke, he gone at night. Mos' eve' night. He home in de day, mos' de day."

It ended by Mary Louise's offering and Zenie's accepting ten dollars a week, and with a promise of starting in on the following Monday. Mary Louise descended the cabin steps with the hollow pomp of one who has bought his victory too dearly. Zenie, from the steps, called cheerily: "Mis' Ma'y Louise. You bring me some goods fuh a dress? Sometime when you come up ag'in?"

Mary Louise paused at the gate and speculated on the humble creature on whom she had wreaked her will. "I guess I might, Zenie. What kind do you want?"

Zenie beamed. "Oh, mos' any kin'. Whateveh you think is pritty. I pay you fo' it."

Mary Louise promised and departed. She walked home very thoughtfully. Ten dollars a week! Ten dollars just to get the cooking done! She had had her eyes fixed very clearly indeed on the coveted goal to brush aside such an expensive obstacle.

That afternoon, as she busied herself with little

chores about the house—she was sweeping the side porch at the time—she chanced to look up and saw Joe Hooper driving by in a low-swung phaeton behind a sleepy old horse. Beside him sat Mr. Mosby, very prim and very erect, and Joe's arm lay along the back of the seat behind him. The street was rather shady and it was quite a distance from where she was to where he was passing. But somehow it seemed to her that there was a singularly cheerful, quite happy expression on his face as he lolled back against the cushion. And he did not look in as he passed.

CHAPTER VII

TWO weeks passed. Joe felt himself gradually slipping into an abyss of resignation. Nearer and nearer came June. Less and less he seemed to care. He took interest in nothing. He ate and slept and plodded. He ate and slept and plodded as though all that life consisted of was eating and sleeping and plodding. Most of us have seen in some quiet fence corner, just behind the barn, under some old tree with gnarled trunk and droopy branches, an old gray horse, with eyes closed, muzzle resting on the top rail, one hind leg slightly bent and propped by the tip of a cracked and drying hoof. Most of us have seen such a horse, seemingly on the gradual slip into oblivion, whose very tail-switching was so rhythmic and regular as to fit in, in absolute harmony, with the swelling waves of sleep and measured breathing and all that sort of thing. And that very horse might well be on the brink of a day's exhausting labour. And furthermore he might well know it. Certainly his experience might tell him—easily enough. Yet he stands there switching in a sort of self-imposed numbness. It is probably nature's way of anæsthetizing him from the pain of unlimited drabness. It

is the only way a sensitive nature can face such a prospect without going mad. Such was Joe.

He had slumped. He no longer cared. He no longer cared if skies were blue and if breezes were lazy and outdoors was calling. He no longer cared when the quitting whistle blew. He no longer cared that June was only two weeks off. He would not even have cared if June had been the end of it all. He had settled into his stupor.

And then one morning at about eleven o'clock he was summoned to the telephone by the switchboard operator. It was a drowsy morning, full of dronings and rustlings, and he was very heavy lidded as he stepped into the booth reserved for such calls. He had been expecting a message from Indianapolis about some shipment that had gone astray and for which he was putting in a claim. He sank heavily down upon the hard, polished little stool. The air was stuffy and foul about him.

"This Mr. Hooper?" he heard a voice say.

He said it was.

"Well, this is——" He had not the slightest idea what the name was. But it made not the slightest difference. It might have been the president or it might have been the shipping clerk. All that mattered was that it was a tiresome sack of castings giving him some extra trouble. And so he stretched a little and yawned a little and replied: "Yes. All right."

And then the voice went on a little hurriedly—too hurriedly for him to catch it all. And instead of “sack of castings,” the voice kept on crazily alluding to “your uncle” and “all night”—and phrases that were jumbled as in a dream. He came to himself suddenly with a start and then the connection was broken off and there was nothing but a confused buzzing and rattling. He straightened up on the stool, waited a minute, and then jiggled the receiver. He felt very queer. He felt to blame for his stupidity. He felt someway as though he had been caught up with. And he could not understand.

Directly the exchange called his name and he responded quite sharply and briskly. Then her “Just a minute,” and he was feeling suddenly taut and tense. And then the voice was switched on again.

Like a dream it came. He could barely make out the syllables. The voice was broken—seemed very far away—very weak. It was telling him that his uncle—his uncle, Mr. Mosby—“Brrr! Brrr!”—and had not been seen since. There was a moment’s pause.

And then—would he come?

Another pause and he had vague notions that that was all. And yet he had not heard. Yes, he would come.

There was a click and then silence, and there he was, sitting just as though he had dreamed it all.

Then a voice called, "Did you get them?" And he mechanically put up the receiver without a word. Something had happened—just what, he could only guess—make out piecemeal. There was trouble—he could feel that. Uncle Buzz had somehow stepped beyond the pale. He had heard the words "all night" and "no trace of him." This was no ordinary trouble. This was not a matter of trial balance.

He opened the door and stepped out into the office. It was a changed place. Over there was his long flat-topped desk with the opened ledger upon it. A sheet of paper had blown to the floor and was sliding over toward him, its edges curling lazily. These seemed live, vibrant features. One of the clerks across the way had thought of something humorous and was leaning forward to tell his *vis-à-vis*. It had been so vital that he had laid his pen down to tell it. He was talking with half-shut lips, with eyes that shifted back and forth alert for a glance of disfavour. His rusty black derby sat on the back of his head; his white piqué tie had slipped away from a bright brass collar button. . . .

Through the open door he could see Mr. Boner hunched up over his desk and as he watched, that gentleman suddenly plunged his head in a ducking motion toward the cuspidor on the floor and just as quickly bent down again over the desk. Like fire-flashes of consciousness all these things were. These were things going on outside of him. There

was a world moving on outside of him, a world that took little count of the creatures in its path. All this—all this about him—was like a bit of stale, flat, slightly greenish backwater—the big wheels churning away just beyond and paying it no attention, letting it grow staler and staler. Some day there would come a change—as though the miller had opened up another sluice—and a few vigorous splashings and all would be changed even here. He viewed it speculatively, as one outside it all. He suddenly felt that for him it was all over. And he went into Mr. Boner's office.

Mr. Boner looked up sidewise.

"I've had a 'phone call from home."

Mr. Boner's eyes rolled slightly, showing the whites.

"There's some trouble there. I'll have to go."

A moment's pause. Mr. Boner cleared his throat. "All right," he said. And then he bent back over his work.

He went and got his hat. With his hand on the swinging door he paused and looked back. Not a head was raised. In the air there hovered a droning, a rustling. It was like a vast, drowsy, slothful thing, ignorant, dull, hateful. He pulled open the door. And then he left it.

Three hours later he was standing in the "Golden Rule" at Bloomfield. Before him was a glass counter wherein were displayed knives and cleavers and scissors and other cutlery. Above the counter, peer-

ing at him rather anxiously over steel-rimmed spectacles, were the head and shoulders of Mr. Burrus. Burrus! It had come to him on the train. That was the name he had not caught. Burrus! Who else?

“And you say that the last time you saw him was when he got into his buggy and drove away—last night? What makes you think he’s gone away?”

Mr. Burrus had been thoughtfully eyeing his stock of knives through the case and as Joe finished he cast a quick, sidewise glance up at him. Joe caught the flicker of it through the spectacles. “Well,” he began, and hesitated a little, “it’s what I woulda done—under the circumstances.” Mr. Burrus’ manner, usually so brisk and business-like, seemed suddenly to have changed. He scratched his head with a long and bony finger and looked up again at Joe. What he saw seemed not to reassure him, for Joe had all of a sudden grown beyond Bloomfield’s conception of him. He towered above the cutlery case—seemed to fill out his clothes. There was a set look about his mouth and a steadiness about his eyes. Mr. Burrus paused again.

“Circumstances?” said Joe. “Under what circumstances?”

Mr. Burrus gazed off into the clear blue of the sky patch outlined by his front door. “Well,” he began cautiously, “I weren’t callatin’ to say anything about this to anybody, but—I had to let Bushrod go.”

The little weazened body with its scrawny neck rising out of the gaping rubber collar, the shiny bald head with its fringe of graying hair about the edge, the white shirt sleeves with the frayed cuffs and the skinny brown hands—a most incongruous disguise for Nemesis to take in passing a pronunciamiento.

“Why?” Joe repeated after him softly. “Wasn’t he doing his work?”

Another flash-like glance up through the steel-rimmed spectacles. Mr. Burrus appeared to be weighing his words. “No,” he considered, “it weren’t that.” He drummed with his fingers on the glass counter. “He was drunk,” he snapped out, and stared sternly off into space. And then as if he felt it becoming of him, he frowned and his adam’s-apple moved up and down with quick, spasmodic jerks. But he would not look at Joe.

A moment’s silence descended on the shop and the odours of the place, as though set free by that silence, came drifting to Joe’s nostrils as he stood there waiting—waiting for the story. There was a blending of the smells of coal oil and fresh cloth on bolts and the indefinable metallic smell of tinware, and behind it all an overtone of odour, as it were, of sweet growing things—hay and grain—and the fields—Someone dropped a pan in the rear of the shop and Mr. Burrus looked around fiercely. When he again faced Joe, the harassed look was gone.

Joe had been gradually making up his mind.

“You’d seen him drunk before?—That wasn’t the first time?”

Mr. Burrus looked up. “Well!” he began tartly. “So much the worse, isn’t it?”

“No,” said Joe, “it’s not. If you’d fired him the first time there’d have been some reason for it. It was because he wasn’t the kind of man you wanted in your office, wasn’t it?”

“That was it, exactly,” agreed Mr. Burrus.

“It was because he didn’t see things as he should, didn’t do things as he should—in a general way—that he wasn’t fit for the job, Mr. Burrus?” Joe went on.

“Exactly.”

“And if he had—had been of a piece with yourself—so that you could have jiggled him around in your fingers like a hunk of putty, it would have been all right. It was not his drinking—it was his drinking in spite of your wanting him not to—that got him in bad, wasn’t it, Mr. Burrus?”

Mr. Burrus fidgeted and then turned sharply on Joe. “This ain’t no third degree.”

“And you think he’s gone away?” Joe continued as though not hearing him.

“Of course he’s gone away. What else was there for him to do?”

There was no obvious alternative.

Joe took his leave and went to see Mrs. Mosby. As he stood waiting in the cool, high-ceilinged hall, he

was struck by the quiet of the place. It had an air of waiting. What for? There was a high walnut hat-rack with a mirror and a marble slab with a card tray on it, and two high-backed chairs, likewise black walnut and elaborately carved and atrocious, and in the dim recesses of the stair a horsehair sofa, all just as they had been for years. They were mute but they seemed expectant. What could they be waiting for? They were on the outside edge of things—where life was passing. What could be in store for them? And yet, as he stood in the hall, with the sound of his breathing so fine, so distinct in his ears, they seemed to be part of another presence waiting there with him, a mute presence as to sound, but in some way eloquent voiced, clamorous to be heard.

A faint rustling came to his ears and then steps, and looking up, he saw his aunt Loraine coming down the stairs. Her bangles and her trinkets gave out hushed little clickings and he could hear her breathing as she came across the carpet to meet him.

“Joseph,” she said, and he could see beneath her shell that she was agitated. “Joseph! What do you suppose can have happened?” Her toilette, like an ancient ritual observed in every sacred detail, included her manner and deportment. The voice, the inflection, the bearing—all went with the ruching and the bangles. Joe had once wondered if she put them all in the same box when she went to bed.

“I don’t know, Aunt Lorry, I’m sure.” Catching a haggard look about her eyes he added more gently: “But I wouldn’t be too worried. He’s probably gone to Louisville.”

She shook her head, and in spite of herself her voice broke a little. “He’s never done that without telling me.”

Joe stood for a moment in thought. “There was no business that would take him anywhere—business about the farm?”

“No,” she said. “Won’t you come in and sit down in the parlour? I was so upset——”

He looked at her kindly. It was perhaps the first time in his experience he had ever done so. Somehow the shell did not seem so to cover her. She was such a tight little body, a close-bound fagot of reserves and inhibitions. She had never exuded the slightest humanity. And now the shell was cracking and little glints were showing through. “No, Aunt Lorry,” he said. “Not now. There’s nothing to be gained by talking—unless you have any ideas as to where—where he might have gone.”

Her eyes looked haggard but they remained stoically dry. She shook her head.

He turned to go and took a few steps toward the door. And she came and laid her hand on his arm. It was as light and feathery as a dead leaf, but he could feel the warmth through his sleeve.

“Don’t,” she said, “don’t let anything get out if—

if there's anything should be kept quiet." She looked him earnestly in the eyes. "I'll depend on you?"

He promised and ran lightly down the front steps. Behind him the front door closed, ponderous and grave. And as he passed around the curve of the driveway to the gate he looked back and the shadows of the old house were stretching out toward him on the grass.

He had had a sudden idea. There in the front hall it had occurred to him that there was one person at least who might know something. He had recalled that last night spent in the upstairs ell bedroom, the voices, the clatter of a car. Zeke was probably closer to his uncle Buzz than any other living soul. And just as suddenly he had decided that it would be time wasted to talk with his aunt Loraine—time that could be well spent elsewhere. And so his departure had been precipitate. And now as he hurried along the plank walk, beneath the arching branches, with the world so fresh and green and hopeful about him, he felt how incongruous everything was. Over beyond the hedge the blackbirds were hopping about on the grass looking for worms, giving occasional satisfied clucks. Across an intersecting road, on up ahead, an old buggy passed, drawn by a jogging horse with hanging head. Like the Mosby turnout—very. And that very morning he had been at his desk, drugged, overwhelmed with the hopelessness of monotony.

He passed on to the other side of town, keeping to the back streets, for he did not wish to meet any one or talk to any one. It was nearing six o'clock as he approached the gate of Zeke Thompson's cabin, and there was that golden glow in the sky which so often follows a spell of dampness. It had rained the night before—the road looked dark and cool—and about the western sky the clouds were hovering as if undecided. But the sunlight streamed bravely through and all was fresh and clean and cool.

The front door was open and as Joe passed through the gate he saw no one. Softly he climbed the steps and passed over the threshold. The room was empty, but an apron thrown carelessly over the back of a rocking chair gave evidence of its having been vacated not long since. The door to the next room was standing ajar.

Joe stood and pondered. Just what should he ask Zeke? Should he tell him what had happened? Zeke might probably have heard, if the news was about. Standing there, waiting, there came to his ears a peculiar sound, faint, high-pitched, and monotonous. He listened. Someone was singing in the next room in a voice not much louder than a whisper. Curious, he walked softly over to the door and peered through.

There in a tiny rocking chair sat a little figure rocking to and fro. Its back was half turned toward him, but he could see a kinky head which was bent

over something held in its arms, which it was most evidently lulling to sleep. The room was darkening, with only a single patch of orange-coloured sunlight upon the bare floor. Back and forth went the little body. He could see the bare feet with the stubby toes, escaping as by miracle the ever-threatening rocker. There was a small square of blue-calico-covered back, two little pigtails of hair tightly tied with scraps of baby-blue ribbon, and—the voice. It was as fine and high as wind blowing across a hair and with a curious, lifting minor note. He listened.

First there would be a gentle hushing and then the refrain—the melody was unappreciable and elusive, though constant:—

“Grasshopper set on sweet tater vine,
On sweet tater vine,
On sweet tater vine.
Big turkey gobbler come up behime
And nip him off that sweet tater vine.”

With the word “nip” would come a crescendo, swelling to a sharp little monosyllabic quaver, and then the whole thing would die away most mournfully.

Twice he heard it sung through to the faint accompaniment of the tiny screaming rocker. It was a very solemn abjuration against the promiscuous sitting about of casual creatures. And oddly enough it seemed to him in a way that something was speak-

ing through that feeble, quavering voice to him; that this was of the same parcel with what had happened, was happening. He felt singularly tense—had not the slightest desire to laugh. And as he watched, the orange patch on the floor began to fade, until the room was bathed in shadow. And the song came suddenly to an end and he heard a gentle little “Hush,” and then a sigh, and then silence. Slowly he backed away on tiptoe from the door.

He had barely gained the security of the front room—somehow he felt it as security—when he heard the gate squeak and, turning suddenly, saw a man dart like a shadow around the side of the house. For a moment he stood in indecision; then he walked softly to the open front door and stood waiting on the threshold. It would be easier to explain his presence there. The sky had grown darker; curling billows of cloud rolling in from the south had chased away the orange glow and their under surface was lit by a pale-green luminance as they came. Shifting wisps of vapour slid twisting and writhing on up ahead, like outriders on reconnaissance. It was singularly still.

Joe stood and waited. Directly he heard a sound, and then steps echoed on the walk around the side of the cabin, and then a man came hurrying around the corner, took one step up on the cabin stair, and then fell back with a low cry: “Fo’ de Lawd.”

It was Zeke. The smoothness of his skin turned an ashen colour and the whites of his eyes were rolling. He pushed back away from the doorway and stared at Joe. Gradually the terror began to fade out of his face and it was superseded by a sickly grin. Joe was watching him closely.

"You plum skeered me to deff," he finally managed to say, his breath coming fast and thick. "Thought you wuz a ghos'." The grin was very weak and it quickly subsided.

Zeke was a gaunt "darky" of that peculiar transparent blackness that looks as though it is put on only one layer deep, and yet is black, not brown. He was thin and shambling, with high and prominent cheekbones and eyes that showed a lot of white at all times. Across one cheek was a long, purplish scar reaching up to the corner of one eye. It gave him a look of cunning from that quarter. But on the whole he was an ineffectual, shiftless looking Negro, with hands that were always dangling and feet that always dragged.

"Ain' seen you fo' a long time, Mist' Joe."

"No. I've been away—down in the city." He paused a moment, considering the best way to begin. "Where were you and Mr. Bushrod last night?" he ventured on a bold stroke.

Zeke's eyes opened wide. "Why, we wusn' no place, Mist' Joe. Mist' Bushrod, he—I was to bring him—he and I wuz to have a little bisnis ovah

to de house, but I couldn' come." His face clouded and took on an anxious look. "Dey ain' no trubbel, is dey, Mist' Joe?"

Joe made no reply and Zeke watched his thoughtful, serious face with growing anxiety. Here was one more avenue of possible solution blocked. Since yesterday afternoon no one had apparently seen him—Uncle Buzz. It was as though the world had swallowed him up. He would have to seek elsewhere. He was on the point of dismissing the matter, of going elsewhere, when a thought sudden'y came to him.

"You and he were to have some business last night?" he said, looking at Zeke intently.

Zeke grinned a sheepish grin. "Yessuh, we wuz—we had a little bisnis."

"But you didn't meet him? Sure you didn't meet him?"

"Sho I neveh. I ain' able to git de—I was detain'." Zeke had learned from experience and considerable instinct to hedge his utterances about with much generality. It was a good principle. It meant less to retract.

Joe thought another moment. "Take me," he said suddenly, "to the place where you get the business." There he might find a connecting link in his chain, he felt growingly certain.

"Oveh to Mist' Bushrod's?" The inflection was perfectly naïve.

“No. Of course not—out where you get it. Over to Fillmore or wherever it is.”

“Now, Mist’ Joe,” very reproachfully and with a quick, nervous flashing of the eyes.

Joe frowned. “You needn’t put on anything with me, Zeke. I’m not going to give you away. Let’s go get your car.” He stretched out his arm as though to sweep Zeke into doing his bidding and started for the door.

“But I ain’ eveh had no bisnis to Fillmo’,” Zeke began in a last effort to stem the tide. “They ain’ no bisnis theh.”

“That’s more like it. That may be the truth,” said Joe pressing him on. And Zeke reluctantly passed out and descended the steps.

As Joe turned to close the front door behind him he caught a look back in the room. Framed in the doorway stood a very small pickaninny, barely reaching to the knob. She was barefoot, in a blue calico dress, with her hair done in two kinky braids that stood out in front like diminutive horns. In her arms she held tightly clutched an old corn shock wrapped in a red rag. One hand grasped the doorpost. And she was watching him wide eyed and very gravely.

“That’s good advice you gave me,” Joe said to her, as he closed the door.

They made their way around a corner to a ramshackle shed, Joe urging on the reluctant Zeke by

the menace of an encroaching shoulder. Zeke paused at the entrance. He groped in his pocket and directly pulled forth a key on a very dirty, greasy string. Fumblingly he inserted it in the lock. Then he paused again and lifting his eyes, thoughtfully inspected the sky.

"Look powahful lak rain," he reflected dubiously.

"Get the car out," said the inexorable Joe. "We can put the top up."

Zeke opened the door and went in. For several minutes there was the metallic slip and catch of the crank and Zeke's laboured breathing. Then there issued forth a reverberating roar as of a monster released in travail, and then slowly there emerged, back end first, a perfect scarecrow of an automobile, mud stained and rust streaked, with an arrangement on the back like a discarded chicken crate, with fenders that were battered and twisted as though torn by some elemental tempest, and with a sagging and flopping top over the front seat that looked as though at any moment it might collapse from sheer decrepitude. Slowly the thing backed out of the shed, in a curve to the road, with much groaning and roaring, and then came to a stop. The whites of two eyes peered out of the shadow of the enveloping bonnet as Joe approached.

He took one more look at the sky before he climbed in. The racing forerunners of storm had

in some inexplicable manner vanished and there remained a lowering canopy of gray and black with here and there a patch of grayish green. Over in the west was a thin line of greening yellow, and the shadows were darkening over the back lanes through the trees.

“Let’s go,” said Joe, climbing in.

With much panting and sputtering and popping the car started slowly forward and they were off. Neither spoke. They came to an intersecting street and Zeke slowed down the car.

“Which way, Mist’ Joe?” he asked.

Joe was suddenly irritated. “To Fillmore. You know where I mean. Wherever you’ve been going for the stuff.”

Zeke made a sudden turn to the left, narrowly escaping the projecting roots of a tree. Joe clung to the top brace for support. Down a darkening street they rolled, with the trees arching, sombre overhead, and on either side, back in the shadows, the darker shapes of houses with here and there the passing glow of a lighted lamp. Night descended upon them as they left the town and a few splashes of rain appeared on the dirty glass of the wind-shield. Joe settled stoically down to wait. There was so much time to be passed until he could be of further use and until then there was no need of making any effort. The thought of the morning came back to him. It did not seem possible that the same day

was passing. Singularly, the idea of Bromley's was the thing that obsessed him rather than the business in hand. It was as though he had been released on furlough. "Grind, grind, grind," said the car. "You will be back at it all to-morrow. This is not real. This is a dream you're having." He shook himself. He was getting sleepy, felt utterly fagged.

And then Mary Louise flashed across his mind. "Come on," she seemed to say. "You're slipping. You're getting behind. They're all getting ahead of you. You're not keeping up. Let's get in a little more—little more—little more." He lurched against the top brace, blinked, and straightened up. Beside him was the shadow bent a little over the wheel. He could see the outline of the peak of the old golf cap and the dim tracing of Zeke's face, about it a faint gleam, and then the flash of an eye. He pondered. Here was Zeke doing his work—playing his part in the scheme of things. *He* was not bothered by any notions of obligation. *He* was not concerned with working out his destiny. *He* played his cards as he got them. "Sometime they roll seven—and sometime they roll two," he remembered the words of a philosopher of the rolling cubes a year ago—or was it a lifetime? Bromley's! The Golden Rule! Mary Louise! All alike. "Shape yourself to this pattern. Fill this niche. You've got to," said one. "Be like me. Do as I do. Or get out," said another. "It costs so much to live

this way. And you have to. Or it's not worth living," said the third. How about his way of looking at it?

He turned suddenly to the inscrutable face beside him.

"You don't let anybody cramp your style, do you, Zeke?" he said.

Zeke started. The sudden voice for a moment terrified him. "Nossuh, I doesn'," he stammered, anxious to agree.

Joe's voice was kindly encouraging. "Well, don't you let them, ever."

"Nossuh, I won'." And singularly he spoke the truth.

They came to a stretch of sand and the car slowed down appreciably. In addition there was a grade. And then came a flash of lightning over in the west, straight ahead of them, and another, fan-shaped, like the slow opening of a hand. In the momentary glare they saw the outlines of a hill up before them, with the road clipping it in two. A telephone pole on the crest stretched out spectral arms and leaned away. And then darkness again.

Joe decided he had better tell Zeke the object of their mission. It really didn't matter much, but then he wanted to talk.

"Do you reckon Mr. Bushrod's in Fillmore, Zeke?" he began, trying to make it as conversational as possible.

"I dunno, Mist' Joe. He might could." This offered no encouragement.

"He's been gone—ever since last night. Reckon he is in Fillmore?" He caught the gleam of two eyes as Zeke partly turned to look at him.

"I dunno, Mist' Joe. Whelh you reckon he gone?" As yet the import had failed to reach him.

For a short while they rolled along in silence, silence save for the rattling labour of the car. The grade was growing steeper. On both sides of the road the woods were encroaching and the only light was the feeble one cast by the single uncertain lamp of the car. It barely seemed to puncture the black.

"Mist' Bushrod ain' been home?" came Zeke's voice. The idea was beginning to have effect.

"Not since yesterday morning."

For another interval, silence, and then: "Whuh Mist' Bushrod gone? Reckon he gone to Louisville?" Perhaps the faint stirrings of a cell of conscience. Who can say?

"Don't know, Zeke. Perhaps."

As though satisfied by this mutual exchange of confidence, Zeke lapsed again into silence, and for a time nothing was heard save the voice of the car and occasional sighing bursts of wind high up in the tree-tops. Then there came a black line of shadow stretching across their way, on up ahead, and above it a yellowish, greenish streak of light where the

clouds were breaking. Faint wisps of vapour went curling slowly across the streak and there was a patch of blue, very deep, and the momentary gleam of a star, and then they plunged into the shadow.

The air grew cooler, almost cold. The woods had swept down upon the road and engulfed it. Even the noise of the motor seemed quieter, and above it could be heard whisperings and occasional crackings. Something started up from a thicket by the side of the road and they could hear it scurrying through the underbrush. Zeke moved up the throttle and they began to move faster. And on either side of them came down the darkness, sweeping past them, pressing close, and before them wavered the faltering light, and the cool damp air came fingering and touched their faces.

Zeke stopped the car. The rushing darkness stopped. The breeze was still.

"Heah's de place," he said, and his voice was lower; Joe could barely hear him.

"I thought it was Fillmore. This isn't Fillmore."

"I know," said Zeke. "I doesn' go to Fillmo'. Dis is de place whuh I gets it. Up de paff a piece."

Joe was on the point of telling him to go on—on to Fillmore, where proper inquiry might be made, when a sense of curiosity prompted him to stop. He would see where the illegal traffic was being carried on. Zeke was trustingly letting him in on his business and he might not understand. After all, it was

getting down in a way to the heart of the business—in a way getting closer to Uncle Buzz. He had never bothered much before. He climbed out of the car and Zeke shut off the motor.

The silence, as he followed Zeke down the narrow path, was oppressive. There would come a vast sighing like a wave of sound, and a settling, a few crackings far off, and then silence. The ground was soft with a matting of fallen leaves, damp and mouldy, and once as Zeke turned his pocket flashlight from the path there came a gleam of water. Briars flicked his face and scratched his hands, and once a low-hanging branch struck him across the eyes and he stumbled from the path and stepped into slime. He kept close behind his guide, for the darkness was intense and the path was tortuous. Directly Zeke stopped. The pocket light made a small circle on the ground.

“Heah ’tis,” Zeke whispered, and pointed with the light.

A thicket of blackberry bushes crowded into a corner of an old snake-rail fence and two old boards were all that was visible in the narrow compass of the light—that, and a pool of dark water over to one side. Up above, there was a break in the trees and a suggestion, beyond, of open fields. He stood for a minute. Nothing else was visible, nothing from the hand of man, as Zeke moved the light back and forth in slow-sweeping arcs. It had been a waste of time;

there was nothing to see, nothing but the crude assignation place of a troop of spectral whiskey jugs, and the seat of a profitable industry. He turned to go, his mind shifting to other things. He heard Zeke fumbling in the bushes, saw the light switch into the fence corner, then across the pool; and then he heard a cry, a low cry of terror, and caught a glimpse of something white—on the ground, near a big tree. And then Zeke's voice, "Fo' Gawd!" and the light switched off and someone came hurrying toward him in the darkness.

"Come on, Mist' Joe. Le's git away fum heah!"

Zeke brushed past him in an agony of haste. He heard his footsteps on the leaf carpet, saw the crazy flickerings of the light through the trees, and had a sudden intense desire to follow. But he paused, curious, mastering his fear. And then the outline of the clearing came slowly to his eyes, and looking up he saw that the clouds were breaking and that the tip of the moon was showing through. Slowly the place was bathed in a silvery flood. Back slipped the shadows. Shapes that had been pressing, close at hand, receded and took the form of trees, of bushes, lurking there on the edge of the darkness. He saw the fence corner. He saw the two boards propped up against it, forming a cache. He saw the pool, a tiny little woodland pool. And then he caught again that glimmer of white by the foot of a huge beech tree. Slowly he made his way toward it with beat-

ing heart. Slowly it took shape, a huddled shadow, right on the edge of the light. He touched it with his foot, careful lest he step beyond. He stooped. He touched it with his hand. He turned it over. And the moonlight, slipping through the trees as though to help him, sent a feeble, flickering shaft down—upon the upturned face of Uncle Buzz. For a moment it rested there, as if to reassure him, bringing out in misty detail all that was necessary. The thing was hideously befouled, besmirched, lying there in that black swamp water, mute, helpless, utterly broken. But it was unmistakable. He stretched out his arms and dragged it from the water, and the clouds, closing in again, obscured the moon, leaving all in darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO days later they buried Mr. Mosby. Joe had kept his promise. At least he had kept it as well as it was possible to keep it. It was decided that Mr. Mosby had met his death by drowning. That is what "One Half of Rome" believed. The "Other Half of Rome" perhaps had various ideas. It could not be surmised from the set conventional expressions on the faces of those gathered together in the back parlour that hot Saturday afternoon just what the consensus was. There had been at first a surreptitious buzz of conversation and then deep silence as the Episcopal priest in his long white vestments came slowly in. Joe felt peculiarly outside of it all. He was in a sense neither spectator nor mourner. For Mrs. Mosby depended on the palsied arm of her brother for support. And then there were a few old ladies, friends of Mrs. Mosby's, and himself bringing up the rear—merely appended to the family, the last survivor of the discredited branch. He was conscious of a heavy scent of flowers banked about the close, dark room, a scent in which the cloying sweetness of jasmine prevailed. For a moment there was not a sound, and then the minister

lifted his head and began the burial service. He, too, was feeling the heavy hand of time, and his voice, so long charged with the burden of emotion, emotion that had had to be summoned on short notice, seemed on the point of breaking. He was old and broken himself, wearied with futility, with his head raised, half-closed eyes lifted ceiling-ward, his fluttering draperies now billowy, now closely enwrapping his gaunt frame in the little breeze that came in from the hall. There was not much of comfort to be gained, not much of hope. Looking out of the corner of his eyes, Joe could get a glimpse of a wall of white, blank, expressionless faces and the silent waving of countless palm-leaf fans. Directly in front of him was the long, narrow back of Mr. Fawcette, and beside the latter, Aunt Loraine, sitting very straight and very stiff, her new black veil opaquely shielding from curious eyes the delicacy of her grief. The ruching was there, but the bangles had been laid aside. On went that quavering, faltering voice:

“All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds.”

Of just what kind had been Uncle Buzz, he found himself wondering. A weaker kind, or at least, a kind ill suited to the world it had been thrown in.

“Now I say, brethren,” the voice went on, “that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.”

What, thought Joe, were the chances of all those white, fleshy faces staring there, immovable? The crowd in the back parlour—a single, silent, pasty-faced, fan-waving convention, over which the fat, pasty white hand of death was significantly hovering, and about which the odour of jasmine was pressing. He felt suddenly stifled, suffocated. He wanted to get up and run away, out of doors, anywhere. The only thing that seemed to escape the stifling was his Uncle Buzz, lying there quietly, in acceptance. And then he knew that another link had been broken, a link that held him to the past. There was a little less friendliness, a little less cheer, a little less understandableness—he was conscious of it—a little less need of him.

The service came to an end and a small fraction of the assembly filed out to the family burying ground on the hill behind the house. Here came a repetition of what had been enacted in the back parlour, only there was the distraction of the wind which would be playful and of a robin, perched on a near-by fence post, who would not be depressed but sang away its liquid, throaty warble as though the whole ceremony had been arranged for its own entertainment. It came quickly to an end. Mr. Mosby was sent on his way with all due convention and dispatch with a little of sentimentality thrown in for good measure. A few moments of grace after the last clods of earth were tossed on and patted down, and

then everyone was hurrying away, back to his respective niche, cloaking haste with a thin layer of dignity. Mr. Burrus openly ran after a departing "Ford." It was Mr. Martin's, and the handy reserve carry-all of the "Golden Rule," and Mr. Burrus preferred a moment's haste to a long, hot walk at greater leisure. Joe remembered his face, there in the third row at the end, in the back parlour. Inscrutable it had seemed—a weazened, yellowing blank mask, slowly souring in the heat. What had he been thinking on? On the waste of some lost accounts, perhaps—or even on the amount of credit he might allow the widow. It might be that he contemplated the remote results of his own handiwork lying there in the black cloth-covered box. But if this latter, his face showed no sign. And "Neither Half of Rome," though it point an accusing finger, would pause for a moment as it passed him by.

Joe did not go back to the house with the rest of the family. Instead, he struck out across the fields away from them. He climbed the back boundary fence and was soon walking up to his knees in grass and weeds. The air was hot and sticky and heavily charged with a shimmering white water vapour. There were a few sluggish clouds with sombre centres hanging about the valley to the southwest, and there was a drone and zip of flying creatures in swarms above the drying weeds and stubble. Coming to a large oak tree standing solitary in that wasting field, he threw him-

self face downward on the ground in its shadow, careless that the grass was scant, and that his bed was scratchy. For a moment he lay in utter relaxation, caring for and observing nothing. And then, the sharp edge of his fatigue being broken, he slowly turned on his side and leaned his head on his palm, his elbow resting on the ground. It was a barren prospect that stretched out before him: lazy, shiftless land clear over the brow of the hill that sloped away to the house. The Fawcette place had not been worked to capacity for years, and there it lay, the waste of Mr. Mosby's opportunity. Tiny creatures swarmed in the grass. Joe could see them scurrying up and down the withered and drying stalks. A little crowd of gnats was hovering about his head and occasionally one would light upon his face and stick there dejectedly. Above the grass, against the blue of the sky beyond, he could see the shimmering waves hang tremulous like the air above a hot woodstove in winter, and there came to his ears the sudden whirring zip of a grasshopper in mid-flight. Directly there came another, and another, till the air seemed full of them. Summer had come. And about him lay the field in listless idleness.

It was common talk that it should be worked, that it was a shame not to work it. But there had not been money enough. Money was needed for everything, everything that man wanted to do, money and something else. About him buzzed the gnats;

all around him poured the sunshine; and in his ears was the drone of countless insects. This was Saturday. Another full day and would come Monday. Monday! He had not thought of it until now. He suddenly felt the uselessness of his bonds. And yet he could feel the stretching of his tether. Was everybody fastened to a tether? Was there no such thing as freedom? Singularly enough, this field in all its idleness, with all its heat, with its droning and buzzing, suggested freedom. In fact, the feel of the entire country, this country that he had known, about which his memories clustered thick, suggested freedom. And yet it was not above reproach. People spoke of it condescendingly. "Poor land—unproducing—a century behind the times." What was it? The land? The people? The times? There was Uncle Buzz, with his foothold on two hundred acres, and they had buried him in his one good suit. Buried beneath the force of circumstances, he had never once lifted his head—had died with it in a shallow pool of water. And *he* was no better. He could feel the shackles close about him, binding him hand and foot. What was one to do? His head dropped down upon the crook of his arm and he fell asleep.

An hour later he awoke. He felt hot and uncomfortable. He stretched himself and rolled over on his back. He gazed upward through the tangle of branches and tried to relax again. But the heat had become unbearable. He struggled to his feet and

brushed the litter from his clothes. Away in each direction stretched the field. It was dry and dusty and covered with a short, cutting stubble beneath the upper surface of waving grass and weeds. It no longer held any allurements for him and yet he did not want to go back to the house. He looked at his watch. It was five o'clock. Some of the old ladies would still be there. They would be sitting about on the horsehair chairs making lugubrious conversation. Back toward the left stretched the pike, white and dusty enough. But there were trees along the edge of it, and he remembered the grass in the fence corners to be long and fresh and succulent as a rule, even in midsummer. Slowly he started in that direction. When he reached the boundary fence he was dripping with perspiration and his shoes and trouser hems were covered with the yellow dust. He climbed the fence, and as he stepped out into the road he saw an automobile approaching in the distance, dipping down a hill to the creek that broke the stretch toward Guests. It was not often that motors of any distinction saw fit to travel into Bloomfield; the pike was not good enough. But this approaching car seemed to be one of some distinction—was long and rather rakish, had a deep sound to the exhaust as it started up the hill toward him. Idly he watched it. There were two passengers, a man and a woman, slouched well down in the seats. What could they be doing in the heat of the afternoon with the

top down and in all that blazing sunlight? He stepped over to the side of the road and dragged his feet, first one and then the other, in the grass to wipe off some of the dust. He knew that he was hot and dirty and dishevelled, but he did not care much. On came the car. As it came nearer it lost its interest to him and he sat down in the grass and plucked a blade to chew, paying it no further attention. Suddenly, to his surprise, he realized it was stopping and then the woman called to him.

At first he did not recognize her. Her face was quite red from the sun and she had on a fetching little close-fitting motor-bonnet with fluttering lavender strings. A long lemon-coloured duster enveloped the rest of her. She was quite pretty, with the contrast of colour, with her hair all snugly tucked away. It did not look like Mary Louise, but it was. He felt very conscious of his dusty old suit and his wilting collar and his flushed and perspiring face, as he came and stood by the car.

"This is Mr. Claybrook, Joe," she said, looking at him gravely.

He remembered then the big, confident man that had joined them that unhappy night.

"I just heard, Joe. It was terrible. I was awfully distressed."

He looked into her eyes—she spoke so earnestly—and wondered if she were feeling all she might feel. Uncle Buzz had not received very charitable treat-

ment at her hands. The picture of it all came before his mind and he said nothing.

“When is—when is the funeral?”

“It’s all over,” he replied shortly. “This afternoon.”

“Oh.”

She turned and had a word with her companion. And then he leaned over, partly across her, smiling quietly.

“We’re going right back in an hour or so. Be glad to have you go with us. There’s plenty of room.” His voice was big and rather pleasant and he had an air of careless assumption that everything would be all right.

“Yes, do, Joe,” Mary Louise put in. “I had John drive me up this afternoon. I wanted to get here in time for— Aunt Susie wanted some things.”

It was quite natural the way she said, “I had John——”

“It will be better than going back on that morning train—to-morrow? And I suppose you’ll have to be back at the office Monday?” He had never known her voice to be so solicitously sweet.

“No,” he said, and he surprised himself, “I’m not going back.” He had come to no such decision. But the idea was suddenly so utterly distasteful that it seemed impossible. And *she* having *him*, Claybrook, take him, Joe, back to work. The smart of it was intolerable. “No,” he repeated firmly, “I’m

not going back." And then he gazed off across the hood of the motor into the vacant field beyond.

"I see," she replied, rather softly, and he could feel that she was watching him and that Claybrook was, in a way, standing by in a condescending attitude, ready to do her bidding.

He was anxious to be off, anxious to be alone. "Thank you very much, however," he said, and bowed to Claybrook. He avoided Mary Louise's eyes. He backed away from the car and lifted his hat. "Good-bye."

Turning away, he set off down the road, away from Bloomfield, and shortly he heard the motor start and the grind of wheels. He looked back. He saw her lean over as though to speak to Claybrook. And then he saw Claybrook turn his face toward hers. They were probably talking about him.

He trudged on down the road, although he had no idea of where he was going. There was a soreness deep down in his heart and it hurt all the more because he realized that he had been unreasonable. And he had said he was not going back. He caught his breath slightly at the thought. Well, he wouldn't go back. There was no reason why he should—absolutely no reason. With that he turned about and walked briskly back up the hill toward home.

As he entered the front hall he could hear a low hum of conversation on the other side of the parlour

doors. They were partly open, and he hurried past lest someone call for him to come in. He went upstairs, into the ell bedroom, and took off his coat. He looked at himself in the glass of the bureau. His face was red and streaked with perspiration and dust. And *they* had looked quite fresh—"smart" was the word. He proceeded to clean himself up and he spent quite a long time in the process.

When he came downstairs again it was growing dark. He no longer heard the voices in the parlour. When he reached the foot, he paused for a moment in uncertainty. The walnut chairs were there, quite placid and content with themselves, and the hat-rack, and the old horsehair sofa. His aunt Loraine came out of another door, back in the passage. She had, of course, laid aside her veil and her face had been freshly powdered; she looked quite the same. There was a certain prim set to her mouth, and her eyes, as she looked at him, were calculatingly cool. She did not touch him but stood with her arms hanging rather stiffly by her sides.

"Joseph," she said, "we want you to stay, if you will—as long as you feel you can."

The tiny spark that he had felt died away. "We," she had said. He wondered who the "we" might be. Mr. Fawcette, perhaps; perhaps one of the old ladies. Aunt Lorry had evidently been looking ahead. There was no need for him here.

"No," he said rather quietly. "Thank you very

much, Aunt Lorry. I must be getting back—first train to-morrow, I expect.”

She lifted her eyebrows ever so slightly. “Very well. Make yourself at home while you stay.” And she glided off with her queer, noiseless step, back into the shadow of the hall.

He walked to the front door and out on to the wide verandah. He looked down the winding driveway to the gate, all mellowing in the dying sunlight. There was not a breath of air, not a sound. The gate was standing partly open; the last departing guest had neglected to shut it. On the driveway lay something white, somebody’s handkerchief. It lay without moving, inert. There was nothing to pick it up, not even the slightest breeze. He gazed across the open country that dipped away to the west to the ridge of hills that was crowned with orange and purple mists, with the white road climbing to its crest. And as he watched, he could see a small blob of white dust moving, leaving a feathery tail behind it. And he turned quickly and went into the house.

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PART II
MYRTLE

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CHAPTER IX

THE sunlight was dazzling white. High winds during the night had chased all clouds to remote quarters and had with the morning suddenly gone, leaving the city to the entire mercy of the sun. It was August and very dry and in the corners of buildings huddled little heaps of dust and elusive trash, withered and powdery. On the pavements and walls the sunlight lay like white-hot gold and the shadows cast by the awnings of Bessire's department store were sharply chiselled as by a stencil. Mary Louise paused for a moment in their shelter and drew breath.

Sometimes work is a fattener. It is when, by virtue of its absorption, certain phases of the body are allowed to function naturally. It is true in the case of meddling minds, also in more or less conscientious natures. Mary Louise's nerves had temporarily ceased to feed upon her. She was getting plump. The lace frill at the bottom of her elbow sleeve lay flat against a curve that was full and round. In fact, one was conscious of a general well-roundedness about her. And her face, which was flushed, was likewise serene.

The tea room had been making money. With the arrival of the intense heat had come generous patronage, especially for the noon meal. And the petty vexations had effaced themselves. For the past few weeks an atmosphere of expectancy had seemed to hover, such as is felt on trains arriving after a long journey, or in the completion of a work. It was the sense of accomplishment. Mary Louise felt her problem undergoing solution, and nothing else mattered. She now laughed at the dismay she had felt at paying ten dollars for a cook in Bloomfield. There was no price to be set on her freedom. And the careless streak in Maida was something to be accepted with good nature and not to be allowed to irritate. Maida was at least on the job, eternally on the job. Not much of a companion truly, nor for that matter a really good business partner. But she irradiated good nature and that was something.

A sizzling hot pavement is not much of a place for reflection even if shaded by a striped awning. So Mary Louise passed on. The bundle of fresh-printed menus was getting heavy under her arm—she had just come from the printer's—and the soda fountain at the corner drug store tempted her. She yielded.

She took a seat alongside a revolving electric fan and let the breeze play on her heated cheek. She felt suddenly lazy and allowed herself a delicious relaxation. Behind the counter two boys in spotless

caps and aprons were working with desperate haste to cool the dusty throats lined up before them. One of them looked like Joe Hooper, except that he moved faster, was quicker with his hands. Poor Joe! How helpless and hopeless he had looked that afternoon. He was one of the kind that could not learn how. The other clerk stopped before her and asked her for her order. This one looked very much like the new cook Maida and she had just hired. So intent was she upon her observation that she forgot he was speaking to her. That new cook—he was a smart, sharp-looking boy—just out of the army a few months. It had seemed a bit incongruous having that type in the kitchen, but then—— She watched the face before her, hair sleek and parted in the middle with ears a little too prominent, features rather regular. The eyes were set too close together. He slid in and out without friction, made up almost two drinks to the other one's one—the one who looked like Joe. Probably made more money even than the real Joe.

A tall frosty tumbler was placed before her. She dipped into it with a straw. It was delightfully cool and refreshing, with a blend of fruit odour and flavour beneath the sprig of mint that floated on the top. Slowly she sipped it. And then for a moment she let her eyes wander across the faces lined up before the counter beside her. Next to her was an old woman in a sleazy black dress with a turban-like hat all

swathed with a long black veil hemmed with black. She had looped it back in anticipation of the drink she would soon get. The old face was white and limned with wrinkles, and one hand, as it rested timidly on the edge of the counter, was heavily veined and thin and swollen about the knuckles. There was a droop to the shoulders and a patient, haggard look about the eyes. Mary Louise wondered if the mourning were very real; she seemed so very tired that even a poignant grief might well be spent. As she looked, the old woman caught her eye and turned hurriedly away.

Beyond her two young girls were making merry with the cherries in their glasses. At odd moments they would surreptitiously bid for the soda-jerker's attention. They had finely plucked eyebrows and were much powdered about the nose. One of them sat with her back partly turned to Mary Louise, who could catch the occasional lift of an alluring eyelash from the glass's brim in the direction of the clerk. She had her legs crossed, and once when she shifted her position Mary Louise could see the gleam of a bare knee. It made her feel a bit older somehow, but likewise complacent.

She finished her drink and arose to go. Just then the big, raw-boned clerk, the one who looked a bit like Joe, dropped a glass on the counter and immediately there was a widening stain of red and a piece of glass rolled over the edge and fell to the

floor. A woman sprang up and back from the counter in irritation. And a dull red flush crept into the boy's face as he quickly produced a rag and began to mop up the débris. As she walked to the door, the other clerk, the one with the close-set eyes, was saying something to him in a sharp tone.

She paused a moment. Past her on the sidewalk pressed a steady stream in each direction. Hot, perspiring faces, flushed and lined with concentration, worry, or fatigue—all hurrying. She felt curiously complacent and aloof. Perhaps it was the momentary rest and cooling. Her thought returned again to Joe, being reminded perhaps by the little incident at the counter. She recalled Claybrook. She remembered Claybrook's words that afternoon—that afternoon she had gone to Bloomfield. It was just a few minutes after they had left Joe Hooper on the road; they were passing the old Mosby place. She had noticed the interest with which Claybrook had inspected the place as they rolled by. He had asked the name of the owner.

"Fine old trees," he had said. And later, "Walnuts," in answer to her question as to which ones he had meant.

Yes, they had been fine old trees. Something enduring about them. They added to a place—trees. There was nothing artificial or upstart about their beauty, but the venerableness of dignity. The Mosby place had been noted for its walnuts.

“Tell ’em,” Claybrook had said, “I’ll give ’em a nickle a foot for those trees right there on the ground. That is, if they are hard up,” he had added as if seeking to justify himself. She remembered the incident now with regret, a sort of complacent regret. Claybrook was a bit crude at times, or at least he was not quite awake to some of the finer sensibilities. But he was a kindly man and doing well. He was the sort you could depend on. Business was cruel. You had to overlook certain things, for instance—Maida. But Joe! Well, it was too bad. He just didn’t have the knack.

She crossed the street. The glare was terrific. Hugging the wall, to keep as far in the shelter of its shade as possible, she proceeded north. In spite of the heat the streets were crowded. She looked at her watch. It was eleven-thirty. She would have to be hurrying to get her menus back on time. She came to an alley and paused on the curb to look in either direction for traffic. By the curb at the corner of the alley stood a bright, shiny, new car. Something about it attracted her attention. She looked more closely and was conscious of a peculiar little catch or start somewhere deep down inside her. In the front seat, behind the steering wheel, sat Joe Hooper, with his arm flung negligently along the polished patent leather of the top brace. And such a Joe Hooper! He had on a new straw hat, and while Mary Louise could not trust herself to a very long

inspection, she noticed the fresh creases in his coat sleeve. He was wearing a "shepherd plaid" suit that looked "bran spanking" new, and in his collar was knotted a pale lavender-hued tie. More than that, he seemed positively well groomed. Beside him sat a woman, back turned toward the curb. It was a most alluring back, in a soft, shimmering dark-blue dress with a lace collar and above it a gentle curve of neck with little provoking wisps of hair curling softly about it. That was all she took in in that flash of vision, except—as she looked, the creature raised a dainty, tapering hand and filleted a tiny feather under Joe's nose. He drew back slightly and smiled—she saw the whole thing—a quite restrained and, if anything, a condescending kind of smile.

Mary Louise passed on inconspicuously across the alley, into the sheltering shade of the shop awnings again. She wondered if he had seen her. And then she was tempted to turn around and reassure herself with another look. But she did not.

A singular mixture of emotions surged through her. She felt as if someone were secretly laughing at her. Joe Hooper, she had decided, had been one of those people who could never learn how to do things. And yet, unless her eyes had deceived her, here he had burst gorgeously from his chrysalis. She was not sure she was glad of it, either. Charity, especially of thought, is frequently more of a luxury to the donor than to the recipient.

She hurried on. The street was becoming more crowded and the heat, if anything, more intense. She began to feel just a bit angry with herself for exposing herself to it. Her face felt as if it were burning up. It had not been at all necessary. She could just as well have sent someone else. And here she was plugging along, with her clothes all sticky, her hair coming down in wisps about her ears, and her face as red as a beet. Funny, what had come over Joe. She was certain it had been he but it seemed improbable. And she had been sorry for him. He was the kind who could not "put anything across."

All her complacency was gone as she opened the tea-room door. She was hot and tired and hurried. The little clock on the mantelshelf said a quarter to twelve as she closed the door behind her and then she saw that there was a customer at a far table in the corner and realized how late she was. A short, fat little woman was sitting tensely on the edge of a chair, looking about her with quick, restless, stabbing glances. She had on an atrocity of a hat that looked as though someone had plumped down on her head a flimsy crate of refuse blossoms and vegetables. It was a riot of colour and disorder. And her short, protuberant bosom rested on the table's edge while the face above it was marked with stern lines of dissatisfaction. Little folds of flesh hung down below her jaws.

Giving Mary Louise a momentary appraising

glance, as the latter came in with her bundle, she snapped out: "This place open, you suppose?"

Mary Louise hastily laid down the menus. "Yes," she said, "it is. Haven't you been waited on?"

"No," said the old lady, stirring in her chair and making as if to rise, though wild horses could not have pulled her away from even the prospect of food. "I've been sitting here ten minutes by your clock." She turned away and stared gloomily into space with her mouth sharply set in indignant endurance of such mistreatment.

Mary Louise hurried across the room. She pushed open the swinging door into the passage that led to the kitchen. Everything was quiet. She wondered at it. As she stood there for an unappreciable instant, she heard a slight sound to her right, seemingly from the little pantry or storage room that was tucked in beneath the stairs. The door of it ordinarily stood open.

She paused a moment then took one step forward and pushed open the door.

Full beneath the light of the pendent lamp, leaning against the serving table for support, stretched the billowy form of Maida Jones, half reclining in the arms of the sleek-haired cook who sat on the table edge and faced the door. Her head was thrown back in complete abandonment and her hair was coming down about her shoulders. The boy's close-set eyes peered up sharply as Mary Louise opened the door.

Then there was an immediate scurry, the lamp was switched off, and directly Maida emerged flushed and sullen.

Mary Louise was stunned. Her ideas were chaotic and could take no form. But as they stood there facing each other, she was conscious of a rising sense of the ludicrous mingled with disgust. The memory of that momentary scene lingered in her mind like a piece of burlesque statuary. She stifled a desire to laugh.

Then the other culprit began to stir about among the pans. Maida was staring at her with lips partly open, her breath still coming short and thick.

"Turn on the light," said Mary Louise.

And then as Maida made no move:

"Go fix yourself up. There's someone in the room waiting to be served." Her voice was heavy with the scorn she felt.

Maida recovered. She bit her lip. Then she laughed a short, nervous laugh. "Shocked to death, aren't you?"

"Not at all," replied Mary Louise pleasantly. "It's quite charming, I assure you." She turned and entered the kitchen. The other cook and a maid were quietly attending to their work. She paid them no attention but went and stood by the back window over which was stretched a heavy wire screen, and through the thick dust of which she could see a dim, dusty, narrow courtyard and a pile of discarded boxes.

For a long time she stood there, with her hands folded one upon the other and resting limply upon a table. The world had taken on a grotesque slant. It was a strange place in which it was easy to lose one's way. Her assurance, her satisfaction, her enthusiasm had vanished. Nothing was well ordered; everything was haphazard. People did the most unexpected things. And there was ugliness and deceit parading about in broad daylight. She suddenly felt herself utterly incapable of passing judgment on anything.

And as she stood staring out through that dingy window, with the bustle and sounds of feet behind her, two fat round tears welled from her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

CHAPTER X

MEANTIME, Joe had written his name at the top of a new sheet. He drew up to the curb on Broadway just below Fourth and stopped the motor. He leaned back against the tufted arm and stretched himself. Then he idly viewed the passing show before him. It was past mid-afternoon and dry and dusty. The keen edge of the sun had slightly dulled, but a Negro, seated high up on a pile of shabby furniture on a moving van, mopped a shining black face with the end of a very dirty undershirt sleeve. A boy came wavering along on a bicycle, swerved in to the curbing across the street, stopped, got off and went in to the Baptist Seminary, leaving the bicycle sprawling in the gutter. An old woman came out of nowhere; he heard her uncertain steps before he saw her as she approached him; the wide pavement the moment before had been entirely deserted. She walked as though she had no definite destination, not straight ahead in a plumb line. She had an old-fashioned bonnet with dangles on her head and a straw basket over one arm. Somehow he thought of his aunt Lorry. She came peering up at him from under her lashes. She seemed drawn

by the brightness of the car. And her dim eyes seemed searching in the shadow of the top for a definite assurance. As she drew near, Joe smiled, a little absently; the rusty steel aigrette perched on top of the bonnet like the horn of a unicorn was nodding so gravely. The old thing caught the smile. Her face brightened. Her mouth spread in a toothless grin. She reached out a hand and touched the car lightly with a withered finger on the fender.

"Such a pretty buggy," she said. The voice was tremulous and high-pitched and the articulation thick and indistinct.

Then she looked at Joe; her rheumy gaze passed over him from the tips of his shiny new shoes to the crown of his hat. Admiration now spoke from her with perhaps greater eloquence even though her lips were still, parted a little. The pause had been but momentary.

Joe reached over and threw the door open.

"Climb in," he said. "I'll take you for a ride."

The old woman shrank back from the car, wide-eyed in alarm.

"Come on," he urged, quite gently, "I'm not a masher. I'll bring you right back here, all safe and right side up."

The old face wrinkled in a shrewd, crafty grin. She lingered on the pavement for a moment in indecision, then came slowly forward and paused at the running board, peering upward into Joe's face.

“Take me for a ride?” she lisped, tremulously eager.

“Sure,” said Joe. “I’m selling ’em.” He held the door open invitingly. “Maybe you’ll buy one some day.”

Again the swift flash of a smile passed over the slack mouth and there was a gathering in the wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. Painfully she pulled herself up into the car and sank into the seat beside him.

He switched on the motor, threw out the clutch, engaged the starting gear, and paused with his hand on the lever.

“We’ll go around this way. It’s not so crowded and I think the air’s better.”

She smiled at him confidently.

They started. At the corner he swung around in a wide sweep. He caught a glance at her and saw her sitting with eyes glued intently on the street before them, her hands gripping the edge of the seat. Then the block ahead was straight and smooth and free of traffic.

He patted the chest of his coat.

“I’ve just put an order away in here,” he said. “It’s very easy. They’re scrambling over each other to buy these cars.”

She gave him a fleeting glance and returned to her desperate business of watching the road.

For a moment he was silent. They rounded another corner.

"I'm not really expecting you to buy a car—merely speak a good word for it with your friends. That is, if you like it. It is all right, isn't it?"

At his questioning tone she again ventured a look at him and smiled again uncertainly, still gripping the edges of the seat.

One more corner and they were on the return trip. Directly they were rolling up toward the curb from whence they had started. They stopped and Joe reached over and opened the door again. The old woman caught the import of the movement and clambered stiffly out, stooping low with her head to avoid the top brace. She stood on the curbing, bewildered and blinking, apparently lost.

Joe reached out and handed her a card.

"You're headed just the same way you were when I picked you up," he said. "And in the same spot." And as she made no move and apparently did not hear him, "Call on me if I can serve you. I can do other things besides sell motor cars.

"Good-bye," he said, tipping his hat and slamming the door shut. Then he moved away. He left her standing there, watching.

He turned in Fourth Street and slowed down to about six miles an hour. The lengthening shadows were bringing out the ephemeral creatures that might otherwise wither in the heat. The west pavement was already crowded and there was a stream of motors idling along in a sluggish tide, southward.

It was the time of day when the city, as it were, stretches itself after its siesta and takes long, lazy, satisfied looks at itself.

Joe slumped in the seat. This lazy panorama had not begun to pall on him. He luxuriated in it. It was something of a holiday to him. The change that had come over his life was inexplicable; without effort he had lifted himself. The selection of an occupation had been haphazard; he had merely taken the first thing that had offered itself—selling automobiles. And there had been no difficulty in selling them, none whatever. The very first month his commissions had amounted to considerably more than twice the sum Bromley's had paid him.

The motor was thrumming along slowly and regularly, giving out soft little ticks like a clock. Everything about it was shining and new. Everything about Joe was shining and new. He felt sleek, lazy, and comfortable. He made no effort to analyze the change that had come over him, merely accepted it as a matter of course. At times would come vague wonderings why he had been such a "chump" as to hang on in that treadmill of an office as long as he had.

He thought about the old woman and her grenadier bonnet and her bewildered pleasure, and chuckled to himself. The old soul had probably never been in an automobile before. He had raised the standard of her desires. She might not be satisfied again until she had another ride, maybe many more. It

might even stir her up. That was what it was. Ignorance was what kept most people down. They did not know what they were missing. And so they just plugged along taking things as they came, most of them. That was what had been the matter with him. Hard work never got a man anywhere, just hard work. He shut his mind resolutely on the thought and turned again to the inspection of the evening parade.

As he came in sight of the windows of Bessire's Department Store he remembered that there was something there that he needed. And there was no need of his hurrying back to the office. He had done enough for the day. So he turned the corner and squeezed into an opening on the side street. He stepped out on to the pavement and indulged in a luxurious stretch of the arms. The sudden glare of the sun on the pavement made him sneeze. It was delightful. He walked lazily through the revolving doors of the department store.

As he gained the interior a woman brushed past him so that he had to stop in his tracks. As she passed she looked into his eyes. Something in him stopped with a click like a notch on a reel.

He gazed after her, trying to remember. But all there was was a faint lingering scent that was difficult and alluring. There was something familiar about the curve of the neck, something about the tilt of the hat, he had seen before. It disturbed him.

All he had caught was a flicker of her eyes, as though she had thought to recognize him and then had changed her mind. She turned a corner into a distant aisle and was gone.

He had a momentary impulse to follow to the end of that aisle and see where it led to, but he checked it. He gathered himself together and lazily strolled along in search of the counter he wanted. Quiet had descended upon the store. It was almost deserted of shoppers and the yellow light came streaming down the cross aisles heavy laden with dust particles. The little bundle girls leaned from their stalls behind the counters and chatted. There was a pleasant buzz in the air.

He made his purchase and lingered for a moment at a counter of notions. Then he strolled back toward the door, steeped in the feeling of well being. A girl at a curved counter was tucking in a wisp of hair and taking off her paper sleeve protectors. Over beyond, there by the west entrance, they were already shutting the doors. He paused and watched the day's closing pleasantly settle down. Then he reached out a hand to push open the door before him. Somebody jostled against him. A small collection of paper bundles spilled out on to the floor at his feet and he mechanically stooped to pick them up. They were manifestly feminine. There were four of them, all small; he gathered them all up in one hand.

Then he rose to his feet and turned to restore them to their owner.

He looked into a pair of limpid violet eyes.

They dropped and long lashes shaded them. A delicate colour rose and splashed the softest of cheeks.

Joe stood, holding the bundles.

Directly she looked at him again. It was a very timid, gentle, apologetic look. She seemed to be gathering courage.

“Oh,” she burst out in a sudden sweet abandonment to friendliness. “I’m so sorry.” She paused then, uncertain what next to do or say.

Joe held the door open for her, keeping tight hold of the packages. He felt a little warm behind the ears.

She preceded him to the pavement. He got a good look at her as she passed through the door. Still the baffling resemblance!

Then she turned and faced him on the pavement. Again she looked at him shyly, and there were little dimples in her cheeks as she tried hard not to smile.

“I knew I’d get into trouble when I loaded myself down with all these bundles,” she explained, reaching out for them.

Confidence was returning to him. He felt the old lazy relaxation of being amused.

“Can’t I help you out of your difficulty—see that you get safely home with them?” he asked quietly.

“I’ve my car here.”

She raised her eyebrows, looked startled a moment, and then flushed slightly. "Oh, don't bother. I can get a taxi."

She made no further resistance and directly he was slamming the door behind her. He had caught a glimpse of black-silk stocking above a white buckskin pump that somehow disturbed his poise. As he walked around to the other side of the car he was wondering where it was he had seen her before. He could not remember.

He climbed into his place behind the steering wheel and observed her again. It was a setting that became her. Her shyness seemed to have all vanished. She was powdering her nose as he climbed in; a silver vanity case lay open on her lap. He noticed it, saw a hairpin and two nickles and a card or two. She had said she might take a taxi.

Directly she was smiling into his eyes. It made him just a little bit giddy in spite of himself. How old was she, he wondered? For a moment he busied himself with the car. There was nothing made up about her; it was a clear case of good looks. And she knew how to wear her clothes.

"I think I'm terrible," she was saying.

"How?" he answered, hardly hearing her.

"Letting you take me up this way." She finished her renovation to her evident satisfaction and packed away the puff with a snap.

"You couldn't expect to manage those bundles

any other way," he assured confidently and quietly. It was an amusing game.

She gazed off toward the corner and wetted her lips.

He started the car. They turned the corner into Fourth Street and moved south. As if sensing the need of further explanation here on the esplanade, where all seemed acquainted, she began in a slightly more animated tone:

"Of course, it's not like we had never met."

He felt she was looking at him, but being busy with the car he was silent.

"I really believe you've forgotten."

He caught a glance at her. She looked charmingly provoked. The fact that she was centring her attention on him was in itself flattering. "Not at all," he assured her and wondered to what she referred.

"It was at the American Legion Ball," she reminded him.

And then he remembered. It all came back to him. It had been a dismal evening, way back in April. He had noticed her that evening. She had worn a weird thing of silver and black. She had even sat beside him on a sofa by the door—she and her partner. But he had not met her; he was sure of that. He had remarked, he remembered now, how curiously alert her eyes were, how alive, taking everything in.

"You were in uniform," she continued.

“Yes,” he replied. Nearly every man present had been.

For a few moments silence. Then reaching Broadway and less traffic they rolled along a little more easily, with less tension.

“I’m Myrtle Macomber,” she at length essayed. “In case you had forgotten.”

Joe grinned. Then he turned to her, “And my name’s Hooper.”

She gave him another one of her roguish glances through her lashes.

“I was trying to remember,” she laughed.

Then he asked her the way home and she told him. After that she chatted more freely, made comments on some of the people they passed. The evening had turned out fine. Broad orange pennons streamed out of the west. The little fountain in the city park tinkled delightfully as they passed.

“It’s a pretty car,” she said once; “so roomy and comfortable.”

He made no reply and wondered if his silence were reprehensible.

Under her direction they turned into a quiet side street and stopped before a grayish frame house with a fancy bulbous tower at one corner and bilious green outside shutters. A woman was stooped over a flower bed in the centre of the yard. She arose stiffly at their approach.

Miss Macomber turned to Joe, but he had already

alighted from the car and gone around to help her out. As he held the door open for her she seemed a bit distraught. Slowly they walked across the pavement to the gate. The woman in the yard came forward to meet them.

There was a moment's pause. And then: "This is Mr. Hooper, mama."

The woman gave him an appraising look, glanced at the car, then smiled and held out her hand. It was damp and flabby.

"Please excuse my appearance, Mr. Hooper," she smirked. "I was getting some flowers for the table, dearie," she added to the girl.

Joe wondered vaguely at the contrast. Here was another of nature's paradoxes. Mrs. Macomber looked worn and quite untidy. She was fat; her figure looked as though it had been allowed to run wild. Her face was heavily lined with wrinkles and was not too clean. And her eyes were tired. The house dress that she wore open at the neck and held together by a bleak-looking cameo pin might have been destined for dust rags in some families, and not extravagantly, either.

She gazed at her daughter with open admiration.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Hooper," said the latter, and as she spoke she barred the entrance through the wooden gate with a dainty arm in a long, white-silk glove. But she smiled at him archly. "Call me up sometime."

And then she turned and, gently pushing the drab creature before her, went up the walk and into the house.

Joe looked back over his shoulder at them as he drove away.

CHAPTER XI

THE rest of that troublous day passed hazily for Mary Louise. She avoided Maida, who in her turn seemed disposed to avoid her. She made a hasty escape after the tea-serving hour and hurried home.

The sun was setting as she entered her room; the tall spire of the First Church was all ruddy with the glow of it as she threw open the window, and as she paused for a moment with palms on the sill, she looked down into the deepening shadows of back passages and alleys, nooks and recesses, where lurked ash and garbage cans and heaps of rubbish. A black cat came slinking around the corner of an old gray-brick stable, disappeared for a moment in a passage, and a moment later she saw him spring to the top of a rotting board fence, pause, and then lightly let himself down into the shadow of the other side. And just a hundred feet to the left—she could barely see past the front cornice of the four-story dwelling below her—Broadway was thronged with its sleek, pleasure-loving, home-going crowd. You could never tell the back from the front.

She withdrew from the window, walked slowly

across the room, and sank into a chair. She felt curiously ill at ease and sat staring blankly before her at the wall.

For the difficulty, which in some ways was trivial enough, no solution presented itself. Maida Jones, her companion and business associate, had developed a side that had never been taken into account. Or perhaps she had merely presented it for the first time. So much the worse. If so, then her judgment had been all the more faulty.

She had thought she had known Maida, known her well enough to count on her. She had known she was lazy, known she was a bit slipshod and indifferent. To offset this she was good-natured and compliant. She had had the money, enough for her share in floating the venture. There had been no complexity in the problem at the start.

It was unfair for her to pan out so. Mary Louise felt in a way that she had been swindled. She had felt all along that she could dominate the tone of the establishment, and in fact she had done so. Maida was not made of the stuff to furnish opposition. That had been one of the considerations of the partnership. And in all the months of their association nothing positive had ever cropped out in her. Why, she did not have the strength to say "no." That was why—Mary Louise's thought checked itself sharply here and paused. For a while her mind wore itself out in short, futile meanderings of suppositions.

Directly the dim headlines of the paper she had brought with her claimed her attention, and then tiring of that she dropped the paper and stared emptily out of the window. Why, she decided suddenly out of nowhere, she didn't even know the girl.

A swinging white finger of light came feeling across the sky in her window. She watched it grope for the brass ball on the peak of the spire, saw it slip off and fumble and come feeling again, settle with a determined grasp as if to say, "There, I've got you," and then go wandering off eastward across the sky. It was the searchlight from the new Odeon theatre, she remembered. And it might be barely possible that it was entirely an honourable affair. They might really care for each other, grotesque as it might seem. Mary Louise granted for the moment that she had been a detached, impersonal sort of companion and such a thing might well be possible without her knowledge. But if such were the case, Maida needs must be apprised at once of the proprieties. The tea room was a business proposition purely. She would wait a bit until the proper time and straighten out the kinks.

Somewhat relieved in mind, she leaned back in the chair and rocked slowly. She began to grow restless, and thought for a moment to switch on the light. But the room was a bare sort of thing, had nothing of her in it, and the thought of its bleak primness was repellent. She decided that a walk

was what she needed, to clear out the cobwebs. Slowly she arose to her feet and groping along the edge of the table, felt her way to the door. An hour's walk would be enough; she would not need her coat. Slowly and thoughtfully she opened the door.

Just beyond the threshold in the dim-lit hall stood Maida, fumbling in her bag for her key. She looked up in alarm as Mary Louise opened the door. It was ludicrous, the expression on the flat face. Behind her stood the cook--the man from the army. He turned away as Mary Louise stepped out and pretended to look out the hall window.

Mary Louise had decided on a more moderate course. She had decided to forget the matter for the time being. But the sight of the boy, there in the hall, was disconcerting. Nevertheless, it was with a forced cheeriness that she spoke:

"Don't need your key, after all. I was just going out for a little while." It was trite enough civility.

Maida looked up at her dully, and Mary Louise stepped to the left and was on the point of passing on down the hall. As she walked away, the boy moved to the door, fingering his hat, and took one step across the threshold after Maida, who had preceded him, into the darkened room.

And then Mary Louise turned around. At her step he paused and looked quickly up.

"There's a chair by the window," she said, indi-

cating a group of armchairs clustered there and a tall fern in a glazed pot on a pedestal. "You can wait there." She had spoken on the impulse, and her voice sounded strangely vibrant and remote even to herself, like the voice of a third person. She was trembling slightly.

The boy looked at her, flushed a little, seemed undecided.

The light switched on and Maida appeared at the door.

"Come on in, Tim," she said, looking strangely at Mary Louise.

An overpowering anger came swelling in the latter's veins. She walked back to the door and stood before the placid bovine figure of her room-mate. For a moment she could not trust herself to speak, she was trembling so.

"I said for him to wait outside—there," she repeated with quavering emphasis.

Maida's face looked flat and large and sober. There was a great, vast, pasty blank of cheek from her sombre eyes to the downcast corner of her mouth. "I heard you," she replied. "Come in, Tim."

Mary Louise felt impotent. She watched the face before her, stolid, immutable, expressionless. She felt suffocated for breath. She plucked at her skirts with her fingers. Finally she gasped out:

"Not—not into my room. If he does, I'm through with it—and you. You understand?"

Maida shrugged her shoulders, and a slight smile curled the corners of her lips. She turned away.

“That’s your lookout, not mine. You’re making an awful fool of yourself, McCallum.”

And then she closed the door.

Mary Louise walked blindly down the hall. She stumbled into the elevator and did not answer when the elevator boy spoke to her. When she gained the street the rush of the night air against her face steadied her a bit. She turned off promptly north and struck out for the down-town district.

By the time she had walked a block her faculties were returning. It had all been preposterous, crude. She had blindly lost her temper. Something kept crying out to her that she was an old maid. Perhaps she shouldn’t have minded. She was finicky and squeamish. A girl had to have some privacy in the place she entertained her company. But Maida—and the cook! The thought of that flat, pasty, sullen face stirred in her a sudden repulsion.

She crossed Broadway and turned west toward Fourth, walking rapidly. Maida! Maida! The girl she had known for eighteen months in the Red Cross tea room! The girl who had sat through a year of war without ever changing the vacuity of her smile! Sat—that was it, positively sat. A woman with a figure like that had no right to a lover. And a cook! An ordinary cook, hired out by the week! His beady, close-set eyes and hair sleeked back.

Like a rat! And *she* was mixed directly up in it, *she*—Mary Louise McCallum, the daughter of Angus McCallum. She shuddered and hurried on.

As she passed Chestnut Street they were going into the "movie" theatre. There was a long queue stringing out on the pavement. She was hardly aware of it but kept on walking straight north. More than one head was turned to watch her as she plunged resolutely on. Her apparent fixity of purpose was incongruous for that time of the evening.

The preposterousness of the whole affair kept hammering at her thoughts. To think that she had tied herself up with such a creature. To think that she had been so blind to the coarseness, the commonness that must have been there all along. What would Aunt Susie think about it? What would they all think? And in her own room! The brazen, callous nerve of the creature! Like a big, fat, lumbering ox. She trembled all over with sensitiveness.

Before she knew it she had come to Main Street. Beyond her dipped the hill that led to the river. The lamps were dim, and sparsely lighted the alleyways and loading platforms of the dark, forbidding warehouses. She realized suddenly that she must make some decision. She could not go back to the room. Slowly and thoughtfully she crossed the street and retraced her steps on the other side. What was she to do? She could not go back. Not under

any circumstances. The friends she had were mere casual acquaintances; she could not call on them.

She passed out into the more crowded district again. She began to be a little perturbed, forgot her anger; at least it was dimmed. Coming to Spruce Street she saw the usual crowd of men hanging about the door of the Ardmore. They always stood there, clustered about on the steps, with their cigarettes and their half-burned cigars and their flashy clothes and their burnt-out eyes and their appraising looks. For a moment she contemplated crossing the street to avoid running the gauntlet of their inspection. Where would she go then? Farther south it was darker and more unfriendly, with great stretches of shade and silence. She paused for a moment on the corner and watched the throng about the steps across the street. People were hurrying in and out; motors were humming; trolley gongs were clanging. She felt a sudden fear of it, that familiar neighbourhood with the tea room less than a block away. Hot, flushed, nervous, excited, she wanted to run somewhere, slink down into a cool, quiet shelter as had the cat she had seen from the window earlier in the evening. The world was a cruel place. One had to know how to get along in it. Every scrap of assurance seemed to have left her.

Suddenly she turned to the right and walked down Spruce Street. She came to the lobby of the Patterson and walked boldly in. With her pulses ham-

mering she went up to the desk, took the pen, and signed her name to the register.

A level-eyed man with a very naked head came forward and considered her. His face was as cryptic as the outline on a mummy case. It was as easy to read his thoughts. He merely inclined his head and looked slightly away, suggesting that his ear was hers if she so desired.

"Single room with bath," faltered Mary Louise.

The clerk resumed his upright position. He looked at her gravely as though she had said, "What will you take for your hotel?" He looked past her into the vast stretches of the lobby and found there much for philosophic speculation. Thus absorbed, he asked vacantly, "Any luggage?"

"No," said Mary Louise. "I—it will be here in the morning."

He turned and stepped back into the sanctum of interwoven grilles and partitions.

Mary Louise was desperately nervous. It seemed that a thousand eyes were watching her; her back felt peppered with them. She shifted one foot and leaned slightly against the desk. All about her men were pressing up for mail, keys, reservations, information. She dared not look around. There were no women in the constricted circle of her vision except the telephone operator over to her left.

The clerk was taking a long time. She was getting even more anxious. Suddenly she heard her name

called. It startled her even while it brought a tremendous sense of relief. She turned and Claybrook was standing by her elbow.

“How’s tricks?” he inquired.

For a moment she could not answer, only look at him gratefully.

“I’ve been out of town. Just got back. Was going to call you up this evening, but I didn’t have the chance,” he went on.

She murmured something unintelligible.

“Waiting here for something?” At her nod of assent he came and stood beside her, leaning his elbow on the desk, his gaze idly and comfortably sweeping the lobby. “Hot to-night,” he said.

The inscrutable clerk returned. Mary Louise felt his inspection before she actually saw him. She turned, expectant.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “Can’t do anything for you.”

Mary Louise received the blow standing. “But,” she faltered. “Later on?—I’m not in a hurry. Are you really all filled up?”

The clerk gravely smiled and shook his head.

She stared at him in desolate appeal. Her thoughts went rocketing off. What was she going to do?

“How’s this?” she heard Claybrook say. “Full up?” He had turned from his idle inspection of the lobby. “Not in two weeks. You can rent a floor in this hotel.”

He looked at Mary Louise. "You want a room here?" He seemed a bit surprised.

"Yes," she stammered. "For the night."

Claybrook turned to the clerk. "Tell McLean Miss McCallum wants a room here for the night," he said.

"But——" interrupted the clerk.

Claybrook cut him off short, tossing a card across the desk. "Take that to McLean and tell him Miss McCallum wants a room. And give her the best service you've got."

The clerk disappeared again. Mary Louise was hot and embarrassed and uncomfortable. She looked up and saw Claybrook regarding her quizzically but kindly. He seemed very big and she warmed to him. He asked her no questions. She was about to speak when the clerk returned again and, calling a bell-boy, tossed out a key to him, bowed, and murmured, "Six fourteen," indicating Mary Louise.

Before following the waiting boy, she held out her hand impulsively to Claybrook and looked into his eyes.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I don't know what I would have done without you. It's all so ridiculous. Tell you all about it sometime."

She left him standing there in front of the desk, with a puzzled look upon his face, a big, reliant, kindly figure. He had not asked her a single question. He had come to her assistance when she

needed it sorely. His was a friendship worth having.

She waited until the bell-boy had left her in the room and then she closed the door and locked it. Then she threw herself face down upon the bed and buried her flushed cheeks in the pillow. What a disgraceful, disreputable affair it all was. All on account of her own blindness and folly. She felt like a little child helped out of a scrape. But all the mischief was not remedied. She at least could find other lodgings to-morrow. She would not wait another day. Thanks to Claybrook she was in off the street. Suppose she had had to spend the night on a park bench? Once that had had a humorous sound to it. Claybrook *was* a masterful person. He had made that clerk step around. How humiliating it had all been.

She got up and switched off the lights. Then she lay down again and watched the twinkle of the lamps of an electric sign about a block away across the roofs. What was she going to do about Maida? What was she going to do about the tea room? Something would have to be done. It was impossible to go on with it any further.

She would have to buy Maida out. She could force her to sell, she supposed. But where would she get the money? She was already in debt for part of her share. Perhaps Maida would buy her out. What would she do then? Go back to Bloomfield?

Just when the venture was beginning to pan out nicely? Not without a struggle, she wouldn't. Back and forth she debated the question, her mind a welter of confused decisions.

After a while she fell asleep. . . .

Two days later she met Claybrook again. Nothing had been decided. Maida had seemed utterly indifferent. "Perfectly satisfied with things as they are," she had said; there was a diabolical stubbornness in her manner. She made capital of her own inertia. She was as cool as if dealing with an entire stranger. Finally, after two days of backing and filling, of bickering and contesting, she had named her price. "Fifteen hundred," she had said and there was nothing in the way she said it that gave the slightest hope that it would be any less. It was a hold-up.

Mary Louise met Claybrook; she was passing through the lobby of the Patterson where she still had her expensive room. He saw the trouble in her face and drew her to the lounge in the ladies' entrance.

"What's wrong?" he said shortly. "You've been hard to catch lately—something's on your mind."

"No, there isn't. Honestly," she protested. She saw that he was not to be put off. Moreover, she was feeling entirely weak and helpless, no longer the masterful and self-reliant female. And she told him the story—most of it.

When she finished he smiled at her. He seemed

genuinely amused. "It's quite a tragedy," he admitted.

"And what am I going to do?"

"That's just the point," he agreed. "Has the tea room been making you money? Does it look good to you?"

"Yes," she said. "Too good to let go of." And then she launched into a digressive and rather vague prospectus of its activities and profits.

"How much money would it take?" he asked at length.

She told him.

"Well, then, forget it," he concluded. "I told you that if you got in a jam, to call on me. Well, I was not talking just to hear myself talk. I meant it." He paused and stared away at the opposite wall. "Meet me here this afternoon at three and I'll have a check for you."

Mary Louise was for the moment incredulous. Then a great sense of relief flooded over her, and then a feeling of regret.

"But I couldn't," she faltered.

"Why couldn't you?" He rose to his feet and looked down at her.

"I couldn't take money from you. You don't know what I'd do with it, don't know what sort of business woman I am, or anything."

"I know enough to satisfy myself," Claybrook assured her soothingly. "And I'm not giving you the

money. You can write me out a note for it. Six per cent. is better than four," he added. And then he smiled.

Two days later Maida Jones moved out and Mary Louise saw her no more.

CHAPTER XII

LONELINESS wages a Fabian warfare. It is likewise a craven. At the slightest opposition it turns tail and flees, frequently to steal back furtively and lurk slinking in the vicinity, clouding it. Only on rare occasions does it boldly come out and proclaim itself.

Another week had passed. Joe was finding leisure. And in leisure there are echoes, as in all vast vaulted spaces, where slight sounds linger reverberating and faint shadows stretch away to void. There was time to see the drabness of his boarding place, so he changed it. The change cost him more money and left him more leisure. He took his meals wherever he happened to be. The town was full of people, kindly enough, but each with his own circle of interests. To some of these he sold motor cars. There would be a short period of contact, then that would pass and the customer would slip into the whirlpool of casualty and be swept away. None of the relationships seemed to last. Each one left him more alone than ever.

He ran across Mrs. LeMasters. Mrs. LeMasters was an ancient lady with a penchant for lavender.

The day he called on her she was wearing a flowered dress with a sash, with bits of lace about the neck and cuffs. She put on a bonnet of lavender straw before the glass in her front hall and bound it to her by yards of voluminous cream tulle, wrapped under her chin and about her neck with trembling fingers.

"Does it blow much in your car?" she called to him in a quavery voice.

He assured her that it was quite desirably calm.

"The Stokes car is most delightful," she said. "Just like sitting in my own room. Not the sign of a bump—and I could not realize we had been going twenty-five miles an hour."

He smiled politely. "We'll see what this one will do."

"I've been struggling to keep off this evil hour for, oh, so long," she explained as she followed him timidly down the walk to the curb. "It was a terrible thing when the world went mad for haste and now has to be jerked around from place to place without ever drawing a sane breath. I've two horses and three carriages, one a Victoria that I bought in Paris. What am I going to do with these if I buy your car, Mr. Hooper? Oh, what a pretty car!"

She narrowed her sharp little eyes—she was quite near sighted—and stepped out into the street and around the rear of the automobile, caught sight of her image in the back panel, came around and felt of the leather in the seat, rubbed the polished sur-

face of the bow socket as though she had bought motors for years. Then she turned to Joe: "And the engine? Is it a good engine?"

"It is guaranteed to be the best." And then he went on quietly to tell her a few of the more spectacular things about it. He did not overdo it.

As he was speaking she was watching his face with a dreamy, vague expression on her wrinkled features. When he had finished, she brightened and laid her hand on his arm. "And now let's go for a nice ride." She was as enthusiastic as a girl. "I'm sure this is a nice car."

They went out in the country a short distance, out on the Bloomfield pike. She found he was from Bloomfield and trilled away in a high, shrill cackle that she loved every stick and stone in that adorable country. And when she found that he was the nephew of Mrs. Mosby, or, rather, Loraine Fawcette, that was, her ecstasy knew no bounds.

"Why, I took Tom LeMasters away from her," she giggled, and leaned over with her wrinkled and scented face close to his, grasping him by the arm.

After that they were bosom friends. He told her about Bloomfield as it came back to him, rhapsodized over its meadows and woods and "purling streams," and felt a rising desire to taste its joys again. And all the while his voice would fall on deaf ears and her eyes would take on a misty look as though peering down dark, dusty corridors; and interrupting him,

she would recall the circumstances of some famous party, summoning forth the creaking images of old men and women, yellow and withering, some of them long dead.

The afternoon passed swiftly away. They found themselves in a bit of lane that dipped down into a little grove of trees, just as the sun was gathering his cohorts for departure. A breath of fragrant breeze, heavy laden with clover and sweet with the stretch of cool, moist shade through which it had passed, came sweeping across the road, and the sounds of a farm hand whetting his scythe. Through a rift in the trees appeared a patch of delicate blue sky and the edge of a rosy cloud. Mrs. LeMasters came to the wistful end of an alluring and musty reminiscence and gazed regretfully at the tawdry beauties of the present. Then she turned her eyes upon Joe, and with a sigh that was sodden with romance: "How could you ever bear to leave that adorable spot?"

Joe smiled in mellow acquiescence and almost agreed with her.

Of course, the Stokes car never had a chance. Before he took his leave of her he had her signed order for a "Sedan" for immediate delivery. And she grasped his hand and held it, leaning coyly close. "We're going to have some wonderful times this fall. We'll drive to Bloomfield, just you and I. And what am I going to do about a chauffeur? What will I ever do with a strange creature who cares

for nothing but speed? Why don't you stay with me and drive for me? We'll just not stay home a minute."

He temporized, laughing, and finally tore himself away. And when he stepped from the car outside of Blake's Restaurant and was met by a blast of hot air, laden with the breath of fried onions, he felt himself very much alone. He ate his supper dreamily and retrospectively. The vacant chair across the little table added to the plaintiveness. He had liver and onions and a chocolate éclair and felt that he needed a woman to look after him.

He got in the car and drove slowly south. When he came to Lytle Street he turned off to the right. It was not quite dark and people passing on the pavement seemed to him to peer out at him. He felt self-conscious and slowed down the car still more till he barely crept along, with headlights blazing two bright paths before him. Myrtle Macomber had told him he might come and he did not wish to seem to be too eager. But as he sought his bearings, watching the unfamiliar fronts of houses and clumps of shade, he suffered little tremblings of expectancy in spite of his restraint.

Directly the house appeared; he had no difficulty in recognizing it. It stood out bleakly against the evening sky, with its pointed cupola thrust upward like a warning finger, with its wooden fence and gate. It had no modest shrouding of trees and bushes in the

shadow of which one might veil one's entrance. For a moment he was afraid lest he be too early, so he alighted, switched off the lamps, and proceeded across the pavement to the gate very slowly. Then from the shelter of the vines on the side porch he heard the hum of voices and a laugh. Grasping his dignity firmly like a walking stick, he stalked up the pavement to the house.

Myrtle came to meet him. The dim outline of her in her filmy dress and the elusive scent of her presence stirred him again. Her voice was gentle as she laughed a greeting and she gave his hand an imperceptible squeeze as he came up the steps. His stiffness vanished, but the sound of voices from back in the shadow disturbed him. An absurd personality crowded to his lips as she led him forward, but he repressed it.

He was introduced. There was quite a crowd assembled and in the dark he was conscious of only a blob of faces and the grip of one hand that was quite too hot. Even in the dark he felt embarrassed, as the conscious caller exposed nakedly to the world. What had she done this for? It was not too considerate of her. Perhaps it was purely accidental. He began to speculate on how soon the crowd might break up, and found himself dangling uncomfortably on the porch railing close beside the chair of a shadowy girl who was buried in its depths. He could look down into the place where he imagined her face might be.

He was quite close to her and in the jabber of voices she was silent. No one seemed to pay him the slightest attention, and his interest mounted in a growing intimacy of silence with this girl in the chair. A door opened and he saw Myrtle's figure pass across the room within and busy herself with something on the table. In the faint light that now pervaded the porch he again peered down at the figure beside him. Instantly the glamour vanished. The face he saw was thin and sharp, with hair slicked back from the forehead and narrow, slanting sharp eyes. He caught a glimpse of neck and shoulders above a brazen filmy waist, and in the splash of light and shadow there was no softness of contour, but cruel bones and hollows.

"Think you'll know me next time?" came a harsh voice and a laugh, and he straightened up and murmured an apology. He felt very much embarrassed and disturbed. His mellow complacency had fled precipitately. In his ears sounded the rattle of personalities. It was as harsh and as constant and as senseless as machine-gun fire. At least he could make an early "get-away."

Myrtle came and stood beside him from somewhere in the darkness. The tip of her little finger barely touched his hand as she stood there, leaning against the railing and firing back some "chaff" into the darkness. There came a lull in the chatter and Joe was feeling a bit mollified. Suddenly, before he

realized it, the crowd was leaving, and one by one they filed past him, each bidding good-night. There was the thin girl in the chair, then two boys who were entirely nondescript, with noisy throats cut out of the same copper plate, a soft billowy shadow of a woman under a floppy hat and exuding a ghastly sweet, cloying perfume. Her bare arm was as soft and flabby as jelly as she stretched it out to Myrtle. After her came another man, rather hesitantly, and keeping in the shadow. His voice was good, rather deep, rather strong. As he passed, he called Joe by name. Twisting around in the light, Joe saw that it was Hawkins, one of the owners of the "Kum-quick Tire Company," a rather taciturn, solemn sort of man to do business with. Joe was surprised.

In a moment they were all gone and the porch was dark and still. Their passage was as inexplicable as their presence had been. A dim band of light lay across the floor of the porch and Myrtle stood before him, facing him. He could not see her face.

"Well?" she said, as though she had known him for years.

"Well?" he echoed uncertainly. Her tone had implied a question or perhaps it was a suggestion. She stood quite motionless; he could have reached out his hand and put it on her shoulder. "Suppose we go for a ride," he suggested lamely, not feeling quite sure of himself, feeling that perhaps it was not just the thing to propose on his first call.

For a moment she made no answer, but stood there looking at him. He could feel rather than see the fixity of her gaze. Suddenly she tripped away from him and ran into the house, calling back over her shoulder, "Have to get a wrap. Be back in a minute."

After they had started he regretted the suggestion. It had shut off the prospect of a languorous evening. It was not in harmony with his mood; he had much rather loll back on a bench and steep himself in musings.

Accordingly, he turned away from town, keeping on quiet back streets. He did not even ask her where she wanted to go. The night was soft and dark with a sky that hung low like black velvet in which was sprinkled a soft studding of stars. The air wrapped about them, lazy and warm; it was not like night air at all. There was a peculiar exotic feel to it which kept the senses in a state of semi-coma yet alive to the slightest change. Joe half closed his eyes and leaned back against the cushion like an old cat getting her back scratched. The soft perfume of the girl's hair, the delicious mystery of the impenetrable sky above them, the caress of the air, all seemed to have been provided for his own especial enjoyment. He was suddenly exultant that he had escaped the house, that he was out and beneath the sky, and above all, that he had someone with him. The feeling of unfulfillment that had wracked him constantly was

giving way. He imagined a sort of proprietary right to the conditions about him. Luxury, ease, pleasure, all that rolling along underneath those stars with an exquisite, beautiful thing beside him was symbolical of, seemed justly to have fallen to his lot. The dull, unfathomable ache of suppressed desire had vanished and he was complacent.

"Well," a voice startled him. "Aren't you ever coming back to earth?"

He was suddenly confused.

"I don't think it's a bit nice, carrying me off and then thinking about some other girl. Aren't you ever going to say a word?"

He recovered and found that they had travelled about two blocks. The spell faded. He regained mastery of himself. "I've been waitin' for permission to speak. You only said I might take you for a ride." He turned and gave her a personal look.

"Where are you taking me then?" Her liveliness seemed to be returning. "Do you have to have permission for everything you do?"

"I'm not sure," said Joe. "We're goin' to take a look at the river. That's my own idea."

"How'd you know I wanted to? Perhaps I had rather do something else."

He looked at her suddenly, but before he could speak, she leaned toward him impulsively and laid her hand on his shoulder. "There, I was just kid-

ding. There's nothing in the world I'd rather do. It's a heavenly night. And I like you for your silence. It takes a real person to be still at the right time. Go ahead and dream all you want. It's heavenly."

She removed her hand, but in some way she seemed to remain nearer to him than she had been. A little, delightful shudder of appreciation ran through him. He no longer felt isolated. The proprietary sense was growing stronger.

They wound in and out in a devious path, for the streets in the eastern part of the city were laid out in accordance with whim and not by plan. And the rows of cottages lining the streets had acquired something of mystery from the canopy of night, and even the squalid sheds that appeared on the edge of the city's virility were wrapped in a shadow that loaned them charm. There came a short stretch of hedge-encompassed road and a damp musty smell of water, beyond, in the blackness on both sides. Then they rolled out upon a clattering bridge, turned a corner, and before them lay the river.

Joe slowed down the car. A tiny light flashed and then lay stretching its rays in a yellow ripple out into a blue-black immensity. A shadow, beyond it and entirely detached, appeared drifting slowly, and passed them, an empty "plop-plop" following vaguely in its wake. The road turned again, a little to the left this time, and swishing branches brushed

the car, and then almost at their feet stretched away to the left a broad, black, moving shadow, matching the sky and studded likewise by tiny pin-pricks of light. Ahead, unwound the road, a straight ghostly ribbon fading away into a giant's mouth, and softly swept down upon them the river wind, almost imperceptible in its rustling and a little chill. Joe felt a quiver of happiness.

"You're the noisiest man I ever knew," interrupted Myrtle plaintively. "Ooh! This place gives me the creeps."

He could feel the warmth of her and he laughed. "Swampy here a bit from the creek bottom. Up ahead it is higher and better. That crowd all come to see you? You shouldn't have run them away."

"Oh, it was time they were going. They knew I wanted to see you." He could almost feel her eyes and felt that she was making a play for him. It was a new and pleasing experience.

"So you really did, did you? I'm flattered."

There was a coaxing, cloying note in her voice when she spoke directly, that in some way coincided with the breath of the night and the feel of that velvet sky. He got her to talk just to hear the sound of her voice and she chattered on for a while about airy nothings that vibrated pleasantly in his ear: told him about a trip she had just had up to the Indiana lakes, regretted the ruining of a summer frock on a boating party, asked him his opinion of the necessity of chap-

erones on picnics. There was a suggestion of deference in her manner as well as lightness, a quality that stirred him a little more pleasantly even than the other qualities. She was different from others he knew.

They mounted a slight rise in the road and then dipped into a cool hollow fringed about by the shadows of willows. She paused suddenly in her recital and gave a little ecstatic cry. Seizing his arm she pointed. Over beyond, through a gap in the willows, lay a stretch of shadowy river meadow reaching back for a great distance to the second rise and fringed about its edge by even blacker shadows. And above it danced a million fireflies weaving ceaselessly to and fro, waving their soft lanterns. They hung, a cloud of twinkling radiance, upon a soft black curtain.

"Oh, stop the car," cried Myrtle. "The lovely things! Let's watch 'em from here."

For some moments neither spoke. They were drawn up to one side of the road partly in the shelter of the willows that lined it and it was snug and pleasant and warm. The light breeze could not reach them. Joe felt exalted. In this communion of spirit he was experiencing something entirely new. It was as though he had known her always. He could feel sure about her. She liked the things he liked. She was alive and she was not aloof. There was a joy in living; she felt it and he felt it. And she

was sitting very close. With an easy stretching of cramped muscles he slid his arm along the back of the seat and let it slip carelessly about her shoulder. There was a moment of delicious freedom and relaxation, of kindness and friendliness and a thousand other little sensations, to say nothing of a spark of a thrill—when she moved easily forward, contracting her shoulders.

“Let’s go,” she said dully.

Instantly the illusion vanished. Back into his self-belittling he slipped and was silent. Away fled the ease and complacency, and the wind came up from the river and chilled his ankles.

A moment later she asked him quite brightly, “*What do you do?*”

He had been thinking upon his sin and was startled at the casualness of the question. He laughed, a bit nervous. “Why, didn’t you know? What’d you imagine?”

“Of course I don’t know. Run some sort of plant, I would guess.”

“Nope,” he replied, and his voice had not the low, ringing assurance he might have wished, but was a little too loud, a little too high. “Nothing but this car.”

“I don’t understand,” she replied. “How do you mean?”

“I’m selling ’em. This is a demonstrator, and I am responsible for it.”

“Oh, I see—well—isn’t that nice!”

And somehow from that time on the evening grew chilly and less pleasant and clouds came up and obscured the soft velvet sky. In a very few minutes they turned about and went home.

She bid him a casual good-night.

When he climbed the stairs to his room about thirty minutes later, they seemed endless. His breath was coming short as he gained the top and a vast, sudden, sickening weariness swooped down upon his body and consumed it. As he passed the open window in the hall the night breeze made him shiver and he went chattering to bed. He pulled the covers up beneath his chin and realized that he had made a fool of himself, which somehow didn’t matter much; realized that he was alone—just as much alone as ever—which mattered quite a lot. All this and the chill shivering and the vast, aching weariness. He fell asleep and dreamed of desolate wastes and wanderings and parching heat.

CHAPTER XIII

HALF of August had joined the past. And with it was passing Joe's complacency. Each day brought a certain routine: customers to be developed, doubtful and recalcitrant ones to be urged to the purchasing point. One day's work was very like the next. But each day passing brought a certain satisfaction, of being one day nearer to the day ahead.

The day that he had taken Myrtle Macomber up the river road had been Tuesday. On Wednesday he had risen, sluggish and weary, with an ache in his bones. A half-hearted, spasmodic attempt at work had ended at eleven o'clock. He had called up Myrtle. They went that afternoon to a ball-game. Thursday morning came, bright with promise, and a profitable forenoon was spent in the old hammer-and-tongs manner. By noon he had two orders in his pocket and felt quite exhausted. The heat drank up the very marrow from one's bones. He met Myrtle on the street. They had lunch together. All that afternoon they paddled about in the river and came home with hair wet and nerves sagging. Friday passed, a long dreary day. By the time five

o'clock arrived Joe would willingly have sunk down on the cement pavement in some shaded corner, just to take his mind from the grip of the traffic. There was nothing in the selling of motor cars to give his mind anything to bite on. What was it kept him going, he asked himself? The answer suggested itself to him, but he shook it off and mused on. Summer was a dreary time. That night he dragged himself to Lytle Street. He found Miss Macomber waiting for him on the porch. She was wearing a Nile green sports suit of soft flannel, with white facings, and white shoes and stockings and a stiff sailor hat of white straw. As he came up the walk and approached the steps, he heard a scurrying and moving of chairs, and as he gained the porch he caught a glimpse of a scuttling back in a baggy shirt with suspenders, a stooped fat neck that was collarless, and a frayed-out bald spot—just a glint of it—on the head above. From humble soil is sometimes nurtured the choicest of blooms. Joe had never met Mr. Macomber and the mother always seemed to keep discreetly in the background.

They went that night to the amusement park on the river. Myrtle looked like a clipping from a style magazine; there was not a flaw in her. She drank up amusement like a thirsty sponge. They wandered about after the show. They drank lemonade. They danced in the pavilion. They wandered about some more, listened for a short time to the trillings

of a robustious prima donna come upon evil days. They soon tired of this so easily attained diversion and feverishly set out for more. They danced again. They ran into a crowd of Myrtle's friends. They joined them in a series of mad dashes on the roller coaster. Myrtle's zest seemed fed from eternal springs. They danced a third time, or rather Myrtle did, with each clamouring swain, while the music bleated and whined away in expiring ecstasies and Joe leaned back against the window sill and gazed hollow-eyed at the ceiling or answered the fatuous banalities of some of the less fortunate ladies who were not dancing at the moment for various reasons. And as they went home that night, after twelve, they talked of the vast still places of the world, "where Nature leans a brooding ear" and "where one can be reposed and strong and silent and happy" and "just drink up the atmosphere in great gusty draughts, and steep oneself in calm. None of this terrible grind from day to day."

Saturday, Myrtle went up-state. Saturday was hot and long and interminable. Sunday she motored, likewise up-state. It did not make the city streets the cooler, thinking of her. Sunday night produced a rain and a rising wind and a repetition of that chill, aching weariness for Joe when he dragged himself to bed. Just as relaxation slipped down between the covers upon his weary body the future came and stood at the foot of his bed and stared at him like a

flat, empty sheet of yellow foolscap, without a mark on it, and away it stretched endless. It was a silly image; it stared so vacantly. But it roused him with a start and he tossed about restlessly on his bed and threw back the covers that had become oppressive and let the breeze from the window, a water-soaked breeze, blow in upon his bare chest. How long would he be selling motor cars? He shelved that question. How much would he have to make this month still, to pay all his bills? He shelved this one, too. What was the matter with him, that he felt so played out? Suddenly he shivered and was chilled to the marrow, and he pulled the sheet up under his chin and went to sleep in the absorbed contemplation of each minute bodily misery.

Monday noon found them lunching together in the tea room. Joe spoke very distantly and formally to Mary Louise when once she came in, looked around at the tables, and then disappeared in the mysterious regions behind. Tuesday night they went on a moonlight picnic on a large river steamer and got back at half-past one. There had been a blissful hour of drifting black shadows, of gleaming ripples, and the heavy sonorous exhaust of benign boilers, spent on the topmost step of the pilot-house stairs, with a moon that dipped and swam in a turgid sea of drifting clouds. The rest had been rattle and bang of jazz and chatter, and bumping about on a hot, swaying floor into obstreperous shoulders, and

the smell of sweetened popcorn and fresh paint and sickly perfume. Wednesday they went for a ride again and ended up at the "Ferry" and danced and drank lemonade. And they passed a table where sat old Mrs. LeMasters with a youngish boy with a very red, sunburned face, and she wagged her finger at Joe and looked long and critically at Myrtle. Thursday night he stayed home and felt solitarily virtuous.

On Friday a picnic had been arranged. Joe "knocked off" work at four o'clock and went home and dressed by a window through which the sun streamed broiling hot. Before putting on his shoes he yielded to the lure of the bed and flung himself upon it. It was all he could do to drag himself forth and put on the finishing touches. Somehow the notion of the picnic did not thrill him. There would be the same crowd on hand, noisy, obstreperous, vulgar. They had no real "punch" to them. They were like beating a tin pan: all of it was right on the surface.

He arrived twenty minutes late and was scolded. They loaded a stack of baskets into his car; all about his feet were cumbersome bundles; and they scratched the polished panel in the tonneau behind the front seat. He could hear the grating of the straw basket across the beautiful surface and he shrank from the sound. Into the seat beside him clambered the soft, fattish girl. Her name was Penny, he had

learned. She smirked at him as she adjusted her skirts. There was a line of tiny beady perspiration upon her upper lip and her white slippers gaped at the sides and were not too clean. Her pink georgette crêpe waist clung to a flabby back with a suggestion of dampness and she simpered at him:

“I hope Myrtle won't put poison in my iced-tea.”

He confessed that that would distress him exceedingly.

Into the back seat clambered the two boys with the copper throats. Their names were Glotch and Trumpeter. They hailed Joe with acclaim, slapped Miss Penny on the bare neck, coyly, with little flips of the fingers, and when the slim, sour-faced girl—who was a Miss Ardle—with her slicked black hair, climbed in between them, they fell on her neck in ecstasies of greeting and threatened to kiss her and were slapped roundly for their pains amid loud guffaws. It ended by Miss Ardle coming around and sitting in the front seat to the rapturous discomfort of Miss Penny, whose fat leg was thereby squeezed against the gear-shifting lever where it was in Joe's way for the remainder of the trip.

Just before they started, Mrs. Macomber came out of the house carrying a small package which she brought round and entrusted to Joe's care. She was wearing a stiffly starched apron and her hair had been plastered down and her face scrubbed so that the deep

rings in the flabby flesh below her eyes were thereby accentuated. Very pointedly she looked at Joe and very definitely she spoke:

“You’ll see that they get back at a decent hour? And don’t let ’em go in the water.” It might have been the tone with which she exhorted Mr. Macomber. At any rate, Miss Penny pursed her lips and looked at Joe and then significantly at Miss Ardle, and ever after that made highly cryptic remarks half aloud, to herself, to the general effect that some folks’ families always were so good to them and how unhappy it was to be an orphan.

They went to a hot, stuffy little grove by the side of a disconsolate stream where mosquitoes hummed and tiny gnat creatures were vulgarly familiar. Joe carried the baskets down a steep and rocky path to the very edge of the brook, scratching his face with stinging briars and tough, elastic little switches from ubiquitous bushes. The two young men in the back seat ostentatiously assisted the ladies in the descent with much demonstration and much unnecessary pawing. Joe sat down and waited for Myrtle, who was coming with Hawkins, a look of resignation on his face.

When at length she finally arrived she paid him no attention in spite of the fact that he had not seen her for over a whole day. Later on she gave him some directions in the arranging of the lunch and the building of the fire, in a strictly impersonal tone, very

much the same as she had used with her mother. Joe was a bit puzzled, but he complied.

They went straight to the business of the lunch. Everything was spread out on a white tablecloth, Mrs. Macomber's second best. There was a baffling variety of sandwiches, olive and peanut-butter, lettuce and cucumber—quite soggy and dangerous—devilled ham, thin bread and butter, and a small pile whose filling was made up chiefly of discarded chicken scraps. There was a highly indigestible chocolate cake sodden enough to serve as a boat's anchor, a great quantity of jumbo pickles, and a dozen bottles of near beer. This last Mr. Glotch welcomed with a stentorian shout ably echoed by Mr. Trumpeter, each of whom fell to and consumed a bottle with much assumption of inebriety. After dissembling complete disintegration and coma, Mr. Glotch raised his head from the ground and mourned, "Oh, boy! The guy that named this juice sure was a bum judge of distance." "You said it," echoed Mr. Trumpeter, and they were rewarded by a series of titters from the ladies which encouraged them into still further excesses.

Joe felt weary. He was fortunately deaf to much of what went on about him, being concerned in the baffling mystery of Myrtle's behaviour. Was she provoked at him? Surely not. Was Hawkins, perhaps an erstwhile rival, putting in a bid for first honours? She was paying no attention to Hawkins

whatever. Had he been talking too much with Miss Ardle or the coy Miss Penny? Perhaps all she needed was waking up.

They had demolished the lunch and were sitting about the wreckage in mournful speculation of its vanished glories; Myrtle was seated between the two comedians; Joe between the two ladies; Hawkins some distance in the background, on a rock. With no warning whatever Joe sprang to his feet, strode over to the lovely Myrtle in her filmy white dress, and picked her bodily from the ground.

"Let's go swimming," he shouted before a single member of the crowd could give utterance.

He carried her in a couple of strides to the edge of the little stream and there held her threateningly over the bank. The two young men shouted approval and Myrtle began to squirm. At first she demanded coyly to be set down, and then with more sharpness in her tone. Joe looked into her eyes. They were unfathomable. Her peach-bloom cheeks were quite pink. But there were a few tiny wrinkles about her mouth that he had never seen before. Made her look older, somehow. He softened, for the lovely burden was becoming delightfully heavy.

"Think I'd better not?" he addressed the crowd.

"Go on," urged Mr. Glotch.

"Oh, well," he decided, "perhaps we'll only go in wading." He reached clumsily down to her foot for her slipper.

She squirmed and flushed deeper. "Don't!" she cried. "Don't, Joe!"

He disregarded her. Her foot dangled out in front, in full view; it was difficult to reach it without letting her slip and with her struggling. But he finally succeeded. He caught the French heel in a sudden swipe and the slipper went scudding off into the bushes. Immediately she drew the foot in to her and cried out. But not content he reached for the other.

"If you take that off I'll never speak to you again," she cried. She looked bewitching, struggling there in his arms all flushed and red, with her hair coming down. He wanted to kiss her but he grabbed the remaining slipper instead and firmly disengaged it from its place. And then she began to cry. And as he held her, struggling no longer, with one foot dangling disconsolately below his arm, he saw the turn of shapely ankle all sleek in its sheathing of white silk, the high arch with the delicate dip to the instep, and below it the gleam of two pink toes boldly peeping from a malignant hole.

Contrite, he set her down while the audience went hysterical. He set her down on a grassy mound and she threw him a red, angry look while the traces of tears were quickly drying. And he noticed that the other stocking was in the same condition. When he returned her the slippers she put them on without a word.

The rest of the evening she spent on the rock be-

side Hawkins while the two young swains made merry with the other girls and Miss Penny simpered and Miss Ardle was correspondingly caustic. Joe sat back with his head against a tree and a hard, tired smile about his mouth, and a restlessness in the pit of his stomach. He tried not to look at Myrtle and Hawkins. And once when the crowd surged in a moment's boisterousness over to another part of the picnic grounds he stretched himself, rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands to get the smart out of them, and muttered, "God, what a party!" all to himself.

Later on, when they were gathering up the remains of the lunch and folding it up in the tablecloth and returning glasses and plates and cutlery to the basket, Joe found himself standing silently beside Hawkins, watching the preparations for leaving. The moonlight was streaming down in a silvery flood through the trees and the bit of green meadow glowed like a fairy ring. There were silvery ripples on the water of the little stream that slipped off with a tinkling chatter into the deep gloom of the shadow. Somewhere near a wild honeysuckle bloomed and the fragrance of its blooming came drifting to them. Hawkins spoke. He stood with eyes fixed on the stooping figures near the tablecloth and his lips barely moved.

"How'd you get mixed up in this crowd?" he said. It was a curious question.

Joe looked at him oddly; the fellow's manner was, always had been, peculiar. "How about yourself?" he replied.

Without answering, Hawkins lifted his shoulders and threw out his hands. Then they were both called to come and help.

Joe had the sole company of Miss Penny on the return trip. She was inclined to be quiet and answered his polite attempts with monosyllables. He wondered if by chance he might be being remiss in the customs of such an occasion, but he did not care much. The three on the back seat had lapsed into a strange silence that seemed out of place, like death in a boiler shop, and when they finally reached the city limits and passed beneath the glare of the first corner light, he took a look behind him and caught Miss Ardle kissing the imperious Glotch. He turned and looked at Miss Penny. She sat with her hands in her lap, looking demurely at them.

He delivered them all to their respective destinations. And then, having the load of baskets and picnic utensils in the car, he returned to Lytle Street to see that they were properly handed over. He passed Hawkins' roadster as he turned the corner into Lytle Street and wondered if he were too late.

But as he staggered up the walk with the baskets, Myrtle came to meet him at the top of the steps and showed him where to put them. And as he turned and would have gone, she stopped him with a soft

word. On the top step she came and took hold of him by both elbows and looked up into his face with eyes that were swimming with sweetness. He gulped and was bitterly sorry for his folly. He started to speak, when she reached up with her hand and softly passed it across his forehead; the touch of it was as exquisite and as transient as a dream. He felt unmentionable depths.

“Hope you’re feeling better,” she murmured.

“Why?” he managed to ask. And then he remembered he had told her he had been unwell Thursday which accounted for his absence. And then: “Oh, I do. Much. All right now.” An errant moonbeam came straggling in between a break in the screen of vines and lighted up her face, looking up into his, flooding it with a sort of holy wistfulness. Softly she moved away, out of the light.

An hour later he clambered into his car and drove away.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT a curious question, that of Hawkins, "How did you come to get mixed up in this crowd?" And the inane response he had made to the counter as though it all were a mystery too vast for solution. Oh, well, Hawkins was a queer bird, inexpressive and glum and commonplace. Could not be expected to register much. His thoughts probably were too rusty and old by the time they formed in his head to issue forth in sparkling deeds or words. Joe slipped a knot into his tie, gave his hair a final swipe with the brush, caught a quick glance at himself in the glass, and then rushed to the door and rattled down the stairs whistling.

It was a fine morning, the kind that gave one lots of "pep," high cloudless sky, dazzling sun, hot and bracing. The morning paper had a column on the first page listing the names of those who had succumbed to the heat; but Joe had no eyes for such morbid news. A man never felt the heat when he had plenty of good work to do and was in good shape, and things were going well with him. Funny, how much suffering of any sort was due entirely to the state of mind. He whistled as he swung along on his

way to the garage. And when he stepped into the door of the garage office he mopped his streaming face and shouted to the night man who was just leaving, "'D you get those gaskets put into the old boat, Harry?"

"Whadda you think this is?" growled the man, "a mad-house? This ain't no flivver fact'ry—build you a car while you change yer shirt—course I ain't changed them gaskets." Harry clumped sullenly out of the door and down the street, keeping close to the wall, in the shade. Harry was an old married man and his feet were leaden. Joe chuckled as he gazed after him speculatively. And then he passed through the door back into the shop.

It was Saturday and only four hours till noon. There were no demonstrations scheduled for the afternoon. There was not a flaw in the sky. And yet the morning dragged. The streets were hot; great waves of heat came curling up from the asphalt, which was soft and gummy and showed the ruts of passing tires.

Toward twelve things began to quicken. Two or three insignificant details brazenly presented themselves and Joe fell upon them with feverish irritation. For a time they threatened to encroach upon a golden afternoon. A lady had sent in an inquiry about a winter top; Mrs. LeMasters was having trouble with her doors squeaking. They could just as well have waited until Monday.

It was two o'clock when he finally quieted Mrs. LeMasters, using a small oil can on the hinges and a few honeyed words upon her ruffled spirits. He drew a deep breath of exasperation and relief as he clambered into his car and drove away. He looked at his watch, paused a moment in deep thought, stopping his car dead in the middle of the street and was almost run over from behind by a nervous, excitable "flivver." The driver waved at him wildly, shouting obscenities as he swerved past and went careening down the street.

He would not have time to eat lunch. There was so much to do. Inspired, he stopped at a corner drug store and gulped down a malted milk. Then with enforced calm, and with a glance at the clock, he brushed down his clothes, looked at himself in the glass above the counter, and walked with much careless aplomb out to the car. He had timed it to a nicety.

When he got out of the car in front of the Macomber dwelling he had another struggle to keep from appearing self-conscious. As he approached the house a rosy little vision of the afternoon in prospect flitted into his mind. He glanced patronizingly at the sky. Never had there been serener blue. Descending a notch, he caught a surreptitious glimpse at upstairs windows. The one above the front door was chastely shrouded by inside shutters. But through a slight gap and beneath a raised sash he saw

a flutter of white and turned away his eyes. It was *her* room. He pulled the old bell knob and stood thoughtfully humming to himself on the steps.

No one came. Slightly jarred, he realized it and pulled the bell again. He stopped humming. Quite a while he waited, in growing irritation. The bell was probably broken. After many minutes—it may have been two—he stepped to the edge of the porch and speculated on going around to the back, when the door flew suddenly open and Mrs. Macomber stood peering at him through the screen.

He jerked off his hat. “How do you do?” and gave her a radiant smile.

Mrs. Macomber scowled. She was an impregnable griffin even in still life. She had on an untidy apron and her hair was squeezed back from her yellow, greasy face.

“Well?” she said.

“I’ve—er—Miss Myrtle?” sparkled Joe, conquering the vapours.

“Not in,” said Mrs. Macomber shortly.

Joe fell back a step. The shadows swept down upon him. For a moment he was at a loss for words. “But—Mrs. Macomber—we were going to Stony Point this afternoon!” He was aghast, and he bared his feelings to the world before he sank in the engulfing sea of negation. “Are you sure?”

Mrs. Macomber smiled grimly. “My eyes haven’t gone back on me entirely, I reckon.”

Joe stepped up to the level of the porch which stood inviting off to the right. "Listen, Mrs. Macomber," he began, striving to be respectful. "What's wrong?" In the face of the threatening debacle he could not calmly let matters drift. He felt himself rushing into action.

Mrs. Macomber considered and then apparently made up her mind. She opened the door and stepped out upon the vine-covered porch. For a moment she stood facing him as if taking in her ground. There was something deep and lurking and resentful in her narrow eyes.

"Well, I'll tell you," she began. "You've been taking up a mighty lot of Myrtle's time here, lately."

He sinkingly realized the truth of this statement as he felt the fixity of her gaze. He was silent. The front door opened over to his left, but he was too absorbed to notice. There was a sound of someone stirring in the vestibule.

Mrs. Macomber did not like his silence. She had decided on conflict. "A man's got no right to take up a girl's time unless he means right by her. Just because a girl's good lookin's no sign she's a play-thing for any Tom, Dick, or Harry comes along."

Joe was stunned by the baldness of the statement.

"But, Mrs. Macomber," he managed to stammer, "I didn't know that's the way Myrtle—Miss Macomber felt about it. I'm awfully sorry——"

"Keeps other men away," she interrupted him

ruthlessly, determined to have her say. "Spoils everything for her. She's just a young girl——"

"There, there, Ma," broke in a voice. Mr. Macomber joined the group, a sheepish, kindly look upon his face, and raising a restraining hand. He came and took Joe by the shoulder. There was something familiar in his round, stolid face. "Don't take on so. Gonna get a cigar. Wouldn't you like one?" he added casually to Joe, at the same time propelling him to the steps.

Joe felt he was being manipulated. He turned again in a desperate effort to regain some of the lost ground and his tone was very respectful, quite abject.

"Mrs. Macomber, please accept my humble apologies. Perhaps I should have spoken to you." He struggled. A final shred of self-respect prevented him from laying bare the throbbings of his heart, or perhaps it was a tiny, rising suspicion of doubt. There were signs of dross in his vision of pure gold. "I hope," he concluded, "that you will give me a chance to square myself."

The old woman glared at him, blocking the doorway, like a faithful dragon at the castle gates where sleeps the queen of beauty.

"Sure you will," insisted Mr. Macomber, still urging him forward. He seemed distressed in a vague sort of way.

They sauntered out of the gate, prisoner and captive, to the corner drug store. Joe me-

chanically selected a cigar from a proffered box. Mr. Macomber did likewise and gravely and deliberately clipped the end in the mechanical clipper on the counter, lighted it, and took a few ruminative puffs, gazing at the ceiling. Then he and Joe walked slowly to the street.

“Women fly off the handle,” he ventured at length without looking at Joe. “You mustn’t mind what the old lady says.”

“She misunderstood,” said Joe. “I suppose I was a bit too much on the job.” It was not easy to express himself and he laughed nervously. “But I don’t think you can blame me much.” He looked at the old man for encouragement and found none. “What I can’t understand is, that nothing was said to me before. It could have been prevented if it was so objectionable. You don’t think there is anything wrong, do you?”

Mr. Macomber shook his head and Joe proceeded to vent the vials of his dismay. A taxi driver escaping from the drug store passed them as they were absorbed in their conversation and stared at them in curiosity. The old man stood chewing his cigar, his eyes on the ground, the breeze softly ruffing the nebulous hairs that fringed his bald head.

Joe concluded his oration. There was nothing more he could add. And Mr. Macomber, raising his eyes, looked at him frankly. “Seen you before, ain’t I? Used to be at Bromley’s?”

“Yes.”

“I’m foreman there. Cultivator room.”

And Joe remembered. It did not exactly add to his satisfaction. “Sure you are,” and he tried to make his voice heartily friendly.

They walked slowly back toward the house. At the gate they paused for an awkward moment and then Mr. Macomber held out his hand.

“See you again,” he said. “Don’t worry about what the old lady said to you. It’s the heat. It’s all right. It’s all right.” He turned to go. He had made no reference to Myrtle at all.

It was over. Joe stood on the curbing and watched the sturdy figure in its sagging vest and collarless shirt plod up the walk to the house. He could not help looking furtively for just a glance at that upstairs window and caught a flash of white and then vacuity. And then crestfallen and hot and sullen and ashamed, he sprang into the car and drove away.

On his way down Broadway he had a puncture. Fortunately it occurred just half a block away from the “Kumquik Tire Company’s” repair shop. He covered that half block on a flat tire and went in for help.

Hawkins came and stood silently beside him as a boy removed the tire. It was a solemn occasion. They stood there on the pavement, thoughtful, intently watching the operation. Hawkins was

coatless; he had pink elastics holding up his sleeves and his hair stood up in a solemn pompadour and his high stiff collar had a spot of grease on it.

“What was the idea of the question you asked me last night, Hawkins?”

There was a moment's silence. Then Hawkins looked up and smiled queerly. “Oh, nothing particular.”

Joe was not satisfied. “Is there any reason why I shouldn't be runnin' around in that crowd? What's the matter? Aren't they—isn't she—all right?”

There was a quick, sudden turning of the slim hatchet face and Hawkins looked hard into his eyes. “It isn't that,” he said brusquely. “I'm engaged to marry her.”

“Oh, yes,” replied Joe.

The boy wrenched loose the tire and was rolling it into the shop. Slowly they followed him. Hawkins proceeded to the desk and picked up a pad of repair forms and started to scribble something on the top sheet. Joe watched his narrow, bent shoulders under the sleazy shirt. There was something pathetic in the proud crest of hair above his forehead and the pucker of lines in his brows.

“How long have you been the lucky man?”

Hawkins looked up from his paper. Faint surprise was written in his face. “Oh, a little over three years. Want to wait for this tube or will you come back for it? Man can put on your spare.”

"I'll come back for it Monday," said Joe.

A few moments later he drove away.

For an hour he drove without thought of where he was going. Detail after detail of the affair presented itself to his mind in endless repetition. It had been a humiliating experience. The old woman's vulgarity; Macomber's stolid, iron hand clearing the air, like brushing trash from his doorstep; the consciousness of prying eyes at that upstairs window! "I've been a feeble cuckoo," he thought. "Mighta supposed two years in the army would have taught me better'n that. Played me for a good thing as long as it lasted and then the old lady called a showdown. Hawkins must stand in with the old lady. Poor Hawkins!"

He discovered that he was rolling along on the Bloomfield pike about two miles from town.

"Funny how these hard-workin' folks sink all their money in a butterfly like that. Bet she uses up the meat bill every month. And look what she gets out of it. Bet she's twenty-six if she's a day. And all she got was Hawkins. I must have looked good to her for a day or two."

Bitterly he waited at the grade crossing while "Number 'Twenty-seven" went lumbering by. It shrieked a high, exasperating whistle as it passed, exulting in its trembling, shaking twenty-five miles per hour.

On he drove. Hot blasts of air came crushing

about him, with the sunlight shimmering white hot on the bare, dry pike. There was much dust from countless automobiles hurrying by in both directions. He was constantly churned up in clouds of fine white particles thrown back at him by passing tires, hurrying on in a mad drive to get somewhere. He was suddenly unbearably hot. But he drove on blindly.

About five miles out he came to a shady lane. It ran like a cool brown gash between arching trees, off from the pike to the right. Away in the distance the fields dipped and rose to the skyline, a golden waste with here and there a patch of withering green. The lane was irresistible. He swung suddenly into it and was caught in a shifting, squirming quagmire of fine yellow sand. For a hundred yards he struggled on, with the car careening back and forth across the road and with much churning and slipping of tires. His shoulders began to ache and he wearied of the effort. It was a useless waste of energy. Spying a huge tree standing on the fence line on up ahead, he drew up to it and stopped in its shade. There was barely room for any one to pass on the other side of him.

For a moment he sat and dully stared out across the landscape. Then he got out of the car, climbed over the fence and threw himself down on the ground in the shade of the big tree.

A stupor seemed to have come over him. There

was the splotchy edge of shade just beyond his feet; there stretched a parched and drying furrow. Withered stubs of cornstalks poked up forlorn heads at intervals in an endless row. Beyond them were more rows, and all about him lay the scarred and cracking earth in yellow heaps and clods, with the wind twisting fine spirals of dust from its rest and spewing it broadcast. In the air was a drone of drab creatures being happy in their drabness, rejoicing in the waste, thoughtless of the future. That was it, the whole field, unkept, idle, lazying, was thoughtless of the future. There stood the dead stubble, blackening and hopeless. Winter might come with its frost. Here was no worry over failing crops. One year's work had done for two. And the grasshoppers and the midges and the gnats and the flies were likewise quite content.

He brushed the dust from a trouser leg. He looked at the trouser leg. The suit had cost him ninety dollars. And he was a creature of Bromley's rigged out like a butterfly and lying in the dust of a rotten old cornfield. Barely two months had passed and great changes had laid their hands upon him. Seemingly great changes. Three hundred dollars a month! Princely wages; but in what respect was he lifted? He had on a ninety-dollar suit, with dust from a cornfield fouling it. He had a few more bills in the haberdasher shops, an enamelled tub to bathe

in, and more time to think about himself, to chase elusive lights and shadows. Otherwise, he was the same old Joe, the same tired old Joe. He realized how tired he was. In spite of the heat his face felt dry and parched, his lips were cracking, his bones ached, and his eyes burned. Well, he had caught up with himself; he would have to snap out of it. No use to lie around and gather dust on one's self and not lay anything by, like the farmer who owned this field, and like the gnats that buzzed around in the dust. He had no idea what he would do, but he would be careful—from now on.

He climbed back across the fence and into the car. The lane was so narrow that he had to back clear to its juncture with the pike. It was slow, tedious, grinding work. "Glad I didn't go down a couple of miles," he thought. And as he backed slowly away, the dry, hot wind came in rattling gusts and swept the dust in yellow eddies after him, bearing the voice of the grasshoppers, the monotone of futility.

When at six o'clock he passed through the cool, smelly garage entrance that was wet and shiny with grease and blue with the breathings of many cars, he was met by the "boss." The latter looked critically at the dust-bespattered panels and then at Joe.

"Seems to me you're spending a lot of time in the country. Don't need to take 'em all over the earth

to show 'em what the car will do. You must be doing a lot of educating."

"I have been," said Joe. "Guess I'll have to slow up on it a bit. Have to brush up my salesmanship."

The "boss" grunted.

CHAPTER XV

MARY LOUISE was seeing quite a lot of Claybrook. First there had been the business of going over the books, although that had not taken much time. "Just to make sure how things stand," he had laughed and she had been only too eager to acquiesce. Then there was the business of making out the notes. Six months and one year they had been, ample time enough on considering the progress of the business. Of course it could have all been finished up in one session. But somehow it was a week or more before everything was entirely settled. She had taken a small apartment, in reality just a room and a bath, in a quiet family hotel-apartment that Claybrook had recommended. He had, of course, come in to see how she was installed. It was a dim, cool, hushed sort of place, where guests spoke in sibilant whispers when they crossed the parlour lobby. There was a faded blonde of doubtful age presiding over the tiny desk, who handed out mail and plugged in telephone calls in a small switchboard and kept the hotel porter in a constant state of agitated unrest. No one ever sat around in the lobby. Every now

and then there would gather little groups of prim old ladies with shawls and magazines and embroidery frames, discussing whispered personalities and the weather, as they waited for the elevator. Careful, curious looks they always had for Mary Louise whenever she came upon them. An all-pervading atmosphere of stealth and secrecy and propriety seemed to hover about the place. Before she had been an inmate three hours she felt it and when Claybrook called that first evening, she had come rushing across the lobby to meet him, with a glad little cry of welcome. Immediately one of the little groups had ceased to function and had with one accord stared at her with grave eyes, and the blonde at the switchboard had lifted her head above the edge of the desk and peered over. And then in the lobby, over in a far corner, they had sat uncomfortably for an hour on the faded plush divan and discussed commonplaces in a low tone and felt irreparably guilty.

But in spite of it all, Claybrook had come again; had come the next evening and the next. Most of the time he took her out for drives in his car. It began to be a regular thing, and she had come to look forward to his coming. The idea of staying alone in that whispery place was not a pleasant idea. Moreover, now that Maida was gone, she had double work to do in the tea room—which was running on as briskly as ever—and in the evening

she felt invariably jaded and in need of some sort of diversion. So she welcomed Claybrook. And she got used to him.

One evening—it was after two weeks of this sort of thing—as she was sitting in her room, looking out of the window at the tops of the trees in an adjacent yard, it struck her how much she had been seeing him. For a moment it made her uncomfortable. What was it leading to? Such suppositions must almost invariably come to a single woman. Ages of tradition have left their imprint upon the sex to the effect that single life is not an end in itself, and that somehow it needs must change. Of course, many a spinster has gone to a satisfied grave in complete contentment over a life of spinsterhood. But there is nothing to prevent the question from arising, especially when there is an attentive male hanging about unattached.

Claybrook had given no indication of any serious intentions. Now that she had come to know him better, he seemed more like an overgrown boy with a healthy appetite for play. There was no cause for alarm. If he had been the kind to moon around in dark corners, wanting to sit alone with her in long interminable silences—but on the contrary he always wanted to go somewhere. She had met several of his friends and they were always going somewhere, both men and women. And he always had plenty to say, mostly about conditions in the

mill, the increase in the cost of labour, the scarcity of good lumber, some little anecdotes about the men, drummers' tales. More like a business acquaintance he treated her, discussing gravely the problems of her tea room and that sort of thing. He had even begun to call her "Sister" in an odd little patronizing way. And she had seen him every night now for the past two weeks. She thoughtfully ran her hand across her mouth. That was too much speed. She would have to slow down.

The graying light deepened and the chequered wavering of the boughs beneath her was slowly swallowed up in shadow so that the depth seemed interminable. A screen door slammed and there was the clatter of a pan on a brick pavement and the drawl of a soft Negro voice somewhere below. The help was going home. And then silence descending with only the quiet rustling of leaves and the distant clang and clatter of the city. She felt suddenly very much alone; and she wondered what her aunt Susie might be doing at this instant. Sitting alone in the ell sitting room, knitting, perhaps, with old Landy pottering about in the kitchen or on the back steps, with some fishing tackle or an odd bit of harness. A bit of sentimentality touched her lightly. It would be good to put the old place on its feet again, free it entirely of debt, with a little surplus so that there would not be that constant feeling of strain, of anxiety. This was no life to be

living in spite of the glamour of the city. Every living creature felt the need of home. If only all she meant to do might not be accomplished too late.

The sharp burr of the telephone startled her and she rose to answer it, dabbing at her eyes furtively with her handkerchief as she rose.

She met Claybrook in the lobby.

"Hi, there!" he said. "Get your hat. The Thompsons want us to come and play bridge with them." He squeezed her hand just a little as he smiled good-naturedly at her with patronizing approval.

"To-night?" she echoed. "In August?"

"Sure," he said. "Why not? It's plenty cool. They've a room on the top floor of the Ardmere and they keep all the windows open. Never seen the Thompsons' apartment, have you?"

She shook her head.

"Pretty swell dump. Like to know how much Tommy pays for it. Keeps it all the year too. They go to Florida for January and February. Want you to see it. Maybe when the business grows enough you'll be wanting one like it."

She smiled wanly and pictured herself spending the balance of her days in a hotel.

"Hurry up. Get your hat and powder your nose and pretty yourself up. Want you to feel at home. Mrs. Tom is *some* doll."

She hastened back to the room. He was like a

kind older brother wanting to show her a good time, wanting her to show to the best advantage. She smiled at him when she again joined him in the lobby. "That better?"

He peered at her closely. "Much," he grunted and followed her through the swinging door.

They played bridge with the Thompsons.

Through the open windows the noise of the city came swelling up distractingly. The cards kept blowing from the table so that the men were busy gathering them up from the floor. Mrs. Thompson wore a lacy gown of lilac organdie cut quite low in the neck and her hair was arranged in an elaborate and immaculate coiffure that stuck out behind in huge, smooth, artificial-looking puffs. Her colour was high and not all her own. Her husband was of the type commonly called a "rough diamond," showing evident signs of hours spent in the barber's chair, with a sort of rawness about a blue-black chin, traces of talcum powder, and a lurking odour of toilet water. He was too big for his clothes, which were just a bit flashy, and he looked as though he might like to doff his coat.

Mary Louise and Claybrook arrived at eight-thirty. At eight thirty-five Thompson produced a flask from a desk drawer and mixed up a couple of high balls with an air of grave deliberation. The glasses were placed on the folding bridge table and remained there throughout the evening, Mrs.

Thompson stooping over and taking delicate sips from her husband's glass every now and then.

The game languished. Mary Louise did not know much about it and the men would lapse into rather boisterous spells of conversation during which time the cards would lie on the table forgotten, and Mrs. Thompson would gaze at her husband with deep absorption and occasionally at Claybrook and sometimes at Mary Louise in a far-off, absent-minded way. And then they would ask each other whose deal it was and "How were the honours?" and then they would be at it again. Claybrook laughed at the slightest provocation, and seemed to pay a little too obsequious attention to whatever Thompson had to say, and after a while the conversation narrowed down entirely to the two men, with Mrs. Thompson contracting a glassy look in her pale-blue eyes beneath their fine-plucked brows. And at ten o'clock she stifled a yawn behind her handkerchief, threw down her cards, got up and went over to the corner where stood an expensive "Victrola."

"Let's have a little jazz," she said brightly. The men were busy discussing the income tax and the ways of avoiding it and did not seem to mind at all. And Mary Louise welcomed the suggestion with relief.

For another hour they sat back in deep chairs, relaxed, relieved of responsibility. And then Clay-

brook, straightening in his chair, said: "Think I'll have to get a new car. The old wagon's been losing compression. Hasn't any get-away at all these days." Then turning abruptly to Mary Louise who, sunk back in her chair, was absently dreaming, "What kind shall I get? You're the one to be pleased." The crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes gathered in tight little clusters and there was an odd pucker about his lips.

In spite of herself she flushed fiery red. There was in the tone a suggestion of proprietary claim that jangled on her. Almost without thinking she replied, "Joe Hooper's selling the Marlowe. It's the best make, isn't it?"

Three pairs of eyes were regarding her, Claybrook's with a slight frown. He continued gazing at her for a moment, in consideration, and then, the topic changing to Florida in the winter, he apparently forgot her.

At eleven o'clock they rose to go. Mrs. Thompson showed signs of relief, and there was more warmth in the farewells than in any previous interchange of amenities. Mr. Thompson laid his hand affectionately on Mary Louise's shoulder as they stood in the doorway into the hall. His manner was bluff and friendly:

"John tells me you're running the tea room over on Spruce Street. Guess I'll have to drop in and see how you're doing."

She murmured her gratitude.

"Won't mind, will you, if I bring in anything on my hip? Tea's mighty weak for a growing boy."

They all laughed, and as she and Claybrook made their way to the elevator, the Thompsons stood in the hall calling gibes and parting injunctions after them.

"Great old scout," commented Claybrook as they descended to the ground floor. "Sure been a good friend to me."

Mary Louise felt her taut nerves slowly relaxing.

"What does he do?" she responded wearily.

"Contractor. Biggest in town." And then when they reached the street and were climbing into the car, "Whadda you say to meeting me at five o'clock to-morrow afternoon? Look at that Marlowe car you say you like."

He was looking into her eyes with an odd sort of questioning directness. She started to refuse, remembering her resolve to see him less often. But then the thought of Joe Hooper presented itself. She owed Joe a kindness or two. Perhaps if she delayed, Claybrook would change his mind. She hesitated a moment.

"All right," she assented.

Claybrook laughed shortly. "You don't sound so keen, somehow. Don't know if I can afford a Marlowe or not. You've a pretty extravagant taste in automobiles. Only one of 'em higher priced than the Marlowe."

“Oh, is it? I didn’t know.” And then, “But I don’t see what my taste has got to do with it. It’s your affair, you know. I knew Joe Hooper, that’s all.”

He was silent, but as he took leave of her at the doorway of her apartment, he again brought up the subject in a quiet tone. “Meet me at five tomorrow?”

“Surely,” she agreed, and then went thoughtfully upstairs to bed.

As she slowly undressed she thought of Joe Hooper in his new “shepherd plaid” suit and wondered if he were getting along. And she thought of the Thompsons living in their bleak finery on the top floor of the Ardmore, just sixty feet removed from the hideous clatter of the traffic. And she speculated on the appearance of Mrs. Thompson with all the hairs in her eyebrows that nature meant them to have. And then she thought upon Claybrook’s boyishness in wanting her to help him go pick out a new toy. He was without guile, entirely without guile. Suddenly she laughed aloud and then she switched off the light and went smiling to bed.

CHAPTER XVI

THEY met at the Marlowe garage. When Mary Louise saw Claybrook and Joe Hooper standing together in absorbed conversation, leaning each with one foot propped on the running board of a big shiny new car in the display room, she suddenly knew she had no business there. She saw them through the big plate-glass window as she came along. It would be hard to make her arrival seem casual. And when Joe Hooper raised his head as she entered the doorway—he was wearing that gaudy suit—she was confused.

But he did not seem to notice and greeted her cordially. He was looking a bit thin, with a high colour and a restless snap in his eyes. There was an alertness about him that was new to her and a something in his manner that was quite different. She stole a look at him while he and Claybrook were discussing lubrication and wondered in what way he had changed. A sureness? A steadiness? A bit of reserve that sat well upon him? All of these, surely. She had never seen him show to better advantage. Once he turned to her and asked her opinion about the leather. There was an air of

quiet deference in the way he put the question. It was a trivial question and she was thinking of the impersonal note in his tone, just as though she might have been a total stranger to whom he owed courtesy, and she was wishing he had asked her something about herself. Her uneasiness about the unconventionality of her being there vanished, so completely were the two men absorbed in technical discussion. She noted the contrast: Claybrook rather beefy and a bit too red of face; Joe, on the other hand, quite slim and taut. His new clothes fitted him better; he had lost that raw-boned look.

Joe asked her if she would not like to go for a ride.

She looked up into his eyes from the chair which he had got for her and felt a childish pleasure, just as though he had shown her a personal attention.

"I'd love to," she said.

They waited at the curb for the demonstrating car to be brought around and she had a chance to ask him how things were at home.

"I haven't been back this summer," he replied, and looked away.

Once, when she and Claybrook were standing a little apart, she caught Joe looking at them, she imagined, under lowered brows, and she had an impulse to go to him and tell him that she was bringing him this business, putting in a word for him. She did not hear what Claybrook was saying to her

at all. And then the car came rolling up and stopped, and her chance was gone.

She and Claybrook sat down in the back seat together, while Joe took the wheel. In about thirty minutes they were climbing a steep hill that lead out of Fenimore Park to one of the back lanes.

"Takes the grade all right," commented Claybrook to her, and she wished that he would not continue to include her in the discussion. She strove to counteract the impression that might be formed by calling attention to the clouds that were gathering in the southwest. Dark and sombre they came rolling, like great billows of smoke, although the green of the park meadows was flooded with golden sunlight. At the crest of the hill Joe partly turned in his seat and with one arm thrown along the back of it pointed to the outline of a massive stone bridge that was being built across the creek far below them. The greenish brown blended subtly with the golden-green shadows of the trees and the dark pools of water beneath.

"New bridge," he said. "Man that's buildin' it knows a thing or two about colour tones."

Mary Louise bent eagerly forward to look. It seemed as though he were speaking directly to her. Claybrook remained leaning back in the corner. They turned a curve and the bridge passed out of view below.

They gained the macadam of the lane that led out from the park gate into the country. Claybrook turned and asked her how she liked the car. His low, direct tone and intent gaze made her uncomfortable, made her nerves ruffle up in a most irritating manner. But she controlled herself and answered lightly, "Oh, ever so much."

He looked as though he might say something more, but changed his mind and sank back against the cushions. For a time they rode on in silence. Claybrook had been strangely quiet ever since they had left the garage. She could feel him watching her and she tried not to notice it. So absorbed was she in trying to appear unconcerned that she did not see the approach of the storm; in fact, there was a supercharge of restraint on all three of them, and it startlingly broke upon them in a clap of thunder that sounded as if it had smashed a tree not fifty feet away.

Joe stopped the car and scrambled back into the tonneau to adjust the side curtains. He murmured an apology as he brushed against her—just like a stranger. Quite sharply she felt the change that had come over their relations. When everything had been adjusted he resumed his seat and called over his shoulder, "Guess we had better go back, hadn't we? I'm sorry this rain had to come and spoil things."

They turned slowly around in the narrow road

and when they again faced the west, the rain came beating furiously down against the windshield so that the road ahead was barely visible. Never had she seen such blinding sheets of water. It tore at the roof, it whipped about the curtains, it threatened to engulf them all in a torrential flood. The car was moving slowly forward—she could see Joe's outline bent slightly over the wheel—and in spite of his care the rear wheels would slew gently from side to side. As she peered ahead she could see a yellow flood of water rushing down the road before them so that it did not look like a road at all but like an angry, muddy stream upon which they were floating. Once Claybrook leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. He had been as silent as a mummy.

“Got any chains?” he asked suddenly.

“Think I have,” replied Joe. “Under the seat.”

“Better put 'em on, don't you think?”

Mary Louise started. “Oh, John! In this rain?”

“Guess I had at that,” interposed Joe quickly.

He stopped the car and lifted the cushion on which he was sitting. Directly he pulled forth a long, tangled confusion of links, opened the door, and stepped forth. As he thrust out his head Mary Louise called:

“Haven't you any coat?” and his answer came back cheerily from the outside, “Never mind me. It'll all come out in the wash.”

She looked at Claybrook reproachfully. He sat

stolidly in the corner but there was a look of discomfort in his face.

“Don’t want us to slide off one of these hills into the creek, do you?”

And she felt there was nothing more she could say.

They sat in awkward silence, listening to the down-pour and the wind. The thunder crashed incessantly and the air was alive with the lightning playing about them in livid flares. They could feel one side of the car lift slightly as Joe adjusted the chain, and then the other side; could dimly hear him struggling with the wheel jack. It seemed criminal to be exposed to such a rain. A wave of cold resentment against Claybrook came over her and she sat staring straight in front of her, lips tightly compressed, waiting.

It seemed an interminable time; in reality, in about ten minutes Joe’s head appeared at the door of the car and he climbed stiffly in. Drenched he was from top to toe. The water streaked down his cheeks in little streams; his clothes flapped and clung to him as though he had been flung into the river; his cap was a sodden, pulpy mass. But he chuckled as he slid over in behind the wheel.

“Guess I’ll remember to bring my coat along next time.”

She wanted to put her hand on his shoulder but she sat in stony silence. And she noticed that he no longer drove with the same care as before. She

saw that he was giving little involuntary shivers, watched the water drip with silent monotony from his cap on to the back of the seat, making a slick, shiny spot there.

And then Claybrook broke the silence. "How will you split commission with me if I take one of these cars?" He spoke heartily, as though he wished to be friendly and cheerful.

Joe made no reply for a moment and when he did, his voice trembled just a little. "We're not allowed to make that kind of a deal."

"Oh, I know that, and all that sort of thing. But they all *do*, just the same." He reached over and gave Mary Louise a little shove on the elbow, from which she recoiled.

Joe made no further reply; they waited for what he might say. And directly Claybrook tried again:

"And how about my old car? Take that in, I suppose?"

"We'll take it and do the best we can to sell it for you," said Joe, without looking back. The water still dripped from his cap on to the cushion.

"Hum," muttered Claybrook. "Independent." And louder: "Two or three other concerns will allow me good money on my car."

Joe made no reply.

When they arrived at the garage again, the rain had about stopped and they drove in at the main entrance back into the general storage room. Joe

stood holding the tonneau door open for them, a ludicrous object in his bedraggled clothes. He made no effort to assist Mary Louise but stood there holding the door with an abstracted look on his face. All the dash, all the sleekness was out of him. They both thanked him and then Claybrook led the way to his own car which someone had brought in out of the rain.

He turned to Joe once more—"I'll see you later"—thanked him again, and started his motor.

Mary Louise satisfied herself with waving her hand to him as they started. His aloofness forbade her to do anything more, though she would have liked to go to him and tell him how sorry she was and to be sure and hurry and put on some dry clothes. But she didn't and she saw him standing in the centre of the passage, a forlorn figure. It struck her as they rolled out on to the street that he had made no effort whatever to sell the car.

"Cold-blooded crowd," broke out Claybrook at length as they hurried on.

"I do hope he won't be sick," she replied.

He grunted. "In the army, wasn't he? Guess he can stand a little water. Used to worse than that."

And after apparently waiting for her to break the silence, he again ventured,

"I like the car. Think I'll have to see if I can't make some sort of deal with them. They'll prob-

ably come down a little off their perch." His tone seemed to invite her opinion, but she offered none.

They came into the stiff little parlour lobby of Mary Louise's apartment. It was quite dark as they got out of the automobile, and the stuffy room was dimly lit by a few feeble incandescent lamps in loose-jointed and rather forlorn gilt wall brackets. They made their way over to the elevator. The lobby was empty; even the blonde was absent from her post.

As they passed the faded plush divan Claybrook laid a detaining hand on her arm: "Sit down here a minute. I want to talk to you." His voice sounded rather gentle and subdued.

She turned and looked at him, wondering, and then obeyed.

"Listen," he began, and laid his hand quietly on hers. "Don't get sore at me because I was the cause of your friend's getting wet. It won't hurt him—just a little clothes-pressing bill—and I'd much rather he had that than for that car to slide off the cliff—especially when you were in it."

She felt somewhat mollified. "Was that what you wanted to say to me?" She looked at his face and saw there an odd expression—a sort of dogged shamefacedness.

"No. I was just getting to it." He was silent a moment, staring at his foot. Suddenly he looked up at her—she had withdrawn her hand. "When,"

he began, "when are we going to call this thing a game?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

He halted. "Well," he said. "How—when are you going to marry me?" He was looking into her face with that same queer, stubborn expression.

Her heart stopped momentarily. "Why," she faltered, "I hadn't thought of it."

They sat there in the hushed lobby as remote from the world as though shipwrecked on a desert island. It was Mary Louise who now looked at the floor. She could feel Claybrook's eyes upon her. He was waiting for her to speak, but she could not collect her thoughts. It had come upon her baldly, without preparation. She scarcely realized the import of his words.

"Well," he was saying, "think of it now."

Another pause.

She raised her eyes and looked at him squarely in spite of the trembling in her limbs. His face loomed big and blank before her, though his voice was very kind.

"I don't know," she heard herself saying. "You—I—it's come on me rather quickly."

For a moment he made no reply. A street car thundered past and made the windows rattle.

"Well, you're going to, aren't you? When?"

She could not trust herself to look at him. Again

he waited on her words. She could feel him edging a bit nearer.

"I don't know." The words choked in her throat. She felt cornered, hemmed in. She could not clear the tumult in her brain. A short time before she had felt tremendously irritated at him. Now she did not know how she felt. He was hammering at her with his insistence.

"That can't be," he broke in on her confusion. "I'm not a stranger, you know. You've known me for over a year and, I think, seen enough of me to know what sort I am. We are not a couple of kids just out of school." His voice broke in a ridiculous quaver that somehow tempted her to laugh hysterically, but he mastered it and went on: "When shall it be? Next month? I'll buy that big car and we'll drive to California."

He was groping for her hand.

"I don't know," she said again. "I can't think. Can't we let things run on as they are?" She ventured a look at him, appealingly.

He drew away just a little and she could see a grim little line gathering about his mouth and a frown about his eyes.

"I don't see any use in waiting to make up your mind. That's not the way *I* do business. What is it?" He went on quietly and firmly, "Yes or no?" and then more gently, "I think you can see I am willing to do things for you. It hasn't been one-sided, has it?"

His words crystallized the turbulence in her mind. She was suddenly sure of herself. She looked up quickly. She could see the little folds of flesh about his collar, the fine little purplish lines in his cheeks, could hear his thick breathing, and yet his eyes were looking steadily and gravely into hers.

"You're right," she said. "There's no use waiting. I'm sorry. I can't."

Something faded from his face. He looked at her fixedly for a moment and then rose to his feet. "I wonder if you've fooled yourself as thoroughly as you have me," he said.

She made no reply, though she cringed slightly at the inference, and sat there watching him.

He lifted his shoulders and let them sink heavily, and then he cast a look about the deserted lobby. Then he turned to her again and imperceptibly inclined his head. He did not offer his hand.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye," she echoed, her lips barely moving.

She watched his broad, stolid back move slowly across the room, saw him pause for a moment at the door and then plunge resolutely through it, and then she was alone. Not a sound came to her ears. The desk by the switchboard was deserted. A bracket lamp on the wall opposite was crooked; one of the crystal pendants beneath it was broken short off. Someone had dropped a burnt match on the floor in front of the desk and it lay there in mute sacrilege.

All at once the silence seemed fraught with a tumult of hateful suggestions, and, without ringing for the elevator, she sprang to her feet, rushed for the steps, and fled up to her room.

She switched on the light and stood for a moment by the table fingering an ivory paper cutter. Then she went to the window and peered out. Not a sound came to her, not a single, friendly sound. Below her the leafy branches stretched out, inert, indifferent; and below them, darkness.

“And this is the man,” she thought, “from whom I have borrowed all that money.”

PART III
BLOOMFIELD

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CHAPTER XVII

FATE smiled. An itinerant Swiss became interested in the tea room. There were a few days of sharp bargaining and on October the fourteenth it was sold to him. The price just barely covered the indebtedness. Mary Louise made haste to send Claybrook a check for the fifteen hundred dollars plus the interest. Two days later she got the notes through the mail with no comment and she tremblingly tore them into bits and scattered the bits from her window. Then she went to the bank and took up the note for the six hundred dollars she had originally borrowed. It left her nothing, but she was free. She had lived the summer and was where she had started. A little wan, feeling a little empty, she caught the train for Bloomfield. All during the trip she gazed from the window, dizzily conscious of the shifting landscape, dimly aware of her retreat. . . .

Miss Susan McCallum looked up from her rocking chair as Mary Louise entered the sitting room. There was no surprise in her greeting, and she suffered her cheek to be kissed in silence. Old Landy stuck his grizzled head in at the door at the unusual com-

motion and Mary Louise, unaccountably and suddenly touched by something subtly familiar and friendly, trilled:

“I’ve come to look after you, Aunt Susie. Just couldn’t stay away any longer. The countryside was perfectly beautiful as I came up this morning in the train. It’s the loveliest October I’ve ever seen. Think of being cooped up in the city this time of year.”

Landy grinned and came shambling in with a greeting. Miss Susie’s eyebrows went up and there was a suspicion of moisture on the lashes. “Well, you needn’t have done it. Landy and I have been managing very well. But *you* look a little peaked.” She turned and laid her knitting on the table by her side.

“Little Missy’s a sight fo’ so’ eyes,” interjected Landy and then withdrew. Directly they could hear him authoritatively ordering someone about.

Miss Susie sighed and looked at Mary Louise. The latter was taking off her hat but she caught a hidden appeal in the pinched, weazened face that she had never before noticed. It made a sharp little tug at her heart, and throwing her hat on the table, she came over and sat on the stool at the older woman’s feet.

“How long will you be with us this time?”

She reached up and took the hand and was startled at finding how hot it was. “Why—for all the time.

Didn't you understand? I'm not going back at all."

A strange expression came over Miss Susie's face. It was as though she all of a sudden let down. She stared into Mary Louise's eyes and the latter waited for some characteristic outburst. But none came. Directly the old lady reached over for her knitting again and busied herself with it, bending her head over it. Mary Louise, watching her, saw her throat contract, saw her moisten her lips softly with the tip of her tongue.

Without looking up, "What about your business? You're not leaving it for someone else to look after for you?" The tone was very low and the voice so husky that she finished the sentence with a little clearing of the throat.

"I've given it up—given it up entirely. Not a thing in the world to keep me," replied Mary Louise.

For a few moments complete silence settled down upon the room, with only the ticking of the clock on the mantel. It was dark and cool and sweet-smelling, a sort of "goodsy" smell. A blue-bottle fly began to buzz and bump against the glass of the window and now and then he would circle about the room, filling its silence with his droning. The sunlight came creeping slowly across the rag carpet, a widening orange pool, as the sun slipped around to the westward. Mary Louise could see the edge of it without turning her head. She felt suddenly guilty, as

though she were in some way parading in false colours. There was an impenetrableness in the reserve.

“I just couldn’t stand it any longer,” she burst out. “I want to be with my people and stay with my people, and look after you and live my life as it was intended.” Somehow it was not exactly what she wanted to say, not the whole truth, but as if in explanation she began to stroke her aunt’s knee very softly.

“What do you plan to do?” Miss Susie looked up again and there was the same old look of withered sharpness. “There’s nothing in Bloomfield, you know.”

“Oh, I know. Nothing, if you mean opportunity. But everything in the way of living. We’ll just rock along. I’ll find something to do. Something to keep me out of mischief,” she laughed. “Mr. Orpell ought to have somebody in his drug store. His soft-drink counter is atrocious. Then I can make preserves and sell ’em. I know where I can sell a lot—in the city. I just don’t want to think—just rest a bit and let this blessed peace get a good hold of me again.” Her voice rose sharp and eager and Miss Susie smiled a quizzical smile and the old order was again restored. A door slammed and Landy’s voice came to them, this time in a wailing gospel hymn, and Mary Louise sprang to her feet. “I’ll have to go get Zeke Thompson and have him fetch my trunk. There was nobody to bring it over from

Guests and I didn't want to wait to hunt for someone."

She skipped over to the table and picked up her hat again. Already she felt better—warmed and comforted. She paused for a moment, standing in front of Miss Susie, looking down at her as she sat there knitting placidly away with the fine firm lines about her mouth. "You won't mind if I go with him, will you? There's an excess baggage charge that I can't trust Zeke with, and I'll not be long."

"No, of course not. Since when have I been that I couldn't be left alone?" But she smiled and Mary Louise, rushing to her, kissed her again, rapturously upon the cheek, turned and whirled toward the door where she paused for a wave of the hand before plunging forth on her errand.

The sound of the door closing behind her sobered her for a moment. Here she was, gone again. Would she never be content to settle down? But the wine of the autumnal weather came mounting to her head and as she opened the front gate and struck out up the street she raised her face, drinking it in.

The rows of maples had been touched by the frost and were flaming scarlet and crimson. Over beyond, across the street, between the houses where a pasture land stretched down to the creek, the beeches were golden and rustling and shimmering in the mellow sunlight. There was a delicious tang in the air one

moment and a soft mellow touch of indolent fruition the next. An automobile went scuttling across Main Street at the intersection, seeking its way westward, leaving a cloud of dust that hung lazily golden ere it settled. Even the dust was fragrant. The old tavern was quite deserted; the same green shutter hung by one hinge, and as she passed the town hall or meeting house she could hear the click of a typewriter through an open window, an incongruous touch of modernity in an otherwise immaculate antique setting. The sun was warm and came filtering through the shade to splotch the uneven brick pavement, bringing out its homely roughness in minute detail. She felt as if she recognized each upturned brick, and the worn patch of yellow earth where a grass plot was meant to be, up to the edge of the gnarled root of the oak stump that had been struck by lightning, was just as it had always been. She and Joe Hooper had played marbles there until he had grown too big to be playing marbles with girls. Queer little ecstatic sensations they were.

She crossed the square. A solitary man was walking on the other side of the street, away from her. He was carrying three long poles over his shoulder and he walked stiffly and with a slight limp. He wore a suit of dusty blue "unionalls" and a battered felt hat. Curious that she should notice such things. A "Ford" backed away from the curbing, wheeled and went rattling around the corner down the road

toward Guests. And then the street and the square and the whole town were quiet again, as deserted as a street or a town on canvas.

She walked swiftly, but not too swiftly to catch up every sign of home. Her mind was aflood with impressions. What a narrow escape she had had. An exultant thought like a song arose in her. She had ventured forth, had had her taste, and it had cost her nothing. The city had not caught her even though it had reached forth strong, prehensile fingers. She knew now what she wanted, had the strength, the zest. And it was October and fair, and smiling.

Suddenly she ran almost headlong into Mrs. Mosby. That good lady came precipitately out of Orpell's Drug Store, and she was wearing her white ruching and her bangles and a trim little widow's bonnet with a semi-circle of black veil hanging down behind and accentuating the prim whiteness of her face.

Mrs. Mosby's was not a face to betray emotion; it was a well-behaved, studiously composed face. And her voice was level as she took Mary Louise by both hands.

"Well, my dear," she said. "What brings you here? I've heard you're an awfully busy woman. Hope there's nothing wrong at home."

"No," replied Mary Louise. Somehow she could never get it out of her head whenever she spoke to Mrs. Mosby that it was not still as a little girl to a

personage—a personage to whom restraint and deference were due. “I’m not so busy as all that.”

“Oh, but you are. I’ve heard all about you. We’re very proud of you, my dear. Very. You’ve been doing so well—oh, I’ve heard—and your striking out into business quite alone was about the most courageous thing I know of. Why, the mere thought of such a thing takes my breath away.”

“But I’m not doing it any more. And there’s nothing courageous in that,” smiled Mary Louise.

Mrs. Mosby looked puzzled.

“It’s a fact. I’ve given it all up. Just got home to-day. And I’m going to settle down again with you all and be just folks.”

The mask again slipped over Mrs. Mosby’s countenance. “Quite as courageous a thing to do as the other,” she went on evenly. “Just to give up your splendid opportunity to come back and accept your duties here—well, I think it highly commendable.” She was not to be robbed of her chance to be agreeable. “Your aunt Susan is, I trust, not unwell?”

“Oh, about the same, thank you, Mrs. Mosby.” She wanted to ask about Joe, something in the rapprochement giving rise to thoughts of him, but she realized that Mrs. Mosby was doubtless entirely out of touch with her graceless nephew and would invent some mere plausibility. So she inquired instead after Mr. Fawcette.

“Brother is not so well. Poor soul, he suffers

terribly with his rheumatism." Mrs. Mosby lapsed into thoughtfulness and Mary Louise murmured her sympathy.

A moment of this and Mrs. Mosby recovered herself and held out her hand again.

"You must come and see me now—real often. I'm so much alone. Such a lot you must have to tell me and I want to hear it all." She took her prim, precise departure conscious of her graciousness.

On her way, in the opposite direction, Mary Louise suffered another qualm, a feeling of insincerity. She was gathering credit that really was undeserved. Her return would doubtless be labelled in Bloomfield as a bit of pretty sacrifice. And the place was a very refuge. The sun dipped as she walked along, so that the tip of it reddened the ridge poles of the houses and the sky was as blue as indigo. She passed an open lot where weeds abounded and in the weeds the blackbirds were chattering noisily. At her approach they flew up in a black swarm to refuge in an old apple tree in the rear of the lot. On the ground near the sidewalk was an old wagon bed that had been there for years—she tried to remember how long. There were decided compensations in coming home.

She found Zeke sitting on his doorstep, his chin on his hands, busily strengthening his restful philosophy. She quickly bargained with him and he hurried away to get out his old carry-all. When he found

that she followed him, and found in addition that she intended accompanying him, his pleasure was quite evident.

“Wait, Mis’ Ma’y, ontill I gits a rag and wipes off de seat,” he said at the door of the shed.

She could not help feeling a bit self-conscious as she sat by Zeke’s side and went rattling along the street, down into the square, into the very centre of Bloomfield life. But she held her head jauntily aloft and wondered if she were being noticed and being talked about. They met no one. They took the open road and the afternoon settled down upon her like a blessing. On either side of the road great patches of red and yellow streaked the hills, and the fields were taking on a soft golden brown, and soft purple mists gathered in the valleys blending in subtle fashion with the foreground. In spite of the riot of colour, the land was wrapped in a calm dignity. It wore its glories well. In the bits of woodland, through which the road occasionally digressed, there was a strong odour of beech and buckeye and there was a fragrant dampness rising.

The thought of Claybrook came into her mind. She could not quite make up her mind about Claybrook. She felt momentarily sorry for him, regretted that their friendship had come to its abrupt close. And yet there was no reason why she should feel sorry for him, he had so much of everything. But he and his world were woven out of different

fabric from this world about her. She could not keep one and still have the other. Anyway, she had made up her mind. She had escaped; her feeling was one of definite escape. She banished the thought of him.

She got her trunk and Zeke loaded it upon the car where it threatened to crush its way through bottom, springs, frame, and all. She observed it skeptically but Zeke was quite brisk and cheerful about it. She bought a "Courier" from the station agent and with it in her hand climbed back into her seat and felt content, now that she had her goods about her and was about to go home again.

Zeke started to crank the car when he took one reassuring look about to see if everything was all right. Not being quite satisfied with the way the trunk was riding, he departed to look for a bit of rope with which to lash it into place. While she waited, she opened up the paper in her lap and looked idly at the first page.

Instantly something caught her eye; she started and then felt suddenly weak. She read on for a moment and then closed the paper and let it fall into her lap and stared off at the blue hills that rimmed the horizon. The station at Guests was about a half mile from the town and the road was quite deserted, with only the sound of someone moving a trunk around in the baggage room behind her. A flock of birds went winging across the sky and dipped down

into a patch of red-and-gold woodland. She picked up the paper again and read some more.

The "Courier" made no specialty of scare headlines or red type. Its most sensational news rarely ever rated more than single-column type, or at most two columns. The article that caught her attention was the usual one concerning misappropriation of public funds, malfeasance of office, bribery, and the like—a drab sort of story. The public had been "bilked" again. It sounded quite matter of fact. Involved were the city engineer and one J. K. Thompson, Contractor, and J. F. Claybrook, lumber man and dealer, all in collusion. All this was in the headlines—in neat, modest type. Below came the bald facts stating the amounts of money involved which somehow she did not notice and a somewhat cynically weary paragraph at the end remarking that the people were having quite too much of this sort of thing and that the courts should recognize their full duty.

So that was where the new car and the trip to California was to come from. Perhaps that was where the fifteen hundred dollars had come from, too. But she had paid it back. She had just barely shaken the bird-catcher's lime from her wings. She shivered and closed the paper again.

When Zeke returned with the rope she smiled at him.

"Let's hurry back," she said.

On the way back to Bloomfield she had no eyes for

the beauties of the fast-falling October evening. But in a little while she began to feel warmer inside. At least she had shaken the dust of the city from her feet, the city where everyone wore a mask—of honesty and sobriety and right living—and lived otherwise. No wonder they called it a melting pot. She would be content from henceforth to live where the air and the living were cleaner and purer.

So absorbed was she that she did not realize that Zeke had taken another route home. When she noticed, she remarked on it.

“Hit’s a shoht cut,” explained Zeke. “You said you wanted to get home quick.”

She smiled at his responsiveness.

They came suddenly around a bend in the road upon a gang of men, road mending. There was a huge concrete mixer and she wondered at the sight of it, a new sign of progress for Bloomfield. There was a stretch of loose rock and a wooden bar blocking the road. Zeke muttered his dismay but did not stop. They rolled right up to the barrier. A man in khaki breeches and flannel shirt and high lace boots came and waved them back.

“You’ll have to turn around,” he called out cheerily, and she saw that it was Joe Hooper. As though in answer to the obvious question he added, as he in turn recognized her, “Like a bad penny—I’m turning up again.”

She looked at him and stared. His face was very

red and somehow he looked quite natural, more so than in his city clothes.

“What in the world?” she said.

He had come quite close and she could see he was smiling. That baffling, uncertain look had left his face and there was something open about it.

“Got a man’s job again,” he said, still smiling.

“And you’re going to be in this part of the country?”

“Till the job’s finished,” he replied. “And there’s quite a lot of it, too. County’s got a prosperous streak on. Means to have some real roads. It’s about time.”

Zeke was slowly backing the car preparatory to turning around.

“I’m back home now, myself,” she called and reddened at once at her unnecessary confidence. What did he care where she was? But as they turned slowly in the narrow road she added, “Come and see me,” and waved to him and wondered if he would.

It was growing dusk as they came again to Bloomfield and a chill was settling down. The lights in the windows glowed cheerily against the purple twilight and in one kitchen someone was frying potato cakes. The odour was symbolical of hot suppers, and summer’s passing, and home, and warmth, and cheer.

She tipped Zeke a quarter even before he lugged

her trunk through the kitchen door, and then she went briskly in.

“Supper ready, Zenie?” she called.

Zenie turned slowly around and looked at her from the biscuit board. She smiled wearily. “No’m. Not jes’ yet it ain’. Terectly.”

Mary Louise looked at her watch. It was a quarter past six. She came to a sudden decision.

“Zenie,” she said.

Zenie looked up hopefully.

“I guess we’ll not be needing you any more after this week.”

A slow, incredulous look met her. “Yas’m?”

“You can go back and look after that husband of yours.”

“Yas’m? He gettin’ erlong all right.”

“I don’t know, Zenie. You never can tell,” Mary Louise went on, maliciously enjoying the havoc she was spreading. “I’ll pay you for the week. You can leave whenever you want to. But let’s have supper right away.” And she walked resolutely through the kitchen into a darkened house, burning her bridges behind her.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT WAS seven o'clock on Main Street. A very faint glow still lingered in the western sky and above it cool points of stars pricked a gray-blue curtain. Over to the left the moon was peeping above a gambrel roof and the near side was steely blue up to the shadow of the purple chimney. Joe walked along shuffling with his feet in the little hollows of dry leaves. They crunched cheerily, sending up a faint, dry fragrance. Up ahead was a dying fire with only here and there a tiny flame tongue; the rest, a black and smoking crust underlaid with dull embers. The smoke that curled upward from the fire was pale blue-gray and mixed with tiny dust particles, and it hung in thin motionless strata or came curling in feathery wisps almost invisible in the shadow but heavy laden with magic scent. Up slid the moon, till Main Street was a phantom cloister, the maple boles huge columns casting purple shadows on a milky floor. Fairy lights winked in hooded windows like deep-set eyes, and a soft warm haze lapped round him dreamily, lulling his senses.

Joe had left the road-camp and tramped three

miles into town. In the dusk he had come upon it unawares; it seemed quite deserted. Very quietly he had come through the back lanes, and now it lay before him, its heart open in a sort of whispered confidence. Crude, inert, makeshift sort of place it might betray itself to be in daylight, it now lay snug and warm and breathing in its cluster of trees. It had gathered its brood to it, its warm lights blinking red, and above, clear liquid moonlight. Joe walked along slowly, an outsider, and yet feeling himself slipping somehow into the warmth and protection of the street. The odour of the burning leaves was heady, a superdistillate of memories. October and moonlight and burning leaves! It meant nuts and wine-sap apples, lingering in the dusk, watching the bull-bats rise. It meant hot supper and a ravenous appetite and a slow roasting before an open fire. Sharp little pictures flashed before his eyes as he walked along, and he fancied he could hear the soft crunch of buggy wheels in the dried leaves and the pad-pad of hoofs. It all seemed wrapped up in the same parcel with his childhood, stored away somewhere in musty archives. You couldn't pull out one without stirring up all the others. He half closed his eyes and peered through his lashes down a sharp black line of roofs like a knife edge against a liquid, shimmering sky, down a broad ghostly band of silver white that was the road, all flecked and mottled with leaf shadows

that moved slowly to and fro. He paused a moment. He scarcely dared breathe lest the whole thing vanish. A fairy touch on his arm, light as thistle-down, a subtle sense of warmth and a dim, intangible fragrance, and he started, blinking, and then walked on. Something was dry and dusty in his throat. "Golly, the old place sorta gets next to you on a night like this," he thought. "Guess I'd better get in. They'll think I'm nuts, mooning around on the street all night."

He came to a long stretch of wooden picket fence, beyond it a silver plaque of moon-splashed grass, the house all hollow-eyed and gaunt, like a thing watching. As he approached the gate a man came hurrying out, his head hunched forward on his shoulders. Joe stood aside to let him pass. The man peered sharply at him from under his hat brim, grunted, and then passed on. It was Mr. Burrus. Joe had a sense of being too late. Over the house hung the stillness of death, and a thing like Burrus leaving! It was an ugly thought. He walked up to the porch and knocked softly on the door.

A moment's silence and then it slowly opened. Someone stood in the doorway. A voice said, "Well?" in a low vibrant tone. There was blended in it the soft mistiness of the night, something of regret, something of purple shadows, something of stirring memories. He moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Is it you?" the voice went on, and then Mary Louise came out.

"I just heard to-day that Miss Susie had had another spell," he explained.

She stood beside him on the porch and looked up into his face. He could see she was shivering a little.

"Not to amount to anything," she said. "Aunt Susie has 'em periodically. She'll be all right in a day or two."

Joe stood in indecision. There had come a high-pitched, nervous tension into her tone, an eagerness that he did not like. The other thing had vanished.

"Won't you sit down?" said Mary Louise. "I'd ask you in, but Aunt Susie's asleep and the sound of our voices might disturb her. She hasn't had much sleep the last few nights."

Joe fingered his hat.

"Aren't you going to stay and tell me about yourself?" she urged. "It's been ages since we had a talk. Let's go down to the summerhouse."

He felt doubtful. Already a chill was gathering in the air, and he fancied she spoke through set teeth. The charm was melting away and the moon, rising above the tops of the maples, seemed cheerless and cold. But he could not be unfriendly; she had had a lot to upset her. He had read about Claybrook in the paper and while the news had caused him no discomfort—if anything quite the

contrary—still, it was different now. She was alone in that bleak, staring house, alone with a sick woman. So he followed her awkwardly across the grass that was already gathering dew.

They sat facing each other in the summerhouse, sat on the edges of the chairs, bending slightly forward. Mary Louise was softly chafing her hands.

“So you’ve really come back,” she began.

“Well, three miles from ‘back,’” he replied. She was making a pretty brave show; her voice sounded bright and cheery. If only she would stop rubbing her hands together—be still for a moment.

“I expect we’re meant for this place, Joe.”

“Yes? How do you mean?”

“Oh, if you bend a twig young enough, the tree will grow that way.” She laughed softly and he gave her a quick look.

For a few moments they sat in silence.

“How did you happen to make another change, Joe?” she asked at length, very quietly.

He paused before replying. “Well,” he began, “you see I’ve never had any real preparation for anything I was doin’. I never could have got anywhere. Those jobs I had in town—I just drifted into ’em. Anybody could have filled ’em. I—what was the use of ’em?” He paused and was silent.

She nodded slowly. “I think you said something like that once before. I begin to see where you were right.”

He made no reply. Why did she want to talk about such things? He hoped she wouldn't bring in Claybrook and her relations with him. He did not feel in the mood for raking over ashes.

"Has Miss Susie been in bed?" He carefully headed on another tack.

"Oh, up and down. She's always that way. You cannot imagine how surprised I was to see you with that road gang. I was riding along with Zeke, all wrapped up in my thoughts, and suddenly I looked up and saw you there——" She trailed off and sat thinking.

Again he was uneasy. Apparently the uncomfortable topic was not entirely buried yet. It might rise up exhumed, in its shroud, any moment.

"Yes," he said. "I'm used to that sort of thing—managin' niggers. Had 'em doin' most every sort of rough work in my time, diggin' ditches, mendin' roads, cuttin' fence posts—all that sort of thing. Guess it's about all I'm fit for." The effort died lugubriously and he sat, waiting. He hated personal confidences and there hung a most particularly uncomfortable one in the offing.

The silence was like a living thing. It crushed down upon the summerhouse with huge, downy black wings. A very faint rustling started up in the dry leaves of the creeper on the roof and clammy little draughts of air came twisting through the cracks. All the languorous glamour of the night had

passed. It was merely autumn moonlight, and too late in the year to be sitting out in a summer-house mouthing inconsequentialities—two people who were old enough to know better. Joe stirred restlessly. Surely she must be convinced that he meant to be friendly. He leaned back and looked up at the sky.

“What do you mean to do, Joe?” Mary Louise began again.

“Huh?” He recovered with a start. “Oh, I don’t know. Think sometimes I will come back and try my hand at farmin’. Think maybe I’ll be more of a real person doing that than anything else I know. But this road business is a necessary thing. Bloomfield needs a good road—all the way into the city. Something to put her on the map. Maybe with a good road we can get somewhere.” Speaking out the idea seemed to crystallize it. He began to enthuse a little over it inwardly. “Mightn’t be so bad. Might buy back the old place even, some day. Jenkins is not makin’ too much speed with it, I hear.”

Mary Louise leaned forward toward him.

“Oh, Joe, I wish you would,” she said. “I’ve been thinking a lot here lately and it seems to me it’s just as essential for real men to settle and live in places like Bloomfield as anywhere else. Big people should spread their influence. Why should they all cluster in little knots and bunches like the

cities? I think there's a better chance to grow—here. I really do." She turned away and sat with her chin on her hands, her face averted.

Joe, carried momentarily away with the thought, did not notice her agitation; moreover, it was quite dark in the summerhouse, with only odds and ends of moonlight slipping through the roof. And he did not answer her, but sat thinking.

"I'm going to," she continued after a bit, her voice sounding somewhat broken and muffled against her open hand.

"Goin' to what?"

"Going to stay here and see what I can make out of it."

She was groping for his friendship and he did not know it. A new line of thought had been stimulated and it brought up very pleasing pictures. After all, what could be better than a respectable life on a farm producing things, seeing the direct results of the work of his own hands, establishing his very own identity? By contrast, how much better than working for someone else, furnishing the effort while someone else worked out the plans, losing his identity completely in an economic machine? He could start modestly, pay off as he went, out of the profits. And meantime, he could be living—real life. Only first he must get a little money to make a start on.

He realized Mary Louise had spoken, paused in

his thought and then remembered. "Oh—yeah. Don't know but what it's about the best thing to do. Might try it myself—soon's I can get enough money together."

She made no reply and he watched her dim profile. Her head drooped quite dejectedly. There was a little splash of moonlight on her cheek; tendrils of her hair curled about the line of her neck. "She's had a pretty heavy bump," he thought.

He briskly rose to his feet. "Must be on my way," he said and stood looking down at the shadow of her. "It's three miles or more out to the camp. We get up at six."

For a moment she did not move, and then heavily she stood up. She made no protest and he could not see her face. If only he might get away, now that he had started, she might not be tempted to make any allusions to her affair. He shunned it instinctively as a dark closet containing a few unburied bones of his own skeleton.

Accordingly he walked slowly out upon the lawn and headed for the front gate. He could feel the dew lapping about his ankles through his socks and his shadow was clear cut and black on the grass. Mary Louise came and walked the short distance by his side, neither saying a word. They came to the gate and stood there in silence. Not a sound could be heard, the street stretching along before them a broad white ribbon, with splotches of mottled

shade along the edges, the dark line of houses across the street like mysterious creatures crouching in the shadow.

As they stood there, each occupied with his own thoughts, there came a distant sound, low and yet distinct, like the sound of one metal striking upon another. It was clear and somewhat musical, lingering in the air with a dying cadence. As the waves of sound died slowly away there came silence and then the soft rustle of the leaves overhead.

"What was that?" she whispered.

"Don't know. Sounded like the closin' of a door."

Both stood listening intently, but the sound was not repeated.

"Well, good-bye," he said, holding out his hand. "See you again sometime."

She took the hand and held it for a moment. "Joe," she began, "let's be friends." She was forcing herself to talk. "I've made some mistakes but—I want everybody to like me here—especially you. You understand things, and you will overlook some of the things that have happened?" Spectres of uncharitableness were disturbing her and she sought to be shriven.

He thought she was alluding to Claybrook and moved uneasily so that she dropped his hand.

"Surely. Surely I will. Good-night," he said again. Then he turned and walked briskly away.

He had got but ten yards or so when out of the stillness came the sound again. He paused there on the sidewalk and listened. A faint, musical, metallic clang came surging toward him in clear beating waves. It sounded as if it were miles away, and the echo lingered pulsing on the silence. Slowly it died away to a whisper and then he heard distant shouts and footsteps echoing hollow. Men were running toward him down the brick sidewalk, their voices sounding nearer. At the corner they turned and went westward, the sound of them growing fainter and fainter. He looked back, and at the gate he could see a shadow standing there waiting. There was a faint nimbus about the head and the face, turned toward him, was in the darkness.

He paused a moment in indecision and then turned and walked rapidly down the street westward, toward the camp.

CHAPTER XIX

MARY LOUISE walked back to the house. At the side porch she paused and looked behind her. High overhead sailed the moon, a day or two past the first half. There was a tremulous movement in the leaves of the maples along the sidewalk, producing an indistinct, vibratory shimmer and shadow. By contrast the patches of darkness were jet black; the overhanging portico of the house was as yawning as a cavern. She listened, stood, her head bent slightly forward, listening. Not a sound could be heard. The sharp, crisp clack of Joe's footsteps had been swallowed up by the distance. She could hear the sound of her own breathing. An uneasiness came gradually upon her, a vague sort of dread of being left alone, entirely alone. How aloof he had seemed; how aloof everything seemed, and unreal! Those sinister trees waving there without a breath of wind; the lowering shadows of the summerhouse and the barn; that greasy moonlight that came slipping up to the very edge of the porch and lay there fearful and cold—were they all remembering her scorn and coming back to mock her loneliness?

Softly she opened the door and went inside. Something scurried off into a corner and she fancied it turned about there and watched her in the darkness. The room seemed hot and close and there was a rhythmic rise and fall like the rising and falling of some vast invisible bosom, oppressed. She tiptoed over to the far door and stood listening. Not a sound could she hear. Old Landy was most probably asleep in his bed in the room up over the stable. She balanced on her feet and stood waiting, in indecision. She could not go back, so she opened the door softly and peered in.

A glaring white patch caught her eye. The moonlight through the window lay cold and bright upon the counterpane. Just above the patch was a jumble of shadows, from which protruded, bare and yellow and weazened, an arm. She caught her breath and fought down the sudden rising of her heart. It was nothing—only lying there so detached in the moonlight, thrust up out of the shadow out of nowhere, it did look gruesome, like something dead, something completely and irrevocably dead. It lay without a sign of movement, with the fingers slightly curled up under the palm and clutching at the coverlet. Gradually, her calm returning, she listened with her head thrust around the corner of the door, and directly she caught the very faint sound of breathing, a far-away, fine-drawn, eerie whisper. Slowly she backed away and closed the door.

She groped over to a chair in the sitting room and sat down. Through the squares of the window panes she could see the milky white patches of moonlight flooding the world outside, and the silence came creeping up all around until it seemed to squeeze the very walls inward.

“I wonder what’s going on?” she thought. Because of its very soundlessness, the universe about her seemed to be teeming with vague suggestions. That distant clamour, the hurry of footsteps, and then Joe, slipping away from her into the shadow. And now the deathlike stillness.

She began to rock slowly to and fro. With an effort of the will she forced herself to think of cheerful things, housework and cooking, and sunlight and people. Suddenly she realized that there was no reason for her sitting up. She might just as well go to bed. She started to her feet, but something held her, something forced her back into her chair. There had been footsteps fading off into the darkness. She must wait until they came back again—out of the darkness. Something in the idea strangely excited her, left her tense. In all this silence she knew she could not sleep; she would be lying there waiting, waiting for something, she knew not what. So she settled back and rocked and waited, staring with wide-open eyes at the steel-blue patch that was the door. And the night settled down and drew close to her with its uncertainties.

Time passed.

Suddenly she was aware of sound. So gradually it had come that she realized she had been hearing it for some time. It was coming back. She riveted her gaze upon the door, watched it unblinking, waiting for it to open upon her with its secret any moment.

Slowly she rocked to and fro. Gradually nearer and nearer came the sound. Rolling upward, gathering round and round into a ball, it took the shape of footsteps and a confused murmur of voices. On it swept. They were passing the house, would pass it, away into the darkness and silence again. Whither?

She rose to her feet and hurried to the door. She groped for the knob and stumbled blindly out upon the porch. The sudden glare of the moonlight dazzled her and she could only make out dimly a little knot of black shadows moving along the pavement past the gate. There was a confused murmur of voices as of several persons trying to make themselves heard at once, and yet be quiet about it. As she watched, tried to get her eyes to focus, the little group passed on and was gone.

She walked slowly to the gate and stood there looking into the darkness after it. Gradually she was recovering her sight; sounds sprang up, little normal sounds, and she began to feel cold. She turned and was about to go back to the house when

the echo of footsteps again caught her ear, and she waited.

It was a single person, apparently in a great hurry. She could hear him shuffling and stumbling along. She peered down the street into the darkness and directly could distinguish the shadow of a man hurrying toward her. On he came. He passed the fence corner—now he had reached the tree with the big fork—he was passing the gate. She saw it was Zeke.

“What’s going on?” she called to him.

He started, stopped, and then came over to the gate.

“Mist’ Burrus’s bahn done cave in,” he said, the whites of his eyes gleaming at her in the darkness.

The sound of his voice cheered her greatly. She felt suddenly so relieved that it was with difficulty that she kept herself from laughing out loud. “How do you mean? It didn’t fall down of itself?”

“Yas’m, hit did. Hit’s de waehouse. Folks say he done load hit up too full and hit plum’ give out.” His voice sounded excited.

“Anybody hurt?” She was beginning to enjoy it all, feeling exhilarated over the drama of it.

“Mist’ Joe—Mist’ Joe Hoopah. He done fell offen de bridge into de ditch. Speck he done broke his laig.”

She caught her breath.

"Dey done sen' me to git my cah. Said dey would lemme ketch up wid 'em. But Lawsy, de cah won' run."

"Was that him they were carrying past the house?" she managed to ask.

"Yas'm, I reckon. Dey aim to take him to Mis' Mosby's. Reckon I better hurry on."

She reached over and seized him by the coat. "Was he much hurt? Did he seem much hurt?"

"Well, yas'm. No'm. Leasewise, he say he ain'. But he cain't stan' up. Hit's his laig. Dey done pull him outen de ditch, wid it dubble unner him."

She let him go and listened to his retreating footsteps down the street into the darkness. She felt suddenly faint and weak. She walked back to the house, entered the sitting room, and lit a candle. Then she went to Miss Susie's door and opened it.

Miss Susie's eyes were looking calmly at her from the bed as she entered. "What's the matter?" said Miss Susie's voice.

"He was here just an hour ago. I saw him go down the street. And now they're bringing him back, broken. Just an hour! God knows what happened to him."

"Who do you mean, child?" Miss Susie moved forward and raised up a little on her elbow.

"It just seems as if the hand of Fate was stretching out over this place, reaching down over us. It makes no difference what we do—we're helpless—

all of us." She seemed to steady herself. She came over to the bedside and laid her hand on Miss Susie's forehead.

"Don't you want me to bring you a drink of water?" she asked.

CHAPTER XX

DIRECTLY after breakfast she went to the Mosby place. The sunlight was making glaring white patches on the pavement, of which she was but dimly conscious as she walked along. The house looked very peaceful, with the mellowness of respectable old age, that fresh October morning. She climbed the steps to the front door, feeling a little self-conscious as she stood and waited. It was possible that she was borrowing trouble; the accident might not prove to have been a serious one at all and she might seem too solicitous.

The door opened and a very old Negro woman in a stiff, white, starched apron stood and peered forth at her.

“Mrs. Mosby in?” she asked.

The old woman ducked her head and held open the door. “I see.” And then she waddled off. Halfway down the dim hallway she turned, paused a moment, and then came back. She went to a tall door, on the left side of the hall, and pushed it open, casting up a furtive eye at Mary Louise as she did so. A wave of clammy air rushed forth and there was a faint crackling as of dried leaves back

in the darkness. "Won' you set down?" said the old woman.

Mary Louise realized how early she had come; she had quite disturbed the usual order of things. "No, thank you," she said. "I'll just wait here in the hall."

The woman waddled away again and disappeared through a back door which wheezed shut with a sort of sucking noise, and the hall was left in hushed silence. Mary Louise gazed up at the ceiling, then at the stairway reaching far back and into the depths of upstairs hall. Even in the soft light the place looked like a barn. It seemed to be watching her sullenly as a small child watches an intruder. Odd little crackings sounded in far corners, and a whispering, starting somewhere in that upstairs hall, came slinking down the wainscoting, across the hall carpet, and out beneath the front door. She wondered what might be going on back in those silent, unexplored depths.

Then the door opened again and Mrs. Mosby came swishing forth, like an echo of the whisper that had preceded her. She was wearing the same ruching, the same bangles, the same everything—minus the bonnet with the veil—that she had worn that previous afternoon. There was an opaque flatness in her eyes.

Mary Louise rose to her feet. She was embarrassed as she met the older woman's quiet gaze, but she quickly threw off the feeling.

“I just heard some indefinite but disturbing news about an accident last night,” she said anxiously.

Mrs. Mosby smiled a ghostly little smile and inclined her head. “We had quite a time,” she admitted. “Won’t you sit down? Or won’t you come in the parlour?”

“No. I’ve not long to stay. I—I felt so worried. I wanted to come first thing and find out, see if there was anything I could do.” They sat down at opposite ends of the horsehair sofa, each reflectively watching the other.

Mrs. Mosby shook her head. “He’s getting on as nicely as could be expected. Fortunately, Dr. Withers was got hold of right away, last night.” She was gazing dreamily at Mary Louise as though the latter were a creature of another world come vaguely intruding.

There was a curious atmosphere of restraint. Mary Louise sat waiting for the other woman to speak, her hands in her lap, her fingers slowly weaving in and out. After a momentary silence she asked in a politely casual tone, “What really did happen, Mrs. Mosby? Was he much hurt?”

Mrs. Mosby continued staring for an instant before she replied: “It really was the strangest thing. You know I did not even know that Joseph was in this part of the country. And at ten o’clock last night they came carrying him in. Of course, I was terribly excited and upset, and I did not find out the particulars

exactly.” She paused and took a delicate little shuddering breath. “You see, Mr. Burrus’ warehouse—the one down by the creek, you know? Well, something happened—the bank on which it stood caved in, in some way, and the rear wall collapsed, and from all I can understand there was quite a wreck, quite a lot of damage, for he had it crammed full of winter goods.” She paused and looked intently at Mary Louise with eyes that were visualizing the events of the night before. “Well, to continue. It seems that someone with a lantern, investigating the place around the back, ran across poor Joseph lying in the creek in the water, with one leg doubled up under him. He told the man he had fallen off the bridge. That was all he said. Just what he could have been doing there at such a time I cannot imagine. It seems that he had been working with a road-construction company about three miles out on the road to Guests. I found that out from a perfect stranger.” She paused again and the line of her mouth took on a grimmer straightness. “One of the men, who brought him in—a great rough boor he was—had the audacity to suggest that Joseph was around there seeing what he could pick up. I silenced him quickly enough. But can you imagine what brought him to such a place at such a time?”

Mary Louise drew herself together in an odd little shiver. “Some strange things can happen by coincidence, Mrs. Mosby. Was he badly hurt?”

“Fractured his left leg just below the knee, Dr. Withers says—poor Joseph! He’s been an ambitious boy. So anxious to get ahead, and so self-sufficient. I feel right guilty about Joseph.” She shook her head dolorously.

“But there’s no real danger, is there?” broke in Mary Louise, her heart momentarily sinking.

“No. I suppose not. He is terribly run down. Like a ghost he looked when they carried him in last night, his eyes staring out before him all dumb and suffering. He must have been in that ice-cold water almost an hour before they found him. I might have been doing things for him all this time—looking after him—but you know how things have been in this house.”

The cold wall of her reserve seemed to be gradually letting down. Never before had she ever so much as alluded to the break in her family’s fortunes. Mary Louise felt an odd, lifting feeling of hope—tremulous but dawning hope.

“Mrs. Mosby,” she said. “Excuse me for speaking about something that is not my affair, but”—she hesitated and gazed at the polished marble slab of the hall tree—“it’s only because I’ve known Joe so well, for such a long time”—the polished slab was gleaming faintly from an errant ray of sunshine that came through a dim, high-set hall window—“that I perhaps know a little more about him.” She paused after this introduction, and having thus com-

mitted herself, plunged in. "Why don't you give Joe the chance he really wants? You have a lot of land here that is not being developed at all. Give Joe the chance to work it out—some of it, at least, on shares." She paused, breathless, and looked up timidly to see how her presumption fared.

A slow, fatuous smile spread over Mrs. Mosby's face. Mary Louise watched it break—watched it play for a moment about her lips like a shaft of winter sunshine. Then she spoke, shaking her head in reminiscence:

"I'd thought of that myself. In fact, I'd spoken of it to Joseph. But he had other ideas. Many's the time I would have welcomed having someone who really cared, on whom I could depend. It's been a difficult time for me, my dear. Brother's so feeble. I couldn't call on him. No. Joseph doesn't care for farming. You're mistaken there. He's got an errant streak in him, like his father, I'm afraid." She sighed, and the sibilance of it echoed with a strange lingering note between those high gray walls. "Besides—though I've not let it be generally known—I've sold the place—to a Mr. Walcott of New York. He's very wealthy, I believe. He's taking it over the first of the year. I'm just not strong enough to hold on any longer."

Mary Louise did not look up. The sunlight on the marble slab of the hall tree faded slowly away.

“Don’t you want to go up and see him, my dear?” Mrs. Mosby said at length.

She started. “No,” she replied. “I must be getting on. I’ve so many things to do. Some other time, may I? Perhaps this afternoon.” She rose to her feet and walked slowly to the door. She opened it and walked through, out on to the wide front porch, her thoughts in a turmoil. Rising above everything was an inexplicable conviction that Joe was closely akin to herself; in all the confusion of the world’s ways, a kindred creature.

She turned. Mrs. Mosby was standing in the open doorway watching her, on her face a set, wistful smile, that was as hard as stone. They exchanged good-byes and then the door slowly closed with its soft sucking noise and she found herself in the gray-ing light of a gathering storm. . . .

It was not until late the following afternoon that she found time again to visit the Mosby home.

The same old Negro woman admitted her and she stepped into the hall and stood waiting. Back in the shadow, in an open doorway, Mrs. Mosby and a stout, thickset man with stubbly black hair were talking in low tones. The Negro woman hurried past them back into the passage, and they moved aside a little as she passed. The last words of the conversation came faintly to Mary Louise’s ears; the stout man was talking:

“Must build him up,” he was saying. “Keep the

windows open, give him plenty to eat, all he wants." Then Mrs. Mosby's sibilant but inaudible reply. And then again, "He's used himself up. No reserve. Not prepared for an emergency like this."

She sat dumbly wondering; it was most probably Dr. Withers, the new doctor. The monotonous hum of their voices suddenly ceased and he was walking past her toward the door, pursing his lips in an odd sort of way. He looked at her as he passed, and reached for his hat. She did not hear the door close after him. Mrs. Mosby was speaking to her with a slight frown on her face.

"Just go on up, my dear. Ell bedroom, on the left. I'll be up directly."

She climbed the stairs in a maze. The silence was the most noticeable thing about the place unless it was the clinging, indescribable odour.

She found the door without difficulty and softly pushed it open. A draught of chill air greeted her, and there was a dim glow on the carpet from an open-grate fire in the wall opposite. Behind the door stood the bed, with its head against the wall, and in the bed lay Joe.

For a moment she could not realize it was he, the light was so dim, the figure so indistinct, so swathed in its covers. He turned his head at the sound of her footsteps and looked at her.

"Hullo," he said weakly.

All her reserves collapsed within her and she came

and sat on the edge of the bed. She looked down into his face and could not speak; a change which she could not begin to detail had come over him. He smiled. "Was wondering about you to-day," he said.

She reached out and took his hand. It was very hot. Two bright spots burned in his cheeks and his eyes had that peculiar, hollow, sunken look she had seen once or twice before. Two days had passed. The realization that it was but two days shocked her.

"Funny," he was saying. "That night—you remember—I met old Burrus coming out of your house. I wondered then what he could be doing. Well—he was just on my trail. Fact."

"Yes," she said. "He brought Aunt Susie a hot-water bottle. But you mustn't talk too much, Joe." She squeezed his hand very softly.

"Well," he went on, as though intensely interested in the idea, "you know what he was for Uncle Buzz? Well, next he must put his jinx on me." He chuckled softly. "His kind always have it in for—my kind. It is funny. As I went down the road, after leaving your house, you remember?"

She nodded.

"Well, I soon saw from the road that something had happened. I went down across the field up to the fence. Things were scattered all over the ground, and some of 'em floating down the creek—

I could see in the moonlight. 'Serves you right, you old skinflint,' I said to myself. 'But it's none of your business.' So I turned about and went back to the road. Couldn't help feeling kinda glad about it." He paused and drew a deep, painful breath. "I guess it's all just retribution. Shouldn't have enjoyed a man's misfortune. I missed the edge of the road, slipped, and fell across the big eight by eight that ties the bridge to the bank, and that's all I remember. Old Burrus pulled me out of the creek himself."

He withdrew his hand and moved slightly in the bed, as if easing himself somewhere. "It *was* funny, wasn't it?"

She gazed into his face. Something was stirring within her over which she seemed to have no control—a tenderness, a mothering instinct, a vast hurt deep within herself. She suddenly realized that she could have had him, although he had not offered himself. Nor had he ever asked for anything, probably never would. The realization singularly made him seem all the more her own. "You mustn't work yourself up, Joe. Be quiet. I want you to get well." Just how fervently she wished it, and with what anxiety, she suddenly knew. The sight of his peaked, upturned face, staring at the ceiling, with the bright red spots on his cheeks, was more than she could bear, and she rose to her feet and walked over to the open window.

The sun was just sinking behind a broken bank of heavy, blue-gray clouds. On the inner surfaces through which streamed its last rays patches of blood-red lining showed. A lurid glow was thinly suffused over the stretch of land between, against which were outlined the gray top branches of trees, moving fitfully to and fro. She stood for a few moments, waiting, listening for Mrs. Mosby. The shadows deepened and lengthened; they came creeping over the grass toward her, in their van the fading glow. All at once, as it were out of the twilight, the sunlight settled momentarily on the field at the bottom of the hill before her. Stark upright and in serried rows stretched the waste of last year's cornfield, the withered stalks touched with a passing glory, standing quite proudly erect and then—blue-gray darkness. A mellow waste delivering a valedictory! Next year it would doubtless be ploughed up—prepared for a crop. Over beyond the crest of hills clouds were gathering like a smoke pall. She wondered if the factory chimneys were sending their beacons that far. There were forty miles between the two worlds.

A voice spoke behind her, a strange, unknown voice. She turned and went back to the bedside. Joe lay staring straight before him and his lips were moving stiffly. The words came muffled and indistinct: "Tell you—got to have more money 'n that, Mr. Heston. 'Tisn't a question of just gettin'

by. A man's got to get ahead." And then there was an unintelligible muttering. And then suddenly the voice rose, clear, querulous, and high-pitched: "Well you can go to hell with it. Needn't think you're doin' us a favour—payin' us a living—just because you've got it all. No, sir! I can go back home. Can live there without havin' to thank *you!*" The voice died away.

She hung on the echo, shaken to the depths of her. Like a disembodied voice it had come out of the great silence. What was it all about? Who was Mr. Heston?

Then in a flash it all came clear to her. The mists arose from the past and before her stood envisioned all in the proper relationship: herself, Claybrook, and Joe; Bloomfield, the city, all of mankind.

Life was, after all, but one shrewd bargain; success a process of getting more than one gave; the survivors, shrewd bargainers, shouldering, edging, metamorphosed by a modern Circe, their forefeet and muzzles thrust eager and deep into the magic swill of her trough; and the others—creatures like Joe—untouched by the sorcery, going without and suffering discredit. Militant, her spirit rose in revolt. Was there no escape from the dilemma? She felt dried up, parched, athirst for something; her throat contracted in a burning ache.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and took his hand. She sat in silence with a great pain in her

heart. Over beyond the window sill the glow was dying, and the gathering pall was rising and coming nearer. Like a blanket the relentless world—the cog-world of personal interests, regulations, and restrictions—was coming, gathering up its wastage into its blue-gray depths.

Joe was speaking again. His voice was suddenly clearer.

“I wonder,” he was saying, “if you’d mind goin’ for Zeke Thompson and sendin’ him up to me? I want him to go somewhere for me. And will you—will you call up Mr. Clausen of the Pulvia Company and tell him I’ll get back on the job soon’s I can? To-morrow’ll do to call him up.”

“Surely I will, Joe,” she replied.

The door opened softly from the hall and Mrs. Mosby appeared, shading a lamp with her hand. “Keep your seat,” she exclaimed as Mary Louise rose to her feet. “I’m just getting ready to bring him his supper.” Then she went back out again.

Mary Louise bent over the bed. The lamp was directly behind her and she could not see for blurring.

“Do take care of yourself, Joe,” she whispered. “I’ll come back again to-morrow,” and then she slipped noiselessly from the room.

Directly Mrs. Mosby returned with a steaming tray which she set on the little table by the bedside. “Has she gone?” she asked.

Joe turned and looked with indifference at the tray,

with its white napkins and egg-shell china. "Don't believe I want anything much, Aunt Lorry," he said.

"Come now, Joseph. You must. I've a soft-boiled egg and some milk toast and cocoa. Dr. Withers says you must keep up your strength."

He turned languidly away. "And Aunt Lorry," he added.

"Yes?"

"I don't need anything—specially this sympathy stuff." He paused and frowned at the ceiling. "I don't—I don't want to have any company. Reckon I can get along all right."

Ten minutes later she carried away the tray with the food on it but scarcely touched. And he lay in the gathering darkness, watching the ceiling, with the wavering circles from the open fire and the soft whisper of the wind in the withered leaves outside the window. There came a gentle patter of rain on the roof and night slipped down upon Bloomfield. He sighed gently, turned his head, and fell asleep. . . .

Some four blocks away a girl was walking—swiftly, her hands clenched so that the knuckles were white. Bright spots burned in her cheeks and her eyes were deep and starry with bright vision. A man, passing close, turned and watched her curiously, saw her enter a wooden gate. A few feet from a darkened porch she seemed to spring forward

in her haste. He saw her run up the steps and disappear into the house. . . .

There was the sound of water being poured from one vessel into another, in the downstairs back-hall, and then the shuffling of retiring feet. Mrs. Mosby stood outlined in the high doorway, a lighted candle in her hand, her eyes straining into the darkness.

“Come, brother Rob,” she called and waited.

There was a muffled reply.

“It will certainly be good,” she went on, half to herself and pleasantly musing, “to have a real bathroom with hot water from a spigot. The city’s pleasant in winter. I’m sorry we’re waiting until January first. Come, brother Rob. The water’s getting cold.”

THE END