MAY
IVERSON'S
CAREER

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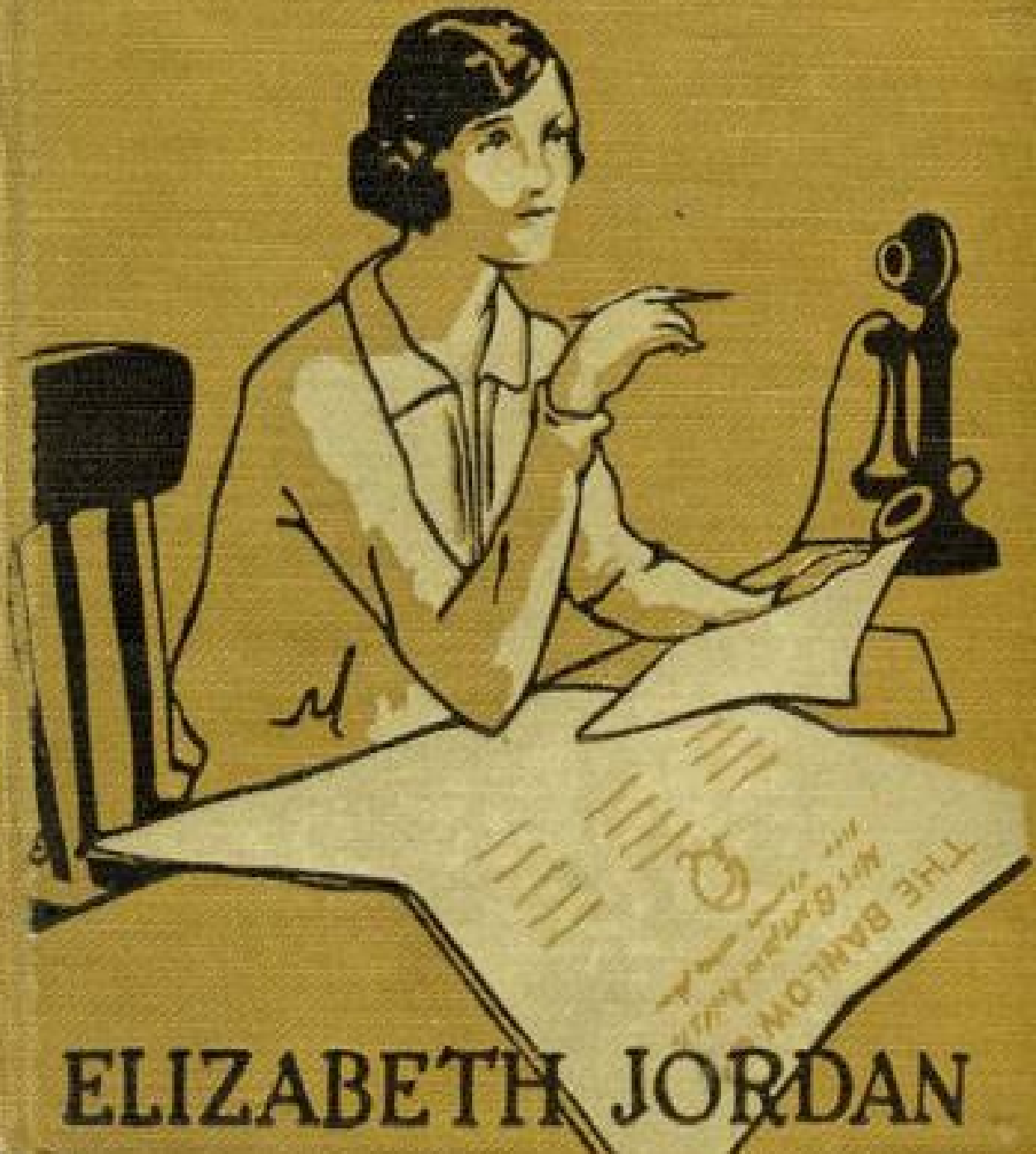

ELIZABETH JORDAN

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MAY IVERSON

MAY IVERSON'S CAREER

BY

ELIZABETH JORDAN

AUTHOR OF
"MAY IVERSON—HER BOOK"
"MANY KINGDOMS" ETC.

Printer's Logo

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TO
F. H. B.
WITH MEMORIES OF THE WISTFUL ADRIATIC

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MAY IVERSON'S CAREER

MAY IVERSON'S CAREER

I

MY FIRST ASSIGNMENT

The Commencement exercises at St. Catharine's were over, and everybody in the big assembly-hall was looking relieved and grateful. Mabel Muriel Murphy had welcomed our parents and friends to the convent shades in an extemporaneous speech we had overheard her practising for weeks; and the proud face of Mabel Muriel's father, beaming on her as she talked, illumined the front row like an electric globe. Maudie Joyce had read a beautiful essay, full of uplifting thoughts and rare flowers of rhetoric; Mabel Blossom had tried to deliver her address without the manuscript, and had forgotten it at a vital point; Adeline Thurston had recited an original poem; Kittie James had sung a solo; and Janet Trelawney had played the Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody on the piano.

Need I say who read the valedictory? It was I—May Iverson—winner of the Cross of Honor, winner of the Crown, leader of the convent orchestra, and president of the senior class. If there are those who think I should not mention these honors I will merely ask who would do it if I did not—and pause for a reply. Besides, young as I am, I know full well that worldly ambitions and triumphs are as ashes on the lips; and already I was planning to cast mine aside. But at this particular minute the girls were crying on one another over our impending parting, and our parents were coming up to us and saying the same things again and again, while Sister Edna was telling Mabel Muriel Murphy, without being asked, that she was not ashamed of one of us.

I could see my father coming toward me through the crowd, stopping to shake hands with my classmates and tell them how wonderful they were; and I knew that when he reached me I must take him out into the convent garden and break his big, devoted heart. At the thought of it a great lump came into my throat, and while I was trying to swallow it I felt his arm flung over my shoulder.

He bent down and kissed me. "Well, my girl," he said, "I'm proud of you."

That was all. I knew it was all he would ever say; but it meant more than any one else could put into hours of talk. I did not try to answer, but I kissed him hard, and, taking his arm, led him down-stairs, through the long halls and out into the

convent garden, lovely with the scent of roses and honeysuckle and mignonette. He had never seen the garden before. He wanted to stroll through it and glance into the conservatories, to look at the fountain and visit the Grotto of Lourdes and stand gazing up at the huge cross that rises from a bed of passion-flowers. But at last I took him into a little arbor and made him sit down. I was almost glad my delicate mother had not been able to come to see me graduate. He would tell her what I had to say better than I could.

When I have anything before me that is very hard I always want to do it immediately and get it over. So now I stood with my back braced against the side of the arbor, and, looking my dear father straight in the eyes, I told him I had made up my mind to be a nun.

At first he looked as if he thought I must be joking. Then, all in a minute, he seemed to change from a gallant middle-aged officer into a crushed, disappointed old man. He bowed his head, his shoulders sagged down, and, turning his eyes as if to keep me from seeing what was in them, he stared out over the convent garden.

"Why, May!" he said; and then again, very quietly, "Why, May!"

I told him all that was in my mind, and he listened without a word. At the end he said he had thought I wanted to be a newspaper woman. I admitted that I had felt that desire a year ago—when I was only seventeen and my mind was immature. He sat up in his seat then and looked more comfortable—and younger.

"I'll put my answer in a nutshell," he said. "You're too young still to know your mind about anything. Give your family and the world a chance. I don't want you to be a nun. I don't want you to be a newspaper woman, either. But I'll compromise. Be a newspaper woman for three years."

I began to speak, but he stopped me. "It's an interesting life," he went on. "You'll like it. But if you come to us the day you are twenty-one and tell us you still want to be a nun I promise that your mother and I will consent. Give us a chance, May." And he added, gently, "*Play fair*."

Those two words hurt; but they conquered me. I agreed to do as he asked, and then we sat together, hand in hand, talking over plans, till the corners of the garden began to look mysterious in the twilight. Before we went back to the assembly-room it was understood that I was to go to New York in a week and begin my new career. Papa had friends there who would look after me. I was

sure they would never have a chance; but I did not mention that to my dear father then, while he was still feeling the shock of decision.

When I was saying good-by to Sister Irmingarde six days later I asked her to give me some advice about my newspaper work. "Write of things as they are," she said, without hesitation, "and write of them as simply as you can."

I was a little disappointed. I had expected something inspiring—something in the nature of a trumpet-call. I suppose she saw my face fall, for she smiled her beautiful smile.

"And when you write the sad stories you're so fond of, dear May," she said, "remember to let your readers shed their own tears."

I thought a great deal about those enigmatic words on my journey to New York, but after I reached it I forgot them. It was just as well, for no one associated with my work there had time to shed tears.

My editor was Mr. Nestor Hurd, of the *Searchlight*. He had promised to give me a trial because Kittie James's brother-in-law, George Morgan, who was his most intimate friend, said he must; but I don't think he really wanted to. When I reported to him he looked as if he had not eaten or slept for weeks, and as if seeing me was the one extra trouble he simply could not endure. There was a bottle of tablets on his desk, and every time he noticed it he stopped to swallow a tablet. He must have taken six while he was talking to me. He was a big man, with a round, smooth face, and dimples in his cheeks and chin. He talked out of one side of his mouth in a kind of low snarl, without looking at any one while he spoke.

"Oh," was his greeting to me, "you're the convent girl? Ready for work? All right. I'll try you on this."

He turned to the other person in the office—a thin young man at a desk near him. Neither of them had risen when I entered.

"Here, Morris," he said. "Put Miss Iverson down for the Ferncliff story."

The young man called Morris dropped a big pencil and looked very much surprised.

"But—" he said. "Why, say, she'll have to stay out in that house alone—all night."

Mr. Hurd said shortly that I couldn't be in a safer place. "Are you afraid of ghosts?" he asked, without looking at me. I said I was not, and waited for him to explain the joke; but he didn't.

"Here's the story," he said. "Listen, and get it straight. Ferncliff is a big country house out on Long Island, about three miles from Sound View. It's said to be haunted. Its nearest neighbor is a quarter of a mile away. It was empty for three years until this spring. Last month Mrs. Wallace Vanderveer, a New York society woman, took a year's lease of it and moved in with a lot of servants. Last week she moved out. Servants wouldn't stay. Said they heard noises and saw ghosts. She heard noises, too. Now the owner of Ferncliff, a Miss Watts, is suing Mrs. Vanderveer for a year's rent. Nice little story in it. See it?"

I didn't, exactly. That is, I didn't see what he wanted me to do about it, and I said so.

"I want you to take the next train for Sound View," he snarled, impatiently, and pulled the left side of his mouth down to his chin. "When you get there, drive out and look at Ferncliff to see what it's like in the daytime. Then go to the Sound View Hotel and have your dinner. About ten o'clock go back to Ferncliff, and stay there all night. Sit up. If you see any ghosts, write about 'em. If you don't, write about how it felt to stay there and wait for 'em. Come back to town to-morrow morning and turn in your story. If it's good we'll run it. If it isn't," he added, grimly, "we'll throw it out. See now?" I saw now.

"Here's the key of the house," he said. "We got it from the agent." He turned and began to talk to Mr. Morris about something else—and I knew that our interview was over.

I went to Sound View on the first train, and drove straight from the station to Ferncliff. It was almost five o'clock, and a big storm was coming up. The rain was like a wet, gray veil, and the wind snarled in the tops of the pine-trees in a way that made me think of Mr. Hurd. I didn't like the look of the house. It was a huge, gloomy, vine-covered place, perched on a bluff overlooking the Sound, and set far back from the road. An avenue of pines led up to it, and a high box-hedge along the front cut off the grounds from the road and the near-by fields. When we drove away my cabman kept glancing back over his shoulder as if he expected to see the ghosts.

I was glad to get into the hotel and have a few hours for thought. I was already perfectly sure that I was not going to like being a newspaper woman, and I made

up my mind to write to papa the next morning and tell him so. I thought of the convent and of Sister Irmingarde, who was probably at vespers now in the chapel, and the idea of that assignment became more unpleasant every minute. Not that I was afraid—I, an Iverson, and the daughter of a general in the army! But the thing seemed silly and unworthy of a convent girl, and lonesome work besides. As I thought of the convent it suddenly seemed so near that I could almost hear its vesper bell, and that comforted me.

I went back to Ferncliff at ten o'clock. By that time the storm was really wild. It might have been a night in November instead of in July. The house looked very bleak and lonely, and the way my driver lashed his horse and hurried away from the neighborhood did not make it easier for me to unlock the front door and go in. But I forced myself to do it.

I had filled a basket with candles and matches and some books and a good luncheon, which the landlady at the hotel had put up for me. I hurriedly lighted two candles and locked the front door. Then I took the candles into the living-room at the left of the hall, and set them on a table. They made two little blurs of light in which the linen-covered furniture assumed queer, ghostly shapes that seemed to move as the flames flickered. I did not like the effect, so I lighted some more candles.

I was sure the first duty of a reporter was to search the house. So I took a candle in each hand and went into every room, up stairs and down, spending a great deal of time in each, for it was strangely comforting to be busy. I heard all sorts of sounds—mice in the walls, old boards cracking under my feet, and a death-tick that began to get on my nerves, though I knew what it was. But there was nothing more than might be heard in any other old house.

When I returned to the living-room I looked at my luncheon-basket—not that I was hungry, but I wanted something more to do, and eating would have filled the time so pleasantly. But if I ate, there would be nothing to look forward to but the ghost, so I decided to wait. Outside, the screeching wind seemed to be sweeping the rain before it in a rising fury. It was half past eleven. Twelve is the hour when ghosts are said to come, I remembered.

I took up a book and began to read. I had almost forgotten my surroundings when a noise sounded on the veranda, a noise that made me stop reading to listen. Something was out there—something that tried the knob of the door and pushed against the panels; something that scampered over to the window-blinds

and pulled at them; something that opened the shutters and tried to peer in.

I laid down my book. The feet scampered back to the door. I stopped breathing. There followed a knocking at the door, the knocking of weak hands, which soon began to beat against the panels with closed fists; and next I heard a high, shrill voice. It seemed to be calling, uttering words, but above the shriek of the storm I could not make out what they were.

Creeping along the floor to the window, I pulled back one of the heavy curtains and raised the green shade under it half an inch. For a moment I could see nothing but the twisting pines. But at last I was able to distinguish something moving near the door—something no larger than a child, but with white hair floating round its head. It was not a ghost. It was not an animal. It could not be a human being. I had no idea what it was. While I looked it turned and came toward the window where I was crouching, as if it felt my eyes upon it. And this time I heard its words.

"Let me in!" it shrieked. "Let me in! Let me in!" And in a kind of fury it scampered back and dashed itself against the door.

Then I was afraid—not merely nervous—afraid—with a degrading fear that made my teeth chatter. If only I had known what it was; if only I could think of something normal that was a cross between a little child and an old woman! I went to the door and noiselessly turned the key. I meant to open it an inch and ask what was there. But almost before the door had moved on its hinges the thing outside saw it. It gave a quick spring and a little screech and threw itself against the panels. The next instant I went back and down, and the thing that had been outside was inside.

I got up slowly and looked at it. It seemed to be a witch—a little old, humpbacked witch—not more than four feet high, with white hair that hung in wet locks around a shriveled brown face, and black eyes gleaming at me in the dark hall like an angry cat's.

"You little fool!" she hissed. "Why didn't you let me in? I'm soaked through. And why didn't that bell ring? What's been done to the wire?"

I could not speak, and after looking at me a moment more the little old creature locked the hall door and walked into the living-room, motioning to me to follow. She was panting with anger or exhaustion, or both. When we had entered the room she turned and grinned at me like a malicious monkey.

"Scared you, didn't I?" she chuckled, in her high, cracked voice. "Serves you right. Keeping me out on that veranda fifteen minutes!"

She began to gather up the loose locks of her white hair and fasten them at the back of her head. "Wind blew me to pieces," she muttered.

She took off her long black coat, threw it over a chair, and straightened the hat that hung over one ear. She *was* a human being, after all; a terribly deformed human being, whose great, hunched back now showed distinctly through her plain black dress. There was a bit of lace at her throat, and when she took off her gloves handsome rings glittered on her claw-like fingers.

"Well, well," she said, irritably, "don't stand there staring. I know I'm not a beauty," and she cackled like an angry hen.

But it was reassuring, at least, to know she was human, and I felt myself getting warm again. Then, as she seemed to expect me to say something, I explained that I had not intended to let anybody in, because I thought nobody had any right in the house.

"Humph," she said. "I've got a better right here than you have, young lady. I am the owner of this house and everything in it—I am Miss Watts. And I'll tell you one thing"—she suddenly began to trot around the room—"I've stood this newspaper nonsense about ghosts just as long as I'm going to. It's ruining the value of my property. I live in Brooklyn, but when my agent telephoned me to-night that a reporter was out here working up another lying yarn I took the first train and came here to protect my interests."

She grumbled something about having sent her cab away at the gate and having mislaid her keys. I asked her if she meant to stay till morning, and she glared at me and snapped that she certainly did. Then, taking a candle, she wandered off by herself for a while, and I heard her scampering around on the upper floors. When she came back she seemed very much surprised to hear that I was not going to bed.

"You're a fool," she said, rudely, "but I suppose you've got to do what the other fools tell you to."

"Don't Stand There Staring. I Know I'm Not a Beauty," and She Cackled Like an Angry Hen

After that I didn't feel much like sharing my supper with her, but I did, and she seemed to enjoy it. Then she curled herself up on a big divan in the corner and grinned at me again. I liked her face better when she was angry.

"I'm going to take a nap," she said. "Call me if any ghosts come."

I opened my book again and read for half an hour. Then suddenly, from somewhere under the house, I heard a queer, muffled sound. "*Tap, tap, tap,*" it went. And again, "*Tap, tap, tap*."

At first it didn't interest me much. But after a minute I realized that it was different from anything I had heard that night. And soon another noise mingled with it—a kind of buzz, like the whir of an electric fan, only louder. I looked at Miss Watts. She was asleep.

I picked up a candle and followed the noise—through the hall, down the cellar steps, and along a bricked passage. There the sound stopped. I stood still and waited. While I was staring at the bricks in front of me I noticed one that seemed to have a light behind it. I lowered my candle and examined it. Some plaster had been knocked out, and through a hole the size of a penny I saw another passage cutting through the earth like a little catacomb, with a light at the far end of it. While I was staring, amazed, the tapping began again, much nearer now; and I heard men's voices.

There were men under that house, in a secret cellar!

In half a minute I was standing beside Miss Watts, shaking her arm and trying to wake her. Almost before I was able to make her understand what I had seen she was through the front door and half-way down the avenue, dragging me with her.

"Where are we going?" I gasped.

"To the next house, idiot, to telephone to the police," she said. "Do you think we could stay there and do it?"

We left the avenue and came into the road, and as we ran on, stumbling into mud-holes and whipped by wind and rain, she panted out that the men were probably escaped convicts from some prison or patients from some asylum. I ran faster after that, though I hadn't thought I could. I wondered if I were having a bad dream. Several times I pinched myself, but I didn't wake up. Instead, I kept on running and stumbling and gasping, until I felt sure I had been running and stumbling and gasping for years and must keep on doing it for eons more. But at

last we came to a house set far back in big grounds, and we raced side by side up the driveway that led to the front door. Late as it was, there were lights everywhere, and through the long windows opening on the veranda we could see people moving about.

Miss Watts gave the bell a terrific pull; some one opened the door, and we stumbled in. After that everything was a mixture of questions and answers and excitement and telephoning, followed by a long wait for the police. A man led Miss Watts and me into a room where a fire was burning, and left us to get warm and dry. When we were alone I asked Miss Watts if she thought they would keep us overnight. She stared at me.

"You won't have much time for sleep," she answered, almost kindly. "It will take you an hour or two to write your story."

It was my turn to stare, and I did it. "My story?" I asked her. "To-night? What do you mean?"

She swung round in her chair and stared at me harder than ever. Then she cackled in her nastiest way. "And this is a New York reporter!" she said. "Why, you little dunce, you know you've *got* a story, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered, doubtfully. "But I'm to write it to-morrow, after I talk to Mr. Hurd."

Miss Watts uttered a squawk and then a squeal. "I don't know what fool sent you here," she snapped, "or what infant-class you've escaped from. But one thing I do know: You came here to write a Sunday 'thriller,' I suppose, which would have destroyed what little value my property has left. By bull-headed luck you've stumbled on the truth; and it's a good news story. It will please your editor, and it will save my property. Now, here's my point." She pushed her horrible little face close to mine and kept it there while she finished. "That story is coming out in the *Searchlight* to-morrow morning. I'd do it if I could, but I'm not a writer. So you're going to write it and telephone it in to the *Searchlight* office within the next hour. Have I made myself clear?"

She had. I felt my face getting red and hot when I realized that I had a big story and had not known it. I wondered if I could ever live that down. I felt so humble that I was almost willing to let Miss Watts see it.

But before I could answer her there was the noise of many feet in the hall, with

the voices of men. Then our door was flung open, and a young man came in, wearing a rain-coat, thick boots covered with mud, and a wide grin. He was saving time by shaking the rain off his soft hat as he crossed the room to us. His eyes touched me, then passed on to Miss Watts as if I hadn't been there.

"Miss Watts," he said, "the police are here, and I'm going back to the house with them to see the capture. I'm Gibson, of the *Searchlight*."

Miss Watts actually smiled at him. Then she held out her skinny little claw of a hand. "A real reporter!" she said. "Thank Heaven! You know what it means to me to have this thing put straight. But how do you happen to be here?"

"Hurd sent me to look after Miss Iverson," he explained, glancing at me again. "He couldn't put her in a haunted house without a watch-dog, but, to do her justice, she didn't know she had one. I was in a summer-house on the grounds. I saw you leave and followed you here. Then I went up the road to meet the police."

He grinned at me, and I smiled a very little smile in return. I wasn't going to give him a whole smile until I found out how he was going to act about my story. Miss Watts started for the door.

"Come on," she said, with her hand on the knob.

The real reporter's eyes grew big. "Are *you* going along?" he gasped.

"Certainly I'm going along," snapped Miss Watts. "I'm going to see this thing through. And I'll tell you one thing right now, young man," she ended, "if you don't put the *facts* into your story I'm going to sue your newspaper for twenty-five thousand dollars."

He did not answer. His attention seemed to be diverted to me. I was standing beside Miss Watts, buttoning my rain-coat and pulling my hat over my eyes again, preparatory to going out.

"Say, kid," said the real reporter, "you go back and sit down. You're not in this, you know. We'll come and get you and take you to the hotel after it's all over."

I gave him a cold and dignified glance. Then I buttoned the last button of my coat and went out into the hall. It was full of men. The real reporter hurried after me. He seemed to expect me to say something. So finally I did.

"Mr. Hurd told me to write this story," I explained, in level tones, "and I'm going to try to write it. And I can't write it unless I see everything that happens."

I looked at him and Miss Watts out of the corner of my eye as I spoke, and I distinctly saw them give each other a significant glance. Miss Watts shrugged her shoulders as if she didn't care what I did; but the real reporter looked worried.

"Oh, well, all right," he said, at last. "I suppose it isn't fair not to let you in on your own assignment. There's one good thing—you can't get any wetter and muddier than you are." That thought seemed to comfort him.

We had a hard time going back, but it was easier because there were more of us to suffer. Besides, the real reporter helped Miss Watts and me a little when we stumbled or when the wind blew us against a tree or a fence. When we got near the house everybody moved very quietly, keeping close to the high hedge. We all went around to the back entrance. There the chief constable began to give his men orders, and the real reporter led Miss Watts and me into a grape-arbor, about fifty feet from the house.

"This is where we've got to stay," he whispered, pulling us inside and closing the door. "We can see them come out, and get the other details from Conroy, who's in charge."

The police were creeping closer to the house. Three of them took places outside while the rest went forward. First there was a long silence; then a sudden rush and crash—shouts and words that we didn't catch. Gleams of light flashed up for a minute—then disappeared. The men stationed outside the house ran toward the cellar. There was the flashing of more light, and at last the police came out with their prisoners—and the whole thing was over. There had not been a pistol-shot.

I was as warm as toast in my wet clothes, but my teeth were chattering with excitement, and I knew Miss Watts was excited, too, by the grip of her hand on my shoulder. The men came toward us through the rain on their way to the gate, and Mr. Conroy's voice sounded as if he had been running a race. But he hadn't. He had been right there.

"Well, Miss Watts, we've got 'em," he crowed. "A nice little gang of amachur counterfeiters. They've been visitin' you for 'most a year, snug and cozy; but I guess this is the end of your troubles."

Miss Watts walked out into the rain and, taking a policeman's electric bull's-eye, looked at the prisoners one by one. I followed her and looked, too, while the real reporter talked to Mr. Conroy. There were three counterfeiters, and they were all handcuffed and looked young. It could not have been very hard for six policemen to take them. One of them had blood on his face, and another was covered with mud, as if he had been rolled in it. Miss Watts asked the bloody one, who was also the biggest one, if his gang had really worked in a secret cellar at Ferncliff for a year. He said it had been there about ten months.

"Then you were there all winter?" Miss Watts asked him. "And you were so safe and comfortable that when the tenants moved in and you found they were all women, except a stupid butler, you decided to scare them away and stay right along?"

The man muttered something that seemed to mean that she was right. The real reporter interrupted, looking busy and worried again. "Miss Watts," he said, quickly, "can't we go right into your house and send this story to the *Searchlight* over your telephone? It's a quarter to one, and there isn't a minute to lose. The *Searchlight* goes to press in an hour. I've got all the facts," he added, in a peaceful tone.

Miss Watts said we could, and led the way into the house, while the counterfeiters and the police tramped off through the mud and rain. When we got inside, Miss Watts took us to the library and lit the electric lights, while the real reporter bustled about, looking busier than any one I ever saw before. I watched him for a minute. Then I told Miss Watts I wanted to go into a quiet room and write my story. She and the real reporter looked at each other again. I was getting tired of their looks. The real reporter spoke to me very kindly, like a Sunday-school superintendent addressing his class.

"Now, see here, Miss Iverson," he said; "you've had a big, new experience and lots of excitement. You discovered the counterfeiters. You'll get full credit for it. Let it go at that, and I'll write the story. It's got to be a real story, not a kindergarten special."

If he hadn't said that about the kindergarten special I might have let him write the story, for I was cold and tired and scared. But at those fatal words I felt myself stiffen all over.

"It's my story," I said, with icy determination. "And I'm going to write it."

The real reporter looked annoyed. "But *can* you?" he protested. "We haven't time for experiments."

"Of course I can," I said. And I'm afraid I spoke crossly, for I was getting annoyed. "I'll write it exactly the way Sister Irmingarde told me to."

I sat down at the table as I spoke. I heard a bump and something that sounded like a groan. The real reporter had fallen into a chair. "Good Lord!" he said; and then for a long time he didn't say anything. Finally he began to fuss with his paper, as if he meant to write the story anyway. I wrote three pages and forgot about him. At last he muttered, "Here, let me see those," and his voice sounded like a dove's when it mourns under the eaves. I pushed the sheets toward him with my left hand and went on writing. Suddenly I heard a gasp and a chuckle. In another second the real reporter was standing beside me, grinning his widest grin.

"Why, say, you little May Iverson kid," he almost shouted, "this story is going to be good!"

I could hear Miss Watts straighten up in the chair from which she was watching us. She snatched at my pages, and he let her have them. I wanted to draw myself up to my full height and look at him coldly, but I didn't—there wasn't time. Besides, far down inside of me I was delighted by his praise.

"Of course it's going to be good," was all I said. "Sister Irmingarde told me to write about things as they are, and very simply."

He had my pages back in his hands now and was running over them quickly, putting in a few words here and there with a pencil. I could see he was not changing much. Then he started on a jump for the next room, where the telephone was, but stopped at the door. There was a queer look in his eyes.

"Sister Irmingarde's a daisy!" he muttered.

Then I heard him calling New York. "Gimme the *Searchlight*," he called. "Gimme the city desk. Hurry up! Say, Jack, this is Gibson, at Sound View. We've got a crackerjack of a story out here. No—the Iverson kid is doing it. It's all right, too. Get Hammond busy there and let him take it on the typewriter as fast as I read it. Ready? Here goes."

He began to read my first page.

Miss Watts got up and shut the door, and I bowed my thanks to her. The storm was worse than ever, but I hardly heard it. For a second his words had made me think of Sister Irmingarde. I felt sorry for her. She would never have a chance like this—to write a real news story for a great newspaper. The convent seemed like a place I had heard of, long ago.

Then I settled down to work, and for the next hour there was no sound in the room but the whisper of my busy pen and the respectful footsteps of Miss Watts as she reverently carried my story, page by page, to the chastened "real reporter."

II

THE CRY OF THE PACK

Mr. Nestor Hurd, our "feature" editor, was in a bad humor. We all knew he was, and everybody knew why, except Mr. Nestor Hurd himself. He thought it was because he had not a competent writer on his whole dash-blinged staff, and he was explaining this to space in words that stung like active gnats. Really it was because his wife had just called at his office and drawn his month's salary in advance to go to Atlantic City.

Over the little partition that separated his private office from the square pen where his reporters had their desks Mr. Hurd's words flew and lit upon us. Occasionally we heard the murmur of Mr. Morris's voice, patting the air like a soothing hand; and at last our chief got tired and stopped, and an office boy came into the outer room and said he wanted to see me.

I went in with steady knees. I was no longer afraid of Mr. Hurd. I had been on the *Searchlight* a whole week, and I had written one big "story" and three small ones, and they had all been printed. I knew my style was improving every day—growing more mature. I had dropped a great many amateur expressions, and I had learned to stop when I reached the end of my story instead of going right on. Besides, I was no longer the newest of the "cub reporters." The latest one had been taken on that morning—a scared-looking girl who told me in a trembling voice that she had to write a special column every day for women. It was plain that she had not studied life as we girls had in the convent. She made me feel a thousand years old instead of only eighteen. I had received so much advice during the week that some of it was spilling over, and I freely and gladly gave the surplus to her. I had a desk, too, by this time, in a corner near a window where I could look out on City Hall Park and see the newsboys stealing baths in the fountain. And I was going to be a nun in three years, so who cared, anyway? I went to Mr. Hurd with my head high and the light of confidence in my eyes.

"'S that?" remarked Mr. Hurd, when he heard my soft footfalls approaching his

desk. He was too busy to look up and see. He was bending over a great heap of newspaper clippings, and the veins bulged out on his brow from the violence of his mental efforts. Mr. Morris, the thin young editor who had a desk near his, told him it was Miss Iverson. Mr. Morris had a muscular bulge on each jaw-bone, which Mr. Gibson had told me was caused by the strain of keeping back the things he wanted to say to Mr. Hurd. Mr. Hurd twisted the right corner of his mouth at me, which was his way of showing that he knew that the person he was talking to stood at his right side.

"'S Iverson," he began (he hadn't time to say Miss Iverson), "got 'ny money?"

I thought he wanted to borrow some. I had seen a great deal of borrowing going on during the week; everybody's money seemed to belong to everybody else. I was glad to let him have it, of course, but a little surprised. I told him that I had some money, for when I left home papa had given me—

He interrupted me rudely. "Don't want to know how much papa gave you," he snapped. "Want to know where 'tis."

I told him coldly that it was in a savings-bank, for papa thought—

He interrupted again. I had never been interrupted when I was in the convent. There the girls hung on my words with suspended breath.

"'S all right, then," Mr. Hurd said. "Here's your story. Go and see half a dozen of our biggest millionaires in Wall Street—Drake, Carter, Hayden—you know the list. Tell 'em you're a stranger in town, come to study music or painting. Got a little money to see you through—'nough for a year. Ask 'em what to do with it—how to invest it—and write what happens. Good story, eh?" He turned to Morris for approval, and all his dimples showed, making him look like a six-months-old baby. He immediately regretted this moment of weakness and frowned at me.

"'S all," he said; and I went away.

I will now pause for a moment to describe an interesting phenomenon that ran through my whole journalistic career. I always went into an editor's room to take an assignment with perfect confidence, and I usually came out of it in black despair. The confidence was caused by the memory that I had got my past stories; the despair was caused by the conviction that I could not possibly get the present one. Each assignment Mr. Hurd had given me during the week seemed not only harder than the last, but less worthy the dignity of a general's daughter.

Besides, a new and terrible thing was happening to me. I was becoming afraid—not of work, but of men. I never had been afraid of anything before. From the time we were laid in our cradles my father taught my brother Jack and me not to be afraid. The worst of my fear now was that I didn't know exactly why I felt it, and there was no one I could go to and ask about it. All the men I met seemed to be divided into two classes. In the first class were those who were not kind at all—men like Mr. Hurd, who treated me as if I were a machine, and ignored me altogether or looked over my head or past the side of my face when they spoke to me. They seemed rude at first, and I did not like them; but I liked them better and better as time went on. In the second class were the men who were too kind—who sprawled over my desk and wasted my time and grinned at me and said things I didn't understand and wanted to take me to Coney Island. Most of them were merely silly, but two or three of them were horrible. When they came near me they made me feel queer and sick. After they had left I wanted to throw open all the doors and windows and air the room. There was one I used to dream of when I was overworked, which was usually. He was always a snake in the dream—a fat, disgusting, lazy snake, slowly squirming over the ground near me, with his bulging green eyes on my face. There were times when I was afraid to go to sleep for fear of dreaming of that snake; and when during the day he came into the room and over to my desk I would hardly have been surprised to see him crawl instead of walk. Indeed, his walk was a kind of crawl.

Mr. Gibson, Hurd's star reporter, whose desk was next to mine, spoke to me about him one day, and his grin was not as wide as usual.

"Is Yawkins annoying you?" he asked. "I've seen you actually shudder when he came to your desk. If the cad had any sense he'd see it, too. Has he said anything? Done anything?"

I said he hadn't, exactly, but that I felt a strange feeling of horror every time he came near me; and Gibson raised his eyebrows and said he guessed he knew why, and that he would attend to it. He must have attended to it, for Yawkins stopped coming to my desk, and after a few months he was discharged for letting himself be "thrown down" on a big story, and I never saw him again. But at the time Mr. Hurd gave me his Wall Street assignment I was beginning to be horribly afraid to approach strangers, which is no way for a reporter to feel; and when I had to meet strange men I always found myself wondering whether they would be the Hurd type or the Yawkins type. I hardly dared to hope they would be like Mr. Gibson, who was like the men at home—kind and casual and friendly; but of course some of them were.

Once Mrs. Hoppen, a woman reporter on the *Searchlight*, came and spoke to me about them. She was forty and slender and black-eyed, and her work was as clever as any man's, but it seemed to have made her very hard. She seemed to believe in no one. She made me feel as if she had dived so deep in life that she had come out into a place where there wasn't anything. She came to me one day when Yawkins was coiled over my desk. He crawled away as soon as he saw her, for he hated her. After he went she stood looking down at me and hesitating. It was not like her to hesitate about anything.

"Look here," she said at last; "I earn a good income by attending to my own business, and I usually let other people's business alone. Besides, I'm not cut out for a Star of Bethlehem. But I just want to tell you not to worry about that kind of thing." She looked after Yawkins, who had crawled through the door.

I tried to say that I wasn't worrying, but I couldn't, for it wasn't true. And someway, though I didn't know why, I couldn't talk to her about it. She didn't wait for me, however, but went right on.

"You're very young," she said, "and a long way from home. You haven't been in New York long enough to make influential friends or create a background for yourself; so you seem fair game, and the wolves are on the trail. But you can be sure of one thing—they'll never get you; so don't worry."

I thanked her, and she patted my shoulder and went away. I wasn't sure just what she meant, but I knew she had tried to be kind.

The day I started down to Wall Street to see the multimillionaires I was very thoughtful. I didn't know then, as I did later, how guarded they were in their offices, and how hard it was for a stranger to get near them. What I simply hated was having them look at me and grin at me, and seeing them under false pretenses and having to tell them lies. I knew Sister Irmingarde would not have approved of it—but there were so many things in newspaper work that Sister Irmingarde wouldn't approve of. I was beginning to wonder if there was anything at all she would approve; and later, of course, I found there was. But I discovered many, many other things long before that.

I went to Mr. Drake's office first. He was the one Mr. Hurd had mentioned first, and while I was at school I had heard about him and read that he was very old and very kind and very pious. I thought perhaps he would be kind enough to see a strange girl for a few minutes and give her some advice, even if his time was worth a thousand dollars a minute, as they said it was. So I went straight to his

office and asked for him, and gave my card to a buttoned boy who seemed strangely loath to take it. He was perfectly sure Mr. Drake hadn't time to see me, and he wanted the whole story of my life before he gave the card to any one; but I was not yet afraid of office boys, and he finally took the card and went away with dragging steps.

Then my card began to circulate like a love story among the girls at St. Catharine's. Men in little cages and at mahogany desks read it, and stared at me and passed it on to other men. Finally it disappeared in an inner room, and a young man came out holding it in his hand and spoke to me in a very cold and direct manner. The card had my real name on it, but no address or newspaper, and it didn't mean anything at all to the direct young man. He wanted to know who I was and what I wanted of Mr. Drake, and I told him what Mr. Hurd had told me to say. The young man hesitated. Then he smiled, and at last he said he would see what he could do and walked away. In five or six minutes he came back again, still smiling, but in a pleasanter and more friendly manner, and said Mr. Drake would see me if I could wait half an hour.

I thanked him and settled back in my seat to wait. It was a very comfortable seat—a deep, leather-covered chair with big wide arms, and there was enough going on around me to keep me interested. All sorts of men came and went while I sat there; young men and old men, and happy men and wretched men, and prosperous men and poor men; but there was one thing in which they were all alike. Every man was in a hurry, and every man had in his eyes the set, eager look my brother Jack's eyes hold when he is running a college race and sees the goal ahead of him. A few of them glanced at me, but none seemed interested or surprised to see me there. Probably they thought, if they thought of it at all, that I was a stenographer trying to get a situation.

The half-hour passed, and then another half-hour, and at last the direct young man came out again. He did not apologize for keeping me waiting twice as long as he had said it would be.

"Mr. Drake will see you now," he said.

I followed him through several offices full of clerks and typewriters, and then into an office where a little old man sat alone. It was a very large office, with old rugs on the floor, and heavy curtains and beautiful furniture, and the little old man seemed almost lost in it. He was a very thin old man, and he sat at a great mahogany desk facing the door. The light in his office came from windows

behind and beside him, but it fell on my face, as I sat opposite him, and left his in shadow. I could see, though, that his hair was very white, and that his face was like an oval billiard-ball, the thin skin of it drawn tightly over bones that showed. He might have been fifty years old or a hundred—I didn't know which—but he was dressed very carefully in gray clothes almost as light in color as his face and hair, and he wore a gray tie with a star-sapphire pin in it. That pale-blue stone, and the pale blue of his eyes, which had the same sort of odd, moving light in them the sapphire had, were the only colors about him. He sat back, very much at his ease, his small figure deep in his great swivel-chair, the finger-tips of both hands close together, and stared at me with his pale-blue eyes that showed their queer sparks under his white eyebrows.

"Well, young woman," he said, "what can I do for you?"

And then I knew how old he was, for in the cracked tones of his voice the clock of time seemed to be striking eighty. It made me feel comfortable and almost happy to know that he was so old. I wasn't afraid of him any more. I poured out my little story, which I had rehearsed with his clerk, and he listened without a word, never taking his narrow blue eyes from my face. When I stopped he asked me what instrument I was studying, and I told him the piano, which was true enough, for I was still keeping up the music I had worked on so hard with Sister Cecilia ever since I was eight years old. He asked me what music I liked best, and when I told him my favorite composers were Beethoven and Debussy he smiled and murmured that it was a strange combination. It was, too, and well I knew it. Sister Cecilia said once that it made her understand why I wanted to be both a nun and a newspaper woman.

In a few minutes I was talking to Mr. Drake as easily as I could talk to George Morgan or to my father. He asked who my teachers had been, and I told him all about the convent and my years of study there, and how much better Janet Trelawney played than I did, and how severe Sister Cecilia was with us both, and how much I liked church music. I was so glad to be telling him the truth that I told him a great deal more than I needed to. I told him almost everything there was to tell, except that I was a newspaper reporter. I remembered not to tell him that.

He seemed to like to hear about school and the girls. Several times he laughed, but very kindly, and *with* me, you know, not *at* me. Once he said it had been a long time since any young girl had told him about her school pranks, but he did not sigh over it or look sentimental, as a man would in a book. He merely

mentioned it. We talked and talked. Twice the direct young secretary opened the door and put his head in; but each time he took it out again because nobody seemed to want it to stay there. At last I remembered that Mr. Drake was a busy man, and that his time was worth a thousand dollars a minute, and that I had taken about forty thousand dollars' worth of it already, so I gasped and apologized and got up. I said I had forgotten all about time; and he said he had, too, and that I must sit down again because we hadn't even touched upon our business talk.

So I sat down again, and he looked at me more closely than ever, as if he had noticed how hot and red my face had suddenly got and couldn't understand why it looked that way. Of course he couldn't, either; for I had just remembered that, though I had been a reporter for a whole week, I had forgotten my assignment! It seemed as if I would never learn to be a real newspaper woman. My heart went way down, and I suppose the corners of my mouth did, too; they usually went down at the same time. He asked very kindly what was the matter, and the tone of his voice was beautiful—old and friendly and understanding. I said it was because I was so silly and stupid and young and unbusiness-like. He started to say something and stopped, then sat up and began to talk in a very business-like way. He asked where my money was, and I told him the name of the bank. He looked at his watch and frowned. I didn't know why; but I thought perhaps it was because he wanted me to take it out of there right away and it was too late. It was almost four o'clock. Then he put the tips of his fingers together again, and talked to me the way the cashier at the bank had talked when I put my money in.

He said that the savings-bank was a good place for a girl's money—under ordinary conditions it was the best place. The interest would be small, but sure. Certain investments would, of course, bring higher interest, but no woman should try to invest her money unless she had business training or a very wise, experienced adviser back of her. Then he stopped for a minute, and it seemed hard for him to go on. I did not speak, for I saw that he was thinking something over, and of course I knew better than to interrupt him. At last he said that ordinarily, of course, he never paid any attention to small accounts, but that he liked me very much and wanted to help me and that, if I wished, he would invest my money for me in a way that would bring in a great deal more interest than the savings-bank would pay. And he asked if I understood what he meant.

I said I did—that he was offering to take entirely too much trouble for a stranger, and that he was just as kind as he could be, but that I couldn't think of letting him do it, and I was sure papa wouldn't want me to. He seemed annoyed all of a

sudden, and his manner changed. He asked why I had come if I felt that way, and I began to see how silly it looked to him, for of course he didn't know I was a reporter getting a story on investments for women. I didn't know what to say or what to do about the money, either, for Mr. Hurd hadn't told me how to meet any offer of that kind.

While I was thinking and hesitating Mr. Drake sat still and looked at me queerly; the blue sparks in his eyes actually seemed to shoot out at me. They frightened me a little; and, without stopping to think any more, I said I was very grateful to him and that I would bring the money to his office the next day. Then I stood up and he stood up, too; and I gave him my hand and told him he was the kindest man I had met in New York—and the next minute I was gasping and struggling and pushing him away with all my strength, and he stumbled and went backward into his big chair, knocking over an inkstand full of ink, which crawled to the edge of his desk in little black streams and fell on his gray clothes.

For a minute he sat staring straight ahead of him and let them fall. Then he brushed his hand across his head and picked up the inkstand and soaked up the ink with a blotter, and finally turned and looked at me. I stared back at him as if I were in a nightmare. I was opposite him and against the wall, with my back to it, and for a moment I couldn't move. But now I began to creep toward the door, with my eyes on him. I felt some way that I dared not take them off. As I moved he got up; he was much nearer the door than I was, and, though I sprang for it, he reached it first and stood there quietly, holding the knob in his hand. Neither of us had uttered a sound; but now he spoke, and his voice was very low and steady.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I want to tell you something you need to know. Then you may go." And he added, grimly, "Straighten your hat!"

I put up my hands and straightened it. Still I did not take my eyes off his. His eyes seemed like those of Yawkins and the great snake in my dreams, but as I looked into them they fell.

"For God's sake, child," he said, irritably, "don't look at me as if I were an anaconda! Don't you know it was all a trick?" He came up closer to me and gave me his next words eye to eye and very slowly, as if to force me to listen and believe.

"I did that, Miss Iverson," he said, "to show you what happens to beautiful girls in New York when they go into men's offices asking for advice about money.

Some one had to do it. I thought the lesson might come better from me than from a younger man."

His words came to me from some place far away. A bit of my bit of Greek came, too—something about Homeric laughter. Then next instant I went to pieces and crumpled up in the big chair, and when he tried to help me I wouldn't let him come near me. But little by little, when I could speak, I told him what I thought of him and men like him, and of what I had gone through since I came to New York, and of how he had made me feel degraded and unclean for ever. At first he listened without a word; then he began to ask a few questions.

"So you don't believe me," he said once. "That's too bad. I ought to have thought of that."

He even wrung from me at last the thing that was worst of all—the thing I had not dared to tell Mrs. Hoppen—the thing I had sworn to myself no one should ever know—the deep-down, paralyzing fear that there must be something wrong in me that brought these things upon me, that perhaps I, too, was to blame. That seemed to stir him in a queer fashion. He put out his hand as if to push the idea away.

"No," he said, emphatically. "No, *no*! Never think that." He went on more quietly. "That's not it. It's only that you're a lamb among the wolves."

He seemed to forget me, then to remember me again. "But remember this, child," he went on. "Some men are bad clear through; some are only half bad. Some aren't wolves at all; they'll help to keep you from the others. Don't you get to thinking that every mother's son runs in the pack; and don't forget that it's mighty hard for any of us to believe that you're as unsophisticated as you seem. You'll learn how to handle wolves. That's a woman's primer lesson in life. And in the mean time here's something to comfort you: Though you don't know it, you have a talisman. You've got something in your eyes that will never let them come too close. Now good-by."

It was six o'clock when I got back to the *Searchlight* office. I had gone down to the Battery to let the clean sea-air sweep over me. I had dropped into a little chapel, too, and when I came out the world had righted itself again and I could look my fellow human beings in the eyes. Even Mr. Drake had said my experience was not my fault and that I had a talisman. I knew now what the talisman was.

Mr. Hurd, still bunched over his desk, was drinking a bottle of ginger-ale and eating a sandwich when I entered. Morris, at his desk, was editing copy. The outer pen, where the rest of us sat, was deserted by every one except Gibson, who was so busy that he did not look up.

"Got your story?" asked Hurd, looking straight at me for the third time since I had taken my place on his staff. He spoke with his mouth full. "Hello," he added. "What's the matter with your eyes?"

I sat down by his desk and told him. The sandwich dropped from his fingers. His young-old, dimpled face turned white with anger. He waited without a word until I had finished.

"By God, I'll make him sweat for that!" he hissed. "I'll show him up! The old hypocrite! The whited sepulcher! I'll make this town ring with that story. I'll make it too hot to hold him!"

Morris got up, crossed to us, and stood beside him, looking down at him. The bunches on his jaw-bones were very large.

"What's the use of talking like that, Hurd?" he asked, quietly. "You know perfectly well you won't print that story. You don't dare. And you know that you're as much to blame as Drake is for what's happened. When you sent Miss Iverson out on that assignment you knew just what was coming to her."

Hurd's face went purple. "I didn't," he protested, furiously. "I swear I didn't. I thought she'd be able to get to them because she's so pretty. But that's as far as my mind worked on it." He turned to me. "You believe me, don't you?" he asked, gently. "Please say you do."

I nodded.

"Then it's all right," he said. "And I promise you one thing now: I'll never put you up against a proposition like that again."

He picked up his sandwich and dropped the matter from his mind. Morris stood still a minute longer, started to speak, stopped, and at last brought out what he had to say.

"And you won't think every man you meet is a beast, will you, Miss Iverson?" he asked.

I shook my head. I didn't seem to be able to say much. But it seemed queer that both he and Mr. Drake had said almost the same thing.

"Because," said Morris, "in his heart, you know, every man wants to be decent."

I filed that idea for future reference, as librarians say. Then I asked them the question I had been asking myself for hours. "Do you think Mr. Drake really *was* teaching me a—a terrible lesson?" I stammered.

The two men exchanged a look. Each seemed to wait for the other to speak. It was Gibson who answered me. He had opened the door, and was watching us with no sign of his usual wide and cheerful grin.

"The way you tell it," he said, "it's a toss-up. But I'll tell you how it strikes me. Just to be on the safe side, and whether he lied to you or not, I'd like to give Henry F. Drake the all-firedest licking he ever got in his life."

"You bet," muttered Hurd, through the last mouthful of his sandwich. Mr. Morris didn't say anything, but the bunches on his jaw-bones seemed larger than ever as he turned to his desk.

I looked at them, and in that moment I learned the lesson that follows the primer lesson. At least one thing Mr. Drake had told me was true—all men were not wolves.

III

THE GIRL IN GRAY

Nine typewriters were stuttering over nine news stories; four electric fans were singing their siren songs of coolness; two telephone bells were ringing; one office boy, new to his job, was hurtling through the air on his way to the night city editor's desk, and the night city editor was discharging him because he was not coming faster; the managing editor was "calling down" a copy-reader; the editor-in-chief was telling the foreign editor he wished he could find an intelligent man to take the foreign desk; Mr. Nestor Hurd was swearing at Mr. Godfrey Morris. In other words, it was nearly midnight in the offices of the *Searchlight*.

I was sitting at my desk, feeling very low in my mind. That day, for the first time in my three weeks' experience as a reporter, Mr. Hurd had not given me an assignment. This was neither his fault nor mine. I had written a dozen good stories for him, besides many more that were at least up to the average. My assignments had taken me to all sorts of places strangely unlike the convent from which I had graduated only a month before—morgues, hospitals, police stations, the Tombs, the Chinese quarter—and I had always brought back something, even, as Mr. Gibson had once muttered, if it were merely a few typhoid germs. Mr. Gibson did not approve of sending me to all those places. Only that morning I had heard my chief tell Mr. Morris the Iverson kid was holding down her job so hard that the job was yelling for help. This was a compliment, for Mr. Hurd never joked about any one who worked less than eighteen hours a day.

I knew he hated to see me idle now, even for a few hours, and I did not like it myself. But we both had to bear it, for this had been one of the July days when nothing happened in New York. Individuals were born, and married, and died, and were run over by automobiles, as usual; but, as Mr. Hurd said, "the element of human interest was lacking." At such times the newspapers fill their space with symposiums on "Can a Couple Live on Eight Dollars a Week?" or "Is Suicide a Sin?" Or they have a moral spasm over some play and send the police

to suppress it. The night before Mr. Hurd had sent Gibson, his star reporter, with a police inspector, to see a play he hoped the *Searchlight* could have a moral spasm over. Mr. Gibson reported that the police inspector had left the theater wiping his eyes and saying he meant to look after his daughters better hereafter; so the *Searchlight* could not have a spasm that time, and Mr. Hurd swore for five minutes without repeating once. He was wonderful that way, but not so gifted as Col. John Cartwell, the editor-in-chief, who used to check himself between the syllables of his words to drop little oaths in. Such conversation was new and terrible to me. I had never heard any one swear before, and at first it deeply offended me. I thought a convent girl should not hear such things, especially a girl who intended to be a nun when she was twenty-one. But after a week or two I discovered that the editors never meant anything by their rude words; they were merely part of their breath.

To kill time that evening I wrote a letter to my mother—the first long one I had sent her since I left my Western home. I wrote it on one side of my copy paper, underlining my "u's" and overlining my "n's," and putting little circles around all my periods, to show the family I was a real newspaper woman at last. When I finished the letter I put it in an office envelope with a picture of the *Searchlight* building on the outside, and began to think of going home. But I did not feel happy. I realized by this time that in newspaper work what one did yesterday does not matter at all; it is what one does to-day that counts. In the convent we could bask for a fortnight in the afterglow of a good recitation, and the memory of a brilliant essay would abide, as it were, for months. But full well I knew that if I gave Mr. Hurd the biggest "story" of the week on Thursday, and did nothing on Friday, he would go to bed Friday night with hurt, grieved feelings in his heart. This was Friday.

However, there was no sense in waiting round the office any longer, so I put on my hat and left the *Searchlight* building, walking across City Hall Park to Broadway, where I took an open car up-town. I was getting used to being out alone late at night; but I had not ceased to feel an exultant thrill whenever I realized that I, May Iverson, just out of the convent and only eighteen, was actually part of the night life of great, wonderful, mysterious New York. Almost every man and woman I saw interested me because of the story I knew was hidden in each human heart; so to-night, as usual, I studied closely those around me. But my three fellow-passengers did not look as if they had any stories in them. They were merely tired, sleepy, perspiring men going home after a day of hard work. I envied them. I had not done a day's work, and I felt that I hardly

deserved to rest. This thought was still in my mind when I left the car at Twenty-fifth Street and walked across Madison Square toward the house where I had rooms.

It was after midnight and very hot. The benches in the park still held many men—most of them the kind that stay there because they have no place else to go. There were a dozen tramps, some stretched at full length and sound asleep, others talking together. There were men out of work, trying to read the newspaper advertisements by the electric light from the globes far above them. Over the park hung a yellow mist that looked like fog but was merely heat, and from every side came the deep mutter of a great city on a summer night. The men around me were the types I had seen every time I crossed the Square, and, though I was always sorry for them, they no longer made me feel sick with sympathy, as they did at first.

But on a bench a little apart from the rest sat a girl who interested me at once. I noticed her first because she was young and alone, and then because she seemed to be in trouble. She was drooping forward in her seat, with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, staring hard at a spot on the ground in front of her. I could not see what it was. It looked like an ordinary brown stain. I usually walked very fast when I was alone at night, but now I slackened my pace and strolled toward the girl as slowly as I dared, studying her as I went. I could not see much of her face, which was in the hollow of her joined hands, but the way she was sitting—all bunched up—showed me that she was sick or discouraged, or both. She wore a gray dress with a very narrow skirt, and a wide, plain lace collar on the jacket. The suit had a discouraged air, as if it had started out to be smart and knew it had failed. Her hat was a cheap straw with a quill on it that had once been stiff but was now limp as an unstarched collar, and the coil of hair under it was neat and brown and wavy. Her plain lingerie blouse was cut low at the neck and fastened with a big black bow, and when I was closer to her I saw that both her shoes were broken at the sides. Altogether, she looked very sick and very poor, and when she changed her position a little to glance at a man who was passing, something about her profile made me think of one of my classmates at St. Catharine's.

I had tried to pass her, but now my feet would not take me. It was simply impossible to ignore a girl who looked like Janet Trelawney and who seemed to be in trouble. I saw when I got nearer that she was not Janet, but she might have been—and, anyway, she was a young girl like myself. We were taught at the convent that to intrude on another person's grief, uninvited, is worse than to

intrude at any other time. Mere sympathy does not excuse it. But this looked like a special case, for there was no one else around to do anything for the girl in gray if she needed help. However, I did not speak to her at once. I merely sat down on the bench beside her and waited to see if she would speak to me.

She raised her head the minute she felt me there, and sat up and stared at me with eyes that were big and dark and had a queer, desperate expression in them. It seemed to startle her to know that some one was so near her, but after she had looked at me her surprise changed to annoyance, and she moved as if she meant to get up and go away. That full glance at her had shown me what she was like. She was not pretty. Her face was dreadfully pale, her nose was ordinary in shape, and her firmly set, thin lips made her mouth look like a straight line. I did not see how I could have thought of Janet Trelawney in connection with her. However, I felt that I could not drive her away from her seat, so I stopped her and begged her pardon and asked if she was ill or had hurt herself in any way, and if I could help her.

At first she did not answer me. She merely sat still and looked me over slowly, as if she were trying to make up her mind about me. The longer she looked the more puzzled she seemed to be. It had been raining when I left home in the morning, so I had on a mackintosh and a little soft rainy-day hat. I knew I did not look impressive, and it was plain that the girl in gray did not think much of me. At last she asked what I wanted, and her voice sounded hard and indifferent—even rude. I was disappointed in that, too, as well as in her face. It would have been more interesting, of course, to help a refined, educated girl. There was no doubt, however, that she needed help of some kind, so I merely repeated in different words what I had said to her at first. She laughed then—a laugh I did not like at all—and stared at me again in her queer way, as if she could not make me out. She seemed to be more puzzled over me than I was over her.

She kept on staring at me a long time with her singular eyes, that had dark circles under them. At last she asked me if I was a "society agent" or anything of that sort, and when I said I was not she asked how I happened to be out so late, and what I was doing. Her voice was as queer as her eyes—low and husky. I did not like her manner. It almost seemed as if she thought I had no right to be there, so I told her rather coldly that I was a reporter on the *Searchlight* and that I was on my way home from the office. As soon as I said that her whole manner changed. I have noticed this quick change in others when they hear that I am a newspaper woman. Some are pleased and some are not, but few remain cold and detached. The girl in gray actually looked relieved about something. She laughed

again, a husky, throaty laugh that sounded, however, much nicer and more human than before, and gave me a good-natured little push.

"Oh," she said, "all right. Better beat it now. So-long." And she waved me away as if she owned the park bench. I hesitated. I was sorry now that I had stopped, and I wanted to go; but it seemed impossible to leave her there. I sat still for a moment, thinking it over, and suddenly she leaned toward me and advised me very earnestly not to linger till the roundsman came to take my pedigree. She said he was letting her alone because he knew she was only out of the hospital two days and up against it, but the healthy thing for me was to move on while the walking was good.

I was sorry she used so much slang, but of course the fact that she was unrefined and uneducated made her situation harder, and demanded even more sympathy from those better off. What she had said about the hospital and being "up against it" proved that I had done right to stop.

I told her I was going home in a few minutes, but that I wanted to talk to her first if she did not mind, and that there was no reason why I could not sit in the park if she could. She looked at me and laughed again as if I had made a joke, and the laugh brought on an attack of coughing which kept her busy for a full minute. When she had stopped I pointed out my home to her. It was on the opposite side of the Square, but we could see it quite plainly from where we sat. We could even see the windows of my rooms, which faced the park. The girl in gray looked up at them a long time.

"Gee!" she said, "you're lucky. Think of havin' a joint to fall into, and not knowin' enough to go to it when you got a chance." She added, "It wouldn't take me long to hop there if I owned the latch-key."

I asked her where she lived, and she laughed again and swung one knee over the other as we were taught in the convent not to do, and muttered that her present address was Madison Square Park, but she hoped it would not be permanent. Then she got up and said, "So-long," and started to go. I got up, too, and caught her arm. Her last words had simply thrilled me. I had read about girls being sick and out of work and being dismissed from the hospital with no money and no place to go to. But to read of them in books is one thing, and to see one with your own eyes, to have one actually beside you, is another thing—and very different. My heart swelled till it hurt; so did my throat. The girl shook off my hand.

"Say," she said, and her voice was rude and cross again—"say, kid, what's the matter with you? You ain't got nothin' on me. Beat it, will you, or let me beat it. I can't set here and chin."

I held her arm. I knew what was the matter. She was too proud to ask for help. I knew another thing, too. There was a story in her, the story of what happens to the penniless girl in New York; and I could get it from her and write it and put the matter on a business basis that would mean as much to her as to me. Then I would have my story, the story I had not got to-day, and she would have a room and shelter, for of course I would give her some money in advance. My mind worked like lightning. I saw exactly how the thing could be done.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Forgive me—but you're hungry, aren't you?"

She stared at me again with that queer look of hers. Then she answered with simple truth. "You bet I am," she muttered.

"Very well," I said, and I put all the will-power I had in my voice. "Come with me and get something to eat. Then tell me what has happened to you. Perhaps I can make a newspaper story of it. If I can, we'll divide the space rates."

The girl in gray hung back. I could see that she wanted to go with me, but that for some reason she was afraid.

"Say," she said at last, "you're kidding ain't you? You don't look like a reporter nor act like one. Honest, you got me guessin'."

I did not like that very much, but I could not blame her. I knew it required more than three weeks to make one look like a real newspaper woman. I opened my hand-bag and took out one of the new cards I had had engraved, with *The New York Searchlight* down in the left-hand corner. It looked beautiful. I could see that at last the girl in gray was impressed. She stood with the card in her hand, staring down at it and thinking. Finally she shrugged her shoulders and clapped me on the back with a force that hurt me.

"Al-l-l *right*!" she said, drawling out the first word and shooting the second at me like a bullet from a pistol. "I got the goods. I'm just out of Bellevue. I'll give you a spiel about the way those guys treated me. I'll tell you about the House of Detention, too, and the judges and the police. Oh, I got a story, all right, all right. I'll give it to you straight."

She was pulling me along the street as she talked. She seemed to be in a great

hurry all of a sudden, and in good spirits, but I realized how weak she was when I saw that even to walk half a block made her breath come in little gasps.

"It's the eats first, ain't it?" she asked; and I told her it certainly was. Then I asked her where we were going, for it was clear that she was headed for some definite place.

"Owl-wagon," she told me, and saved her breath for the walk. I said we would take a car, but she pointed to the "owl-wagon" standing against the curb only a square away. The sight of it seemed to give her fresh strength. She made for it like a carrier-pigeon going home. When we reached it she sat down on the curbstone and nodded affably to the man inside the wagon. He nodded back at her and then came through the door and down the wagon steps to stare at me.

"Hello," he said to the girl in gray. "Heard you was sick. Glad to see you round again. What'll you eat?"

She did not waste breath on him, but made a gesture toward me. For a moment I think she could not speak.

"Give her a large glass of milk first," I told the man—"not too cold." When I handed it to her I advised her to drink it slowly, but she did not. It vanished in one long gulp. While the man was filling another glass for her I asked her what she wanted for supper. Eating at the "owl" was a new experience to me. I began to enjoy it, and to examine the different kinds of food that stood on the little shelves around the sides of the wagon. The girl in gray looked at me over the rim of her glass.

"What'll you stand for?" she asked.

I laughed and told her to choose for herself; she could have everything in the wagon if she wanted it. Before the words were past my lips she was on the top step, selecting sandwiches and pie and ordering the man around as if she owned the outfit. She took three sandwiches, one of every kind he had, and two pieces of pie, and some doughnuts. When she had all she wanted she got down from the wagon and backed carefully to the curb, balancing the food in her hands. Then she sat down again and smiled at me for the first time. Something about that smile made me want to cry; but she seemed almost happy.

"Ain't this a bit of all right?" she asked, with her mouth full. She told the proprietor that his pies had less sawdust in them than last year and that he must

have put some real lemon in one of them by mistake. While they talked I continued to inspect the inside of the wagon, but I heard the owl-man ask her a question in a whisper that must have reached across the street. "Say, Mollie, who's your friend?" he wanted to know.

The girl in gray told him it was none of his business. Her speech sounded strangely like that of Mr. Hurd. There were several of his favorite words in it. I sighed. She was a dreadfully disappointing girl, but she had been starving, and I had only to look at her face and her poor torn shoes to feel sympathy surge up in me again. When she was finishing her last piece of pie she beckoned to me to come and sit beside her on the curb.

"Now for the spiel," she said, and her husky voice sounded actually gay. "You got the key. Wind me up. I'll run 's long's I can."

I looked around. The street was deserted except for two men who stood beside the owl-wagon munching sandwiches. They stared hard at us, but did not come near us. There was a light in the wagon, too, by which I might have made some notes. But I did not want to get my story at one o'clock in the morning out on a public avenue. I wanted a room and a reading-lamp and chairs and a table. Six months later I could write any story on the side of a steam-engine while the engine was in motion, but this was not then. Besides, while the girl was eating I had had an inspiration. I asked her if she had really meant what she said about having no place to go but the park; and when she answered that she had, I asked her where she would have gone that night if I had not come along. She looked at me, hesitated a moment, and then turned sulky.

"Aw, what's the use?" she said. "Get busy. Do I give you the story, or don't I?"

I told her she did. Then I produced my inspiration. "Aren't there homes for the friendless," I asked her, "where girls are taken in for a night when they have no money?"

The girl in gray said there were, and sat eyeing me with her lower jaw lax and a weary, discouraged air.

"All right," I said, briskly; "let's go to one."

It took her a long time to understand what I meant. I had to explain over and over that I wanted to go with her and see exactly how girls were received and treated in such places and what sort of rooms and food they got, and that I must

play the part of a penniless and friendless girl myself to get the facts; for of course if the people in the "refuge" knew I was a reporter everything would be colored for me. At last my companion seemed to grasp my meaning. She got up, wabbling a little on her weak knees, and started toward Twenty-third Street.

"Come on, then," she muttered, and added something about a "funeral" and some one being "crazy." She said the place we were going to was on First Avenue, not very far away, but I stopped a car and made her get into it. As we rode across town she told me the little she knew about the refuge. She said girls who went there paid a few cents for their rooms if they had money, but if not they were sometimes taken in without charge. She said breakfast was five cents and dinner ten or more, according to what one ate. The house closed at midnight, and she was afraid we could not get in; but she had been there twice before, and the matron knew she was sick, so perhaps she would admit us. I was to be Kittie Smith, a friend of hers from Denver.

I did not like the appearance of the place very much when we finally reached it. It was like a prison, I thought, and its black windows seemed to glower at us menacingly as we looked at them. We climbed the worn steps that led to the front door; there were only a few of them, but I had to help the girl in gray. When we reached the last one, she rang the bell labeled "Night bell." Beside it a brass sign that needed polishing told us the institution was a "Home for Friendless Girls." We could hear the bell jangling feebly far inside the house, as if it hung at the end of a loose wire, but for a long time no one answered it. The girl in gray sat down on the top step while I rang the bell again. Then at last steps came along the hall, the door opened an inch, and an old woman peered out at us. We could see nothing of her but her eyes and a bit of white hair. The eyes looked very cross, and the old woman's voice matched them when she spoke to us. She asked what we wanted and explained in the same breath that the house was closed and that it was too late to get in. The girl in gray leaned back against the door so the old woman could not close it, and said in a faint voice that she was sick.

"You remember me, Mrs. Catlin," she added, coaxingly. "Sure you do. I'm Mollie Clark. I been here before."

Mrs. Catlin opened the door another inch, grudgingly, and surveyed Mollie Clark.

"Humph!" she said. "It's you again, is it?"

She hesitated a moment and again looked Mollie Clark over. Then she flung the door wide without a word and let us into a long hall with a bare floor, whitewashed walls, and a flight of stairs at the end of it. A gas-light, turned very low, burned at the rear, and the whole house smelled of carbolic acid. It seemed to me that no girl's situation anywhere could be as forlorn as that place looked. The old woman picked up a candle which stood on a table near the door and lit it at the solitary gas-jet. Then she motioned to us to follow her and started rheumatically up-stairs, grumbling under her breath all the way. She said it was against the rules to let us in at that hour, and she didn't know what the superintendent would say in the morning, and that there was only one room empty, anyhow, and we would have to be content with it. She led us up three flights of stairs and into a little hall-room at the front of the house. It had one window, which was open. Its furniture was a small bed, a wash-stand with a white bowl and pitcher, one towel, a table, and two chairs. My eyes must have lit up when they saw the table. That was what I wanted, and I did not care much about anything else.

Mrs. Catlin set the candle down on the table, whispered something about taking our "records" in the morning, warned us not to talk and disturb others, and went away without saying good night. The minute the door closed behind her I sat down at the table and got out my pencil and a fat note-book. I did not even stop to take off my hat, but Mollie Clark removed hers and threw it in a corner. Her hair, as I had suspected, was very pretty—soft and brown and wavy. She came and sat down opposite me at the table and waited for me to begin.

At first when we got into the room I had felt rather queer—almost nervous. But the minute I had my pencil in my hand and saw my note-book open before me I forgot the place we were in and was comfortable and happy. I smiled at Mollie Clark and told her to tell me all about herself—the whole story of her life, so that I could use as much or as little of it as I wanted to. Of course, she did not know how to begin. People never do. She rested her elbows on the table and her chin on her hands, which seemed to be her favorite attitude, and sat quite still, thinking. To help her I asked a few questions. That started her, and at last she grew interested and more at ease and began to talk.

I will admit right here that before fifteen minutes had passed I was in an abyss of black despair. Someway I simply could not get hold of that story, and when I did begin to get hold of it I was frightened. It was not because she used so much slang. I understood that, or most of it. But some of the things she said I did not understand at all, and when I showed I did not, or asked her what they meant,

she was not able to explain them. She put them in a different way, but I did not get them that way, either; and she looked so surprised at first, and so discouraged herself toward the end, that at last I stopped asking her questions and simply wrote down what she told me, whether I knew what it meant or not. After a time I began to feel as if some one in a strange world was talking to me in an unknown tongue—which little by little I began to comprehend. It seemed a horrible sort of world, and the words suggested unspeakable things. Once or twice I felt sick and giddy—as if something awful was coming toward me in a dark room and would soon take hold of me. Occasionally the girl leaned across the table to look at my notes and see what I was putting down, and I kept pushing my chair farther and farther away from her. I hoped it would not hurt her feelings, but I could not endure her near me.

For five minutes the story went beautifully. She had run away from home when she was only sixteen—three years before; and the home had been a farm, just as it is in books. She had gone to Denver—the farm was thirty miles from Denver, but not large enough to be a ranch—and she had worked for a while in a big shop and afterward in an office. She had never learned typewriting or shorthand or expert filing, nor anything of that kind, so she folded circulars and addressed envelopes, and got five dollars a week for doing it. She said it was impossible to live on five dollars a week, and that this was the beginning of all her trouble.

After that she talked about her life in Chicago and Detroit and Buffalo and Boston and New York, and about men who had helped her and women who had robbed her, and police graft, and a great many things I had never even heard of.

For a long time I wrote as fast as my hand could write. My head seemed to be spinning round on my shoulders. I felt queerer and queerer, and more and more certain I was in a nightmare; the worst part of the nightmare was the steady husky whisper of the girl's voice—for of course she had to whisper. At moments it seemed like the hissing of a snake, and the girl looked like a snake, too, with her set straight mouth and her strange, brilliant eyes. At last, after a long time, I stopped writing and leaned back in my chair and looked at her. At the same time she stopped talking and looked back at me, and for a minute neither of us spoke. Then she bunched forward in her chair and sat staring at the floor, exactly the way she had done in the park.

"It's no go," she said, in a queer, flat voice. "You ain't gettin' it, are you?"

For a moment I did not answer her. It seemed someway that I could not. I saw by

her face how she felt—sick with disappointment. She muttered some words to herself. They sounded like unpleasant words; I was glad I did not hear them clearly. She had counted on her share of the space rates for my story. She sat still for quite a long time. Once or twice she looked at me as if she did not understand why I was allowed to encumber the earth when I was so stupid. Then she shrugged her shoulders, and finally she smiled at me in a sick kind of way. I suppose she remembered that, after all, I had given her a supper. At last she rose and picked up her hat and put it on.

"I'll blow out of here," she said. "Sorry you're out a meal for nothin'."

She turned to go, and I felt more emotions in that moment than I had ever felt before. There were dozens of them, but confusion and horror and pity seemed to be the principal ones. I asked her to wait a minute, and I went to my hand-bag and took out my purse. There was not very much in it. I had been paid on Saturday, and this was Friday, so of course I had spent most of my money. But there were six dollars left, and I gave her five of them.

"What for?" she asked, and stared at me as she had done in the park.

"For the story," I said. "On account. I'll give you the rest when it's printed."

She took the bill and stood still, looking down at it as it lay in her hand. Then suddenly she threw it on the floor.

"Aw, say," she muttered, "what's the use? It's like takin' candy from a kid. You'll need that money," she added, touching the bill with the toe of her ragged shoe as she spoke. "You'll sure need it to get back where you come from. You didn't get that story. You didn't get a word of it."

The look of the ragged shoe as she put it out and pushed the money away, and the look on her face as she spoke, made my heart turn over with pity for her. I picked up my note-book and held it toward her.

"Didn't I get it?" I asked. "Look at this."

She took the note-book and turned the pages, at first slowly and without hope, then with interest. Finally, without raising her eyes, she sat down by the flickering candle and read them all. While she read I watched her, and as I looked I realized that there was another Watcher in the little room with us—one who stood close beside her, waiting, and who would wait only a few weeks. I knew now what her cough meant, and her husky voice, and the stain in the park,

and the red spots that came and went on her thin cheeks.

When she had finished reading the notes she laid down the book and smiled at me. "Kiddin' me again, wasn't you?" she said, quietly. "You got it all here, ain't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I've got the story."

"Sure you have," she corroborated. "That Bellevue stuff's great. And take it from me, your editor will eat up the story about Holohan, with the names *an'* the dates *an'* the places. Here's six girls will swear to what I told you. And Miss Bates, the probation officer, she'll stand for it, too. I'd have give it to a paper long ago if I'd known who to go to."

An attack of coughing stopped her words. After it she leaned against the table for a moment, exhausted. Then she bent and picked up the bill from the floor. Last of all she took my pencil out of my hand, wrote a name and address in my note-book, and laid the book back on the table.

"Me for the outer darkness," she said. "That's where I'll be. I'll stay in till four to-morrow afternoon, if your editor wants anything else."

She hesitated a moment, as if struggling with words that wouldn't come. "Thanks for the banquet," she got out, at last. "So-long."

I looked straight into her strange eyes. There were many things I wanted to say to her, but I didn't know how. I felt younger than I had ever felt before, and ignorant and tongue-tied.

"You stay here," I said. "I'll go home."

The girl's eyes looked big and round as she stared at me. She held up the five-dollar bill in her hand.

"Stay here," she gasped, "when I got money to go somewhere else? D'ye think I'm crazy? *You* got to stay an' get the rest of yer story. *I* ain't! See?"

I saw.

"You'll go right to that address," I asked, "and rest?"

"Sure I will," she told me, cheerfully.

"I'll bring your half of the money to you as soon as I get it," I ended. "Probably

in two or three days. And I'm going to send a doctor to see you to-morrow."

She was on her way to the door as I spoke, but she stopped and looked back at me. "Say, kid," she said, "take my advice. Don't bring the money. *Send* it. Get me?"

I nodded. The door closed very softly behind her. I heard the old stairs creak once or twice as she crept down them. Then I went to the open window and leaned out. She was leaving the house, and I watched her until she turned into a side street. She walked very slowly, looking to the right and to the left and behind her, as if she felt afraid.

Two mornings later when I entered the city room of the *Searchlight* Mr. Gibson rose and bowed low before me. Then he backed away, still bowing, and beckoning to me at the same time. His actions were mysterious, but I followed him across the room, and several reporters rose from their desks and followed us both. Near the city editor's desk Mr. Gibson stopped, made another salaam, and pointed impressively to the wall. Tacked on it very conspicuously was a "model story" of the day—the sort of thing the city editor occasionally clipped from the *Searchlight* or some other newspaper and hung there as "an inspiration to the staff." We were always interested in his "model stories," for they were always good; I had read some of them till I knew them by heart. But this particular morning it was *my* story which was tacked there—my story of the girl in gray!

For a full minute I could not speak. I merely stood and stared while the reporters congratulated me and joked around me. While I was still trying to take in the stupendous fact that the "model story of the day" was really mine the city editor, Mr. Farrell, came and stood beside me. He was a fat man, with a face like a sad full moon, but he was smiling now.

"Nice story," he said, kindly. "But don't get a swelled head over it. You'll probably write a rotten one to-morrow."

I nodded. Full well I knew I probably would.

"Besides," continued Mr. Farrell, "the best thing in your story was the tip it gave us for Gibson's big beat. That was a cub reporter's luck. Thanks to it, we've got Holohan with the goods on. If you listen you'll hear him squeal. And oh, by the way," he added, as he was turning back to his desk, "we have a dozen messages already from people who want to give care and nursing and country homes to your 'girl in gray.'"

I was glad of that. Also I was interested in something else, and I mentioned it to Mr. Farrell. I told him I had felt sure my story was spoiled because I had left so much out of it. The city editor looked at me, and then jerked his head toward the story on the wall.

"It's what you left out of it," he said, "that makes that a model story."

IV

IN GAY BOHEMIA

The office door opened with a rush and shut with a bang. In the little whirlwind caused by the draught it made, the papers on our desks rose, swirled in the air, and played tag upon the floor. Everybody but me stopped work and glanced up to nod or frown at the woman who had come in. I did not stop. I knew too well who it was. There was only one person on the *Searchlight* whose entrance caused that sort of commotion. Besides, I had heard the whisper of silk petticoats, and smelled the strong odor of *peau d'Espagne* which always preceded Miss Mollie Merk to her desk.

Mollie Merk was Mr. Hurd's most sensational woman reporter—the one who went up in air-ships and described her sensations, or purposely fell in front of trolley-cars to prove that the fenders would not work. She was what she herself called a "breezy writer," but her breeziness did not exhaust itself in her literature. She was a breezy person generally—small and thin and dark, and so full of vitality that she always arrived anywhere as if she had been projected by some violent mechanical force. She spoke very rapidly, in short explosive sentences. She openly despised the young and made epigrams about them to show her scorn. Before I had been on the *Searchlight* a week she announced that I would be endurable if I had a redeeming vice; and our fellow-reporters went around quoting that remark and grinning over it. After I had written a few "big stories" her manner changed to one of open wonder, and she began to call me "the convent kid" and give me advice, addressing me as if I were an infant class. When she was in the same room with me I felt that she was mentally patting my head. I appreciated her kind heart and her value to the *Searchlight*; but I did not really like Mollie Merk.

Usually when she catapulted into the office she exchanged a few shouts of greeting with "the boys" and then went directly to her desk, where she dropped into her chair like a bag of ballast from a balloon, and began to write with a pen that scratched louder than any other. But to-night she followed the *peau*

d'Espagne across the room to me and clapped her hand on my shoulder.

"'Lo, Iverson," she said, in her loud and breathless way. "Still on the job? 'Can' it. I'm your vesper-bell."

I felt myself instinctively drop away from her hand. In her greeting she had done two things I particularly disliked. She had called me "Iverson"—it was a vulgar habit of hers to address other women by their last names—and she had spoken of something connected with my convent life, which was too sacred to be joked about. Still, I knew she meant well. I looked up at her and tried to smile, but all I could do was to drag one side of my mouth down to my chin in humble imitation of Mr. Hurd when he is talking to a member of the staff. Mollie Merk seemed to appreciate it. She roared, and her hand clapped my shoulder again.

"Cheer up, Iverson," she said. "Worst's yet to come." And she added, all in one breath, "I'm-going-to-give-a-party-for-you!"

I dropped my pen and turned in my chair to stare at her.

"Been meaning to do it right along," she jerked out. "Couldn't pull it off. To-night's my chance. Nothing to do. Fell down on my story. Hurrah! Give you a Bohemian dinner. Show you life outside the cloister. Purple pasts. Crimson presents. All the rest of it. Make your hair curl and your eyes stick out. Come on!"

Her words gave me a thrill, on which I immediately put down the stern brake of conscience. As a student of life I wanted to see and learn all I could—especially as I intended to be a nun in three years and would have no further chances. But was I justified in deliberately turning aside to seek such knowledge, when in the broad path of my daily duty I was already acquiring more than one person could understand? Also, would it be right to accept Mollie Merk's hospitality when I did not approve of her? I decided that it would not; and I tried to think of some polite and gracious way of declining her invitation, but the right words did not come. I had no social engagements, for I was still a stranger in New York, and Mollie Merk knew it; and I had not learned to tell lies with unstudied ease.

Finally an inspiration came to me. I could make an engagement and then keep it. I thanked Miss Merk and told her I intended to dine with my classmates Maudie Joyce and Kittie James. They had come to New York the day before with Kittie's sister, Mrs. George Morgan; and as they were only to stay a week, I felt that I must see all I could of them. As a matter of fact, I had dined with them the

previous night, but that did not matter. I knew they would be glad to see me, even two nights in succession.

Mollie Merk was interested as soon as I spoke of them. "Classmates?" she yelped. "Two more convent kids?"

I admitted coldly that Maudie and Kittie had been graduated with me from St. Catharine's the month before.

"All right," said Mollie Merk. "Have 'em with us. Great. More convent kids the merrier. Invite their chaperon, too. I'll get Mrs. Hoppen. Hen-party of six."

I hesitated. Mrs. George Morgan would hardly approve of Mollie Merk, but she would find her a new type. Mrs. Morgan liked new types and strange experiences, and had seen many of them, for her husband was a wealthy Chicago man who wrote plays. Moreover, Mrs. Hoppen would be with us, and Mrs. Morgan would surely like her. Mrs. Hoppen was the city editor's star woman reporter, and very old—older even than Mollie Merk, who was at least twenty-five. Mrs. Hoppen, I had heard, was over thirty. She was rather bitter and blasé at times, but usually she had charming manners. I told Miss Merk I would get Mrs. Morgan on the telephone and ask if she and the girls could come, and within five minutes I was in the *Searchlight's* telephone-booth calling up her hotel.

It was Maudie Joyce who answered, and she uttered a cry of joy when I told her of Mollie Merk's invitation. She said Mrs. Morgan had gone to bed with a sick-headache, and that she and Kittie James had been just about sick, too, over the prospect of a whole evening shut up alone in hotel rooms when so much Life was going to waste in the outer world. Then she turned from the telephone and repeated Mollie's message. I observed that she did not say anything about the dinner being Bohemian and making our eyes stick out, though I had faithfully repeated our hostess's words. Almost immediately her voice, breathless with joy, came over the wire again, telling me that she and Kittie could dine with us, and that Mrs. Morgan was very grateful to Miss Merk for saving her young friends from a lonely evening.

The girls were waiting when we three reached the hotel, and my heart swelled with pride as I introduced them. Mrs. Hoppen and Mollie Merk and I were, of course, in our office clothes, as we had not gone home to dress; but Kittie and Maudie were beautifully gowned for the evening. They were both as charming as Helleu drawings, and in the same exquisitely finished way; and their manners were so perfect that I could almost hear Mollie Merk trying to climb up to them.

By the time the five of us had crowded into the taxi-cab, with the little bustle and confusion the effort caused, everybody liked everybody else. Maudie and Kittie were very proud of being with three newspaper women, and showed it; and they were so fascinated by Mollie Merk that they could not keep their eyes off her.

Of course, too, they were quivering with delight over the throngs, the noise, the brilliant electric signs, the excitement on every side, and the feeling that they were in the midst of it. Even I, though I had been in New York for a whole month and was a reporter at that, felt an occasional thrill. But as I leaned back and watched the faces of my two friends, I realized that, though we three were about the same age, in experience I was already a thousand years in advance of them. So many things had happened in the past month—things we girls at St. Catharine's had never heard of—things I could not even mention to Kittie and Maudie. I felt that I had lost a great deal which they still retained, and I expected a deep sadness to settle upon my soul. But someway it did not.

The cab stopped at a restaurant ornamented by a huge electric sign, and we got out and walked into a marble-lined vestibule. Mollie Merk and Mrs. Hoppen led the way, and I followed them with an easy, accustomed step. To dine at a great New York restaurant was just as novel to me as it was to Maudie and Kittie, but they did not know this, and I sincerely hoped they would not find it out.

A maid took our wraps in the anteroom, and sent us in single file along a narrow hall to enter a huge room at the end of it, ablaze with electric light, and full of smoke and music and little tables with people sitting at them. All the tables were clustered close together around the four sides of the room, leaving a big square space in the center, roped off by a heavy red cord. It was empty, and I wondered what it was for. Above there was a balcony with more tables and people at them. There was laughter everywhere, some of it quite loud, and many voices were speaking in many tongues. Above it all the band at the head of the room poured forth gay music. I could hear Maudie and Kittie draw quick breaths of delight, and my own feet hardly touched the ground as we followed the head waiter to the table reserved for us.

There were bottles and glasses on most of the tables, and even the women were helping to empty them. But I knew that many good people drink wine in moderation, so I was not greatly shocked. After all, this was New York—Bohemia, a new world. We were in it, and I at least was of it. The reflection sent a thrill down my spine—the kind that goes all the way. I felt almost wicked, and strangely happy.

When we were seated at our table Mollie Merk asked if we would have cocktails. She spoke with a very casual air, and we tried to decline in the same manner, though I am sure that Maudie and Kittie felt their hair rise then and there. Even my own scalp prickled. I explained in an offhand way that we never drank anything but water, so Mollie Merk ordered some Apollinaris for us, and two cocktails "with a dash of absinthe in them" for Mrs. Hoppen and herself. For five minutes afterward Kittie and Maudie and I did not speak. We were stunned by the mere sound of that fatal word.

Mollie Merk seemed to understand our emotions, for she began to tell us about her first experience with absinthe, years ago, in Paris, when she drank a large gobletful as if it had been a glass of lemonade. She said it was the amount a Frenchman would spend an entire afternoon over, sipping it a few drops at a time at a little sidewalk table in front of some cafe; but that she gulped it down in a few swallows, and then had just enough intelligence left to get into a cab and tell the *cocher* to drive her around for three hours. She said she had ordered the man to keep to the Boulevards, but that he had taken her through the Milky Way and to the places where the morning stars sang together, and that she had distinctly heard them sing. Afterward, she added, she had traveled for centuries through space, visiting the most important objects in the universe and admiring color effects, for everything was pulsing with purple and gold and amethyst lights.

As a student of Life I admired the unerring instinct with which Mollie Merk had chosen her subject when she started in to make our eyes stick out. But if this was the beginning, what would be the end? At last Maudie Joyce, who had always had the manner of a woman of the world, even when she was a school-girl, pulled herself together and asked smilingly if Miss Merk's cocktail had swept her into space this time. Mollie Merk sighed and said, alas, no; those were the joys of yesteryear, and that the most a cocktail could do for her at present was to make her forget her depression after she had received a letter from home. Then a calcium light blazed from above, making a brilliant circle on the floor inside the red ropes. The musicians struck into wild Oriental music, and two mulattoes came into the limelight and began to dance.

They were a man and a woman, very young, and in evening dress. They padded into the ring like two black panthers, the woman first, circling slowly around in time to the music, which was soft and rather monotonous, and the man revolving slowly after her. At first she seemed not to see him, but to be dancing by herself, for the love of it, and there was beauty in every movement she made. I forgot all about the dinner, the people, my friends and my hostess, and leaned forward,

watching.

Suddenly she looked over her shoulder and discovered the man. She quickened her steps a little, and the musicians played faster, while she circled in and out, as if through the tangled growths of some dense jungle. I could almost see it springing up around her and hear the sound of animals moving near her—wild things like herself. She was very sure of herself as she writhed and twisted, and she had reason to be; for, however fast the man came toward her, she was always a little in advance of him. The music swelled into a sudden crash of sound as he gave a leap and caught her. But she dipped and slipped out of his hands and whirled away again, sometimes crouching close to the ground, sometimes revolving around him with a mocking smile. Once, as he leaped, she bent and let him go over her; again he caught her, but a second time she slipped away.

At last the violins sent forth only a queer, muted, barbaric hum, broken by a crash of cymbals as the man made his final spring and captured the woman, this time holding her fast. There was a delirious whirl of sound and motion while he held her up and performed a kind of jungle *pas seule* before he carried her away. The music grew slower and slower and finally stopped; but for an instant or two after the dancers had disappeared it seemed to me that I could still see the man bearing his burden steadily through strange tropical growths and under trees whose poisonous branches caught at him as he passed.

I turned and looked at Maudie and Kittie. They were sitting very still, with their eyes fixed on the spot where the dancers had been. I knew what they were thinking, and they knew I knew; but when they caught my glance they both began to speak at once, and eagerly, as if to reassure me. Maudie said the woman's clothes were in excellent taste, and Kittie murmured that such violent exercise must be very reducing. Kittie is extremely plump, and she loves good food so much that she is growing plumper all the time. In her interest in the dance she had forgotten her dinner, and now the waiter was taking away a portion of salmon with a delicious green sauce before she had eaten even a mouthful of it. That agonizing sight immediately diverted Kittie's mind, and I was glad.

Mollie Merk met my startled eyes and grinned. "Cheer up, Iverson!" she exclaimed. "Worst's yet to come, you know."

I managed to smile back at her. This was Life, and we were seeing it, but I began to feel that we had seen enough for an evening. I tried to remind myself again

that we were in Bohemia, but under the look in Maudie's eyes I felt my face grow hot. It was I who had brought her and Kittie here—I and my new friends. What would Sister Irmingarde think of me if she knew?

I had little time for such mournful reflections. There was a stir on the musicians' platform as all the players but one laid aside their instruments and filed out through a side door. This one, the first violin, came down on the floor and walked about among the diners, stopping at different tables. Every time he stopped, I discovered, it was to play to some particular woman who had caught his eye. He was tall and good-looking in his gipsy costume, with a wide red sash around his waist, a white-silk shirt open at the neck, short velvet trousers, and a black-velvet coat. Under his dark mustache his teeth looked very white as he smiled, and he smiled often, or sighed and made eyes at the women as he played to them.

I glanced at Kittie and Maudie. They were watching the gipsy with absorbed interest.

He must have caught Maudie's eye, for suddenly he crossed to our table and began to play to her—turning occasionally to Kittie and me for a second only, while his violin shrieked and moaned and sighed and sang in a way that made our hearts turn over. I could see by their faces, which were pink with excitement, and by their shining eyes, what emotions the moment held for my young friends, and certainly it was thrilling enough for three girls just out of school to have a genius playing to them alone in one of the gayest restaurants in New York.

For a few moments I was delighted with the gipsy and his music. Then I began to notice the way he looked at us, alternately half-closing and slowly opening his eyes as he put his soul into his music. He seemed to be immensely interested in Maudie, and played to her much longer than he did to any one else. Several times he came so close to her that I was afraid he would touch her.

The other musicians had returned by this time, and were playing an accompaniment to the violinist, who had swung into a Brahms waltz. When he had finished the first movement he stopped playing, tucked his violin under his arm, and held out his hand to Maudie, with his most brilliant smile. She turned first red, then white, and shrank away from him in her chair, while instinctively I, too, threw out my hands to ward him off. He turned to me and took them at once, holding them tight and trying to pull me to my feet. My heart stopped beating as I resisted his drag on my wrists, and I looked at Mollie Merk and Mrs.

Hoppen, expecting them to spring up and interfere. But for a moment they both sat regarding the scene as indifferently as if they were at a play.

At last Mrs. Hoppen shook her head at the musician with her bored little smile, and he bowed and shrugged his shoulders and went off to a table some distance away, where he began to play to another woman.

Mollie Merk leaned toward me. "Say, Iverson," she exclaimed, in a tone that must have reached the diners in the balcony, "what's up? You're as white as your copy-paper. Which is it—indigestion or cold feet?"

Her words pulled me together. It was natural that I should look pale, for by this time I was frightened—not for myself, but for Kittie and Maudie. They, I could see, though embarrassed and ill at ease, were not yet frightened. I knew why. *I* was there, and they trusted me. They were sure that nothing could harm them while I was with them. I set my teeth in the determination that nothing should.

More entertainers came into the space shut off by the red cords. Every moment the room grew closer and hotter, the smoke around us became thicker, the atmosphere of excitement increased. The faces of Kittie and Maudie began to float before me in a kind of mist. I decided that if I ever got them out into a clean world again I would have nothing left to pray for. But I knew I could not wipe the evening and its incidents from their memories, and that knowledge was the hardest thing I had to bear.

In desperation I turned from the dancers and began to watch the diners. The way these accepted the dancing and the actions of the gipsy had shown me at once what they were, and now they were becoming gayer every minute and more noisy. Some of them got up occasionally and whirled about together on the dancing-floor. Many sang accompaniments to the violins. These men and women were moths, I reflected, whirling about a lurid flame of life. There were dozens of young girls in the room—many without chaperons.

Directly opposite me two persons—a man, and a girl in a white dress—sat at a table alone, absorbed in each other. At first I glanced at them only occasionally and idly, then with growing interest and at last with horror, for I began to understand. The girl had a sweet, good face, but a brief study of the man showed me what he was. He was short and stout, with a bald head and a round, pleasure-loving face. It was not so much his appearance, however, as the way he watched the girl which betrayed him to me. He hardly took his eyes from her face. Whatever was going on in the dancing-place, he looked at her; and she, leaning a

little forward in her chair, listened to him as he talked, and swayed toward him. I saw him tap her hand, which lay on the table, with his fat forefinger. The sight revolted me, but she did not draw her hand away.

As I watched her I thought of all the dreadful things I had heard and read and seen since I had been in New York, and wondered if the time would ever come when I would be old enough and wise enough to rise and go to a girl in such a situation and ask her if she needed help. It seemed impossible that women experienced enough to do this with dignity and courage should sit around to-night, all unheeding, and let such things go on. Then looking at them again, table by table, I read the answer. They were themselves the lost and strayed—callous, indifferent, with faces and hearts hardened by the lives they had led. I began to feel sick and faint, and for a moment I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, coming toward us slowly through the crowd was Godfrey Morris, the assistant of Nestor Hurd, my chief on the *Searchlight*. It was plain that he had just entered, for he was looking around in search of a table. I shall never forget the feeling that came over me when I recognized him. Now that he was there, I felt absolutely safe. I had almost a vision of him picking up Maudie and Kittie and me and taking us bodily away, and the relief and gratitude I felt showed me how great my inward panic had been. I kept my eyes on him, hoping he would turn and see me, but he was looking in another direction. Still, he was drawing nearer, and I sat tight and waited in silence, though I wanted to call out to him above the uproar around us.

It did not surprise me to see the girl in white put out her hand as he passed her table and touch him on the arm. He stopped at once, looking a little surprised, and then stood for a moment beside her and the stout man, talking quietly to them both. I waited breathlessly. Now he was speaking to the man alone, probably urging him to leave the place. And then—I heard a sound as unexpected in that place as an altar-bell. Mr. Morris had thrown back his head and laughed, and as he laughed he smote the stout man heavily on the shoulder and dropped into a chair beside him. The stout man filled a glass. I saw Mr. Morris lift it, bow to the girl in white, and drink its contents.

I lived a long, long time during the next minute. I cannot describe my emotions. I only knew that in that instant life seemed unbearable and New York became a city I could not remain in any longer. Surely nothing could be right in a place where even Godfrey Morris came to resorts like this, not as a knight to the rescue of helplessness, but as a familiar patron, who was there because he

enjoyed it and found congenial friends.

It was impossible to take my eyes from the horrible group at that table. I kept on staring, and, as if he felt my gaze, Mr. Morris turned around and saw me. The next instant he was on his feet, and a second after that he was shaking hands with Mrs. Hoppen and Mollie Merk and me. Evidently, he was neither surprised to find us there nor ashamed to be found there himself. When he was presented to Kittie and Maudie his manner was exactly as it might have been if he were meeting them at an afternoon tea, and he settled down comfortably into the sixth place at our table, which Mrs. Morgan had been invited to fill, and chatted as if he had known the girls all his life.

I have no idea what he said. It did not matter. After the first few moments Maudie and Kittie were able to talk to him. I heard their voices, but not their words. I sat with my eyes on the table-cloth and my cheeks burning. I wanted to get away that minute. I wanted to go to my home, out West. Most of all, I wanted to return to the convent and never, never leave it.

The gipsy was playing among the tables again, and now he was quite near us. But I had reached the point where I was not even interested when he turned, caught sight of our new companion, and crossed quickly to our table, his hand outstretched to Mr. Morris, his face shining like an electric globe when the light has been turned on inside of it.

Mr. Morris greeted him like a long-lost brother. "Hello, Fritz!" he exclaimed, taking his hand in a most friendly grasp. "Business good? How are the kids?"

The gipsy revealed the widest smile of the evening as he answered. "*Ach*, Herr Morris," he cried, in a guttural German voice that simply dripped affection, "you remember dose kids? T'ree we had—*aber* now, *now* we got anoder one—since Tuesday!"

"Good!" cried Mr. Morris, looking around as if he expected us all to share his joy over the glad tidings. "Girl or boy?"

"Girl," the gipsy player told him. "T'ree boys we had. Now we haf girl for change. We t'ink, my wife and I, we make her noospaper woman. Goot idea, *nicht wahr*?"

He laughed, and Mr. Morris laughed with him. "Fine," he declared. "Send her down to the *Searchlight* office in a week or two. We'll give her Miss Merk's job."

Everybody laughed again, Mollie Merk, of course, loudest of all. The musician bade us good night, beginning to play again at the tables. I had forgotten about Kittie and Maudie, but now I knew they had been listening, too, for I heard Kittie speak.

"Why, that gipsy isn't a gipsy at all, is he?" she gasped.

"No more than I am," Mollie Merk told her. "Wears the rig because it pays—pleases romantic girls." She grinned at us, while Mrs. Hoppen leaned forward.

"I'm afraid you hurt his feelings," she told Maudie and me, "by refusing his invitation to dance a little while ago. That was the greatest compliment he could pay you, you know."

Mr. Morris looked amused. "Did he invite them to dance?" he inquired, with interest. "Good old Fritz. He doesn't often do that, this season."

Maudie and I exchanged a long glance. "I thought—" Maudie began, and then stopped. I was glad she said no more. I looked again at the gipsy, and, as if something had been stripped from my eyes, I saw him as he was—no reckless and desperate adventurer, but a matter-of-fact German, his silk shirt rather grimy, his black hair oily, his absurd red sash and shabby velvet coat rebukes to the imagination that had pictured a wild gipsy heart beating under them.

Mr. Morris was smiling at the girl in white. Now he turned to me and nodded toward her. "That's Miss Hastings and George Brook," he said. "Have you met them yet?" I was able to shake my head. "Well, it's high time you did," were his next words. "I'll bring them over."

He rose, but I caught his arm and gasped out something that stopped him. I don't remember what I said, but I succeeded in making him understand that I did not want that particular man to meet my friends. Mr. Morris stared at me hard for a moment. Then he sat down again and looked me straight in the eyes.

"Miss Iverson," he said, quietly, "what have you against Brook? He's the foreign editor of the *Searchlight*, and one of the best fellows alive."

I could not speak. I was too much surprised.

"The girl he's with," Morris went on, "is Marion Hastings—Mrs. Cartwell's social secretary. She and Brook are going to be married next week."

He waited for me to reply. I muttered something about not wanting my friends to meet any one in this place. That was all I said. My self-control, my poise, had deserted me, but perhaps my burning face was more eloquent than my tongue. Mr. Morris looked from me to Maudie, and then at Kittie, and finally back at me.

"I see," he said at last, very slowly. "You three actually think you are in a den of iniquity!"

He turned to Mollie Merk and addressed her as crisply and with as much authority as if they were in the *Searchlight* office.

"How did you come to give Miss Iverson that impression?" he demanded.

Mollie Merk looked guilty. "Didn't realize she had it till within the last half-hour," she muttered.

"I see," said Morris again, in the same tone. "And then it was such fun for you that you let it go on!"

For a moment Miss Merk seemed inclined to sulk. Then she threw herself back in her chair and laughed. "Oh, well," she admitted, "'twas fun. Know what started her. Said something about showing her Life—making her eyes stick out. Adding her friends to the party changed the program. Brought 'em here instead. Seeing us drink cocktails started her panic. Harlem tango did the rest. Her imagination got busy."

I listened to her as one listens to a strange tongue in which one hears an occasional familiar word. She turned to me. "What that dance represents," she said, "is a suburbanite catching a cook. Least, that's what the inventor says."

"It's very graceful. My nieces dance it charmingly," Mrs. Hoppen added, mildly.

Mr. Morris smiled, but not as if he really wanted to. Then he turned to me. There was a beautiful, understanding look in his gray eyes.

"Do you realize what has happened, Miss Iverson?" he asked. "You've been having a bad dream. You expected something lurid, so you have seen something lurid in everything you have looked at to-night. In reality you are in one of the most eminently correct restaurants in New York. Of course it has its *cabaret*—most of them have, this season—but it's an extremely well-conducted and conservative one, with no objectionable features whatever. Now look around you and try to see things as they are."

He made a gesture with his hand, and I followed it slowly around the room. At most of the tables ordinary-looking couples sat contentedly munching food. A German woman near us was telling a friend how she cooked *Wiener Schnitzel*. A tired-looking girl was doing an acrobatic dance in the ring, but it was not vulgar. It was merely foolish and dull. Three men on our left were arguing over some business question and adding up penciled columns on the table-cloth. Our wild-hearted gipsy, Fritz, was having a glass of beer with some friends off in a corner. The musicians were playing "The Rosary," and several fat women were lost in mournful memories. Not far away a waiter dropped a tray and broke some glasses, and the head waiter hastened to him and swore under his breath. That was the only lurid thing in the room, and it was mild indeed to ears familiar with the daily conversation of Mr. Hurd and Colonel Cartwell. Everything else suddenly, unmistakably, was simple, cheerful, entirely proper, and rather commonplace.

"So much for the restaurant," remarked Mr. Morris, smiling as if he had observed my change of expression. "Now for the people. That's the editor of the *Argus* over there"—he pointed to a thin, blond man—"with his daughters. At the table next to them is Miss Blinn, the artist. The stout old lady who is eating too much is her mother. The chap with the white hair is the leading editorial-writer of the *Modern Review*, and the lady opposite is his sister. Almost every one prominent in New York drops into this place at one time or another. Many worthy citizens come regularly. It's quite the thing, though dull!"

"I know," I stammered. "I know." I did know, but I was humiliated to the soul. "Please don't say any more."

It is true that I form impressions quickly. It is also true that I can change them just as quickly when I am shown that I am wrong. Mr. Morris looked at my face, from which the blood now seemed to be bursting, and took pity on me.

"All I want," he ended, "is to make you realize that you're visiting a legitimate place of amusement and that the performers are honest, hard-working people, though I think myself they're going a bit stale."

"Been doing the same thing too long," corroborated Mollie Merk. "Garroti ought to change his program. Just the same," she added, cheerfully, as she called the waiter and paid the bill, "they give you the best *table d'hôte* dinner in town. If you hadn't been too scared to eat, Iverson, you'd have realized that much, anyway!"

At this, Kittie James broke into the conversation. Here was something Kittie understood, though, like myself, she had been somewhat mixed as to the place and the performers. Kittie told Mollie Merk with impassioned earnestness that the dinner was one of the best she had ever eaten, and that she would never forget the flavor of the artichoke hearts with the mushrooms on them. Mollie Merk seemed pleased and patted Kittie's hand.

"You see," she went on, addressing the others as if I were not there, "Iverson's had a pretty hard time since she struck this town. It's jolted her sense of values. Thought everything was white. Had some unpleasant experiences. Decided everything was black. Been seeing black to-night. Take another month or two," she added, kindly, turning to me, "to discover most things are merely gray."

Those were her words. It was a moment of agony for me. I had now gone down into the abyss of humiliation and struck the bottom hard. Mr. Morris spoke to me, though at first I did not hear him.

"Don't forget one thing, Miss Iverson," he said, gently. "An imagination like yours is the greatest asset a writer can have. You'll appreciate it when you begin work on your novels and plays in a year or two."

I felt a little better. I could see that Maudie and Kittie were impressed.

We drifted out into the street, toward a row of waiting taxi-cabs. There Mrs. Hoppen and Mollie Merk bade us good night, and Mr. Morris put Maudie and Kittie and me into a taxi-cab and got in after us. His manner was beautiful—serious, sympathetic, and deeply respectful. On the way to the hotel he told them what good work I was doing, and about the "model story" I had written two weeks before. I was glad he spoke of those things. I was afraid they had discovered that, after all, there were still many lessons in life I had not learned.

After I had gone up to my room I went to one of the windows facing Madison Square and looked out. It was not late—hardly eleven o'clock, and the big city below was wide awake and hard at play. Many sad and terrible things were happening in it, but I knew that many kind and beautiful things were happening, too. I felt sure that hereafter I would always be able to tell them apart.

Later, when I closed my eyes, all sorts of pictures crowded upon me. I saw the mulatto dancer pursuing the Harlem cook. I heard again Fritz's wild gipsy music and saw him wandering among the tables. I saw the stout man and the girl in white, and felt my face burn as I recalled what I had thought of them. But the

thing I saw most clearly, the thing that followed me into the land of dreams and drifted about there till morning, was the face of Godfrey Morris, with a look of sympathy and understanding in his gray eyes.

V

THE CASE OF HELEN BRANDOW

"'S Iverson," barked Nestor Hurd, over the low partition which divided his office from that of his staff, "c'm' here!"

I responded to his call with sympathetic haste. It had been a hard day for Mr. Hurd. Everything had gone wrong. Every reporter he had sent out seemed to be "falling down" on his assignment and telephoning in to explain why. Next to failures, our chief disliked explanations. "A dead man doesn't care a hang what killed him," was his terse summing up of their futility.

He was shouting an impassioned monologue into the telephone when I reached his side, and as a final exclamation-point he hurled the receiver down on his desk, upsetting a bottle of ink. I waited in silence while he exhausted the richest treasures of his vocabulary and soaked up the ink with blotters. It was a moment for feminine tact, and I exercised it, though I was no longer in awe of Mr. Hurd. I had been on the *Searchlight* a year, and the temperamental storms of my editors now disturbed me no more than the whirling and buzzing of mechanical tops. Even Mollie Merk had ceased to call me the "convent kid." I had made many friends, learned many lessons, suffered many disappointments, lost many illusions, and taken on some new ones. I had slowly developed a sense of humor—to my own abysmal surprise. The memory of my convent had become as the sound of a vesper-bell, heard occasionally above the bugle-calls of a strenuous life. Also, I had learned to avoid "fine writing," which is why my pen faltered just now over the "bugle-calls." I knew my men associates very well, and admired most of them, though they often filled me with a maternal desire to stand them in a corner with their faces to the wall. I frequently explained to them what their wives or sweethearts really meant by certain things they had said. I was the recognized office authority on good form, Catholicism, and feminine psychology. Therefore I presented to Mr. Hurd's embittered glance the serene brow of an equal—even on occasions such as this, when the peace of the office lay in fragments around us.

At last he ceased to address space, threw the blotters into his waste-paper basket, and turned resentful eyes on me.

"Gibson's fallen down on the Brandow case," he snapped.

I uttered a coo of sympathy.

"The woman won't talk," continued Hurd, gloomily. "Don't believe she'll talk to any one if she won't to Gibson. But we'll give her 'nother chance. Go 'n' see her."

I remained silent.

"You've followed the trial, haven't you?" Mr. Hurd demanded. "What d'you think of the case?"

I murmured apologetically that I thought Mrs. Brandow was innocent, and the remark produced exactly the effect I had expected. My chief gave me one look of unutterable scorn and settled back in his chair.

"Great Scott!" he groaned. "So you've joined the sobbing sisterhood at last! I wouldn't have believed it. 'S Iverson"—his voice changed, he brought his hand down on the desk with a force that made the ink-bottle rock—"that woman's as guilty as—as—"

I reminded him that the evidence against Mrs. Brandow was purely circumstantial.

"Circumstantial? 'Course it's circumstantial!" yelped Hurd. "She's too clever to let it be anything else. She has hidden every track. She's the slickest proposition we've had up for murder in this state, and she's young, pretty, of good family—so she'll probably get off. But she killed her husband as surely as you stand there, and the fact that he was a brute and deserved what he got doesn't make her any less guilty of his murder."

It was a long speech for Mr. Hurd. He seemed surprised by it himself, and stopped to glare at me as if I were to blame for the effort it had caused him.

"You know Davies, her lawyer, don't you?" he asked, more quietly.

I did.

"Think he'll give you a letter to her?"

I thought he would.

"'L right," snapped Mr. Hurd. "Go 'n' see her. If she'll talk, get an interview. If she won't, describe her and her cell. Tell how she looks and what she wears—from the amount of hair over her ears to the kind of polish on her shoes. Leave mawkish sympathy out of it. See her as she is—a murderess whose trial is going to make American justice look like a hole in a doughnut."

I went back to my desk thinking of his words. While I was pinning on my hat the door of Mr. Hurd's room opened and shut, and his assistant, Godfrey Morris, came and stood beside me.

"I don't want to butt in," he began, "but—I hope you're going on this assignment with an open mind, Miss Iverson."

That hurt me. For some reason it always hurt me surprisingly to have Godfrey Morris show any lack of faith in me in any way.

"I told Mr. Hurd," I answered, with dignity, "that I think Mrs. Brandow is innocent. But my opinion won't—"

"I know." Mr. Morris's ability to interrupt a speaker without seeming rude was one of his special gifts. "Hurd thinks she's guilty," he went on. "I think she's innocent. What I hope you'll do is to forget what any one thinks. Go to the woman without prejudice one way or the other. Write of her as you find her."

"That," I said, "is precisely what I intend to do."

"Good!" exclaimed Morris. "I was afraid that what Hurd said might send you out with the wrong notion."

He strolled with me toward the elevator. "I never knew a case where the evidence for and against a prisoner was so evenly balanced," he mused. "I'm for her simply because I can't believe that a woman with her brains and courage would commit such a crime. She's too good a sport! By Jove, the way she went through that seven-hour session on the witness-stand the other day ..." He checked himself. "Oh, well," he ended, easily, "I'm not her advocate. She may be fooling us all. Good-by. Get a good story."

"I'll make her confess to me," I remarked, cheerfully, at the elevator door. "Then we'll suppress the confession!"

"We'll give her a square deal, anyway," he called, as the elevator began to

descend.

It was easy to run out to Fairview, the scene of the trial, easy to get the letter from Mr. Davies, and easiest of all to interview the friendly warden of the big prison and send the note to Mrs. Brandow in her cell when she had returned from court. After that the broad highway of duty was no longer oiled. Very courteously, but very firmly, too, Mrs. Brandow declined to see me. Many messages passed between us before I was admitted to her presence on the distinct understanding that I was not to ask her questions, that I was not to quote anything she might say; that, in short, I was to confine the drippings of my gifted pen to a description of her environment and of herself. This was not a heartening task. Yet when the iron door of Number 46 on the women's tier of the prison had swung back to admit me my first glance at the prisoner and her background showed me that Mr. Hurd would have at least one "feature" for the *Searchlight* the next morning.

On either side of Number 46 were typical white-painted and carbolic-scented cells—one occupied by an intoxicated woman who snored raucously on her narrow cot, the other by a wretched hag who clung to the bars of her door with filthy fingers and leered at me as I passed. Between the two was a spot as out of place in those surroundings as a flower-bed would seem on the stern brow of an Alpine glacier.

Mrs. Brandow, the newspapers had told the world, was not only a beautiful woman, but a woman who loved beauty. She had spent six months in Fairview awaiting her trial. All the members of the "good family" Mr. Hurd had mentioned had died young—probably as a reward of their excellence. She had no intimate friends—her husband, it was said, had made friendships impossible for her. Nevertheless, first with one trifle, then with another, brought to her by the devoted maid who had been with her for years, she had made herself a home in her prison.

Tacked on the wall, facing her small, white-painted iron bed, was a large piece of old Java print, its colors dimmed by time to dull browns and blues. On the bed itself was a cover of blue linen, and the cement floor was partly concealed by a Chinese rug whose rich tones harmonized with those of the print. Over the bed hung a fine copy of a Hobbema, in which two lines of trees stretched on and on toward a vague, far-distant horizon. Near this a large framed print showed a great stretch of Scotch moors and wide, empty skies. A few silver-backed toilet articles lay on a small glass-covered hospital table. Against this unlooked-for

background the suspected murderess, immaculate in white linen tailor-made garments, sat on a white-enameled stool, peacefully sewing a button on a canvas shoe.

The whole effect was so unprecedented, even to me after a year of the varied experiences which come to a New York reporter, that my sense of the woman's situation was wiped out by the tableau she made. Without intending to smile at all, I smiled widely as I entered and held out my hand; and Mrs. Brandow, who had risen to receive me, sent back an answering smile, cool, worldly, and understanding.

"It *is* a cozy domestic scene, isn't it?" she asked, lightly, reading my thoughts, "but on too small a scale. We're a trifle cramped. Take the stool. I will sit on the bed."

She moved the stool an inch, with a hospitable gesture which almost created an effect of space, and sat down opposite me, taking me in from head to foot with one straight look from black eyes in whose depths lurked an odd sparkle.

"You won't mind if I finish this?" she asked, as she picked up her needle. "I have only two more buttons."

I reassured her, and she bit off a piece of cotton and rethreaded her needle expertly.

"They won't let me have a pair of scissors," she explained, as she began to sew. "It's a wonder they lend me a needle. They tell me it's a special privilege. Once a week the guard brings it to me at this hour, and the same evening he retrieves it with a long sigh of relief. He is afraid I will swallow it and cheat the electric chair. He needn't be. It isn't the method I should choose."

Her voice was a soft and warm contralto, whose vibrations seemed to linger in the air when she had ceased to speak. Her manner was indescribably matter-of-fact. She gave a vigorous pull to the button she had sewed on and satisfied herself of its strength. Then she bit the thread again and began to secure the last button, incidentally chatting on, as she might have chatted to a friend over a cup of tea.

Very simply and easily, because it was my cue, but even more because I was immensely interested, I fell into her mood. We talked a long time and of many things. She asked about my work, and I gave her some details of its amusing

side. She spoke of the books she had read and was reading, of places she had visited, and, in much the same tone, of her nights in prison, made hideous by her neighbors in near-by cells. As she talked, two dominating impressions strengthened in me momentarily: she was the most immaculate human being I had ever seen, and the most perfectly poised.

When she had sewed on the last button, fastening the thread with workman-like deftness, she opened a box of pipe-clay and whitened both shoes with a moist sponge.

"I don't quite know why I do all this," she murmured, casually. "I suppose it's the force of habit. It's surprising how some habits last and others fall away. The only wish I have now is that I and my surroundings may remain decently clean."

"May I quote that?" I asked, tentatively—"that, and what you have told me about the books you are reading?"

Her expression of indifferent tolerance changed. She regarded me with narrowed eyes under drawn, black brows. "No," she said, curtly. "You'll be good enough to keep to your bond. You agreed not to repeat a word I said."

I rose to go. "And I won't," I told her, "naturally. But I hoped you had changed your mind."

She rose also, the slight, ironic smile again playing about her lips. "No," she answered, in a gentler tone, "the agreement holds. But I don't wonder I misled you! I've prattled like a school-girl, and"—the smile subtly changed its character—"do you know, I've rather enjoyed it. I haven't talked to any one for months but my maid and my lawyer. Mary's chat is punctuated by sobs. I'm like a freshly watered garden when she ends her weekly visits. And the charms of Mr. Davies's conversation leave me cold. So this has been"—she hesitated—"a pleasure," she ended.

We shook hands again. "Thank you," I said, "and good-by. I hope"—In my turn I hesitated an instant, seeking the right words. The odd sparkle deepened in her eyes.

"Yes?" she murmured. "You hope—?"

"I hope you will soon be free," I ended simply.

Her eyes held mine for an instant. Then, "Thank you," she said, and turned away.

The guard, who had waited outside with something of the effect of a clock about to strike, opened the iron door, and I passed through.

Late that night, after I had turned in my copy and received in acknowledgment the grunt which was Mr. Hurd's highest tribute to satisfactory work, I sat at my desk still thinking of the Brandow case. Suddenly the chair beside me creaked as Godfrey Morris dropped into it.

"Just been reading your Brandow story. Good work," he said, kindly. "Without bias, too. What do you think of the woman now, after meeting her?"

"She's innocent," I repeated, tersely.

"Then she didn't confess?" laughed Morris.

"No," I smiled, "she didn't confess. But if she had been guilty she might have confessed. She talked a great deal."

Morris's eyes widened with interest. The day's work was over, and he was in a mood to be entertained. "Did she?" he asked. "What did she say?"

I repeated the interview, while he leaned back and listened, his hands clasped behind his head.

"She *was* communicative," he reflected, at the end. "In a mood like that, after months of silence, a woman will tell anything. As you say, if she had been guilty she might easily have given herself away. What a problem it would have put up to you," he mused, "if she *had* been guilty and *had* confessed! On the one hand, loyalty to the *Searchlight*—you'd have had to publish the news. On the other hand, sympathy for the woman—for it would be you who sent her to the electric chair, or remained silent and saved her."

He looked at me quizzically. "Which would you have done?" he asked.

It seemed no problem at all to me, but I gave it an instant's reflection. "I think you know," I told him.

He nodded. "I think I do," he agreed. "Just the same," he rose and started for his desk, "don't you imagine there isn't a problem in the situation. There's a big one."

He turned back, struck by a sudden idea. "Why don't you make a magazine story of it?" he added. "I believe you can write fiction. Here's your chance. Describe the confession of the murderess, the mental struggle of the reporter, her

suppression of the news, and its after-effect on her career."

His suggestion hit me much harder than his problem. The latter was certainly strong enough for purposes of fiction.

"Why," I said, slowly, "thank you. I believe I will."

Before Mr. Morris had closed the door I was drawing a fresh supply of copy-paper toward me; before he had left the building I had written the introduction to my first fiction story; and before the roar of the presses came up to my ears from the basement, at a quarter to two in the morning, I had made on my last page the final cross of the press-writer and dropped the finished manuscript into a drawer of my desk. It had been written with surprising ease. Helen Brandow had entered my tale as naturally as she would enter a room; and against the bleak background of her cell I seemed to see her whole life pass before me like a series of moving-pictures which my pen raced after and described.

The next morning found me severely critical as I read my story. Still, I decided to send it to a famous novelist I had met a few months before, who had since then spent some of her leisure in good-naturedly urging me to "write." I believed she would tell me frankly what she thought of this first sprout in my literary garden, and that night, quite without compunction, I sent it to her. Two days later I received a letter which I carried around in my pocket until the precious bit of paper was almost in rags.

"Your story is a corker," wrote the distinguished author, whose epistolary style was rather free. "I experienced a real thrill when the woman confessed. You have made out a splendid case for her; also for your reporter. Given all your premises, things *had* to happen as they did. Offer the story to Mrs. Langster, editor of *The Woman's Friend*. Few editors have sense, but I think she'll know enough to take it. I inclose a note to her."

If Mrs. Appleton had experienced a thrill over my heroine's confession we were more than quits, for I experienced a dozen thrills over her letter, and long afterward, when she came back from a visit to England with new honors thick upon her, I amused her by describing them. Within twenty-four hours after receiving her inspiring communication I had wound my way up a circular staircase that made me feel like an animated corkscrew, and was humbly awaiting Mrs. Langster's pleasure in the room next to her dingy private office. She had read Mrs. Appleton's note at once, and had sent an office boy to say that she would receive me in a few minutes. I gladly waited thirty, for this home of a

big and successful magazine was a new world to me—and, though it lacked the academic calm I had associated with the haunts of literature in the making, everything in it was interesting, from the ink-spattered desks and their aloof and busy workers to the recurrent roar of the elevated trains that pounded past the windows.

Mrs. Langster proved to be an old lady, with a smile of extraordinary sweetness. Looking at her white hair, and meeting the misty glance of her near-sighted blue eyes, I felt a depressing doubt of Mrs. Appleton's wisdom in sending me to her with a work of fiction which turned on murder. One instinctively associated Mrs. Langster with organ recitals, evening service, and afternoon teas in dimly lighted rooms. But there was an admirable brain under her silver hair, and I had swift proof of the keenness of her literary discrimination; for within a week she accepted my story and sent me a check for an amount equal to the salary I received for a month of work. Her letter, and that of Mrs. Appleton, went to Sister Irmingarde—was it only a year ago that I had parted from her and the convent? Then I framed them side by side and hung them in a place of honor on my study wall, as a solace in dark hours and an inspiration in brighter ones. They represented a literary ladder, on the first rung of which I was sure I had found firm footing, though the upper rungs were lost in clouds.

Mrs. Langster allowed my story to mellow for almost a year before she published it; and in the long interval Helen Brandow was acquitted, and disappeared from the world that had known her.

I myself had almost forgotten her, and I had even ceased to look for my story in the columns of *The Woman's Friend*, when one morning I found on my desk a note from Mr. Hurd. It was brief and cryptic, for Mr. Hurd's notes were as time-saving as his speech. It read:

Pls. rept. immed.
N. H.

Without waiting to remove my hat I entered Mr. Hurd's office. He was sitting bunched up over his desk, his eyebrows looking like an intricate pattern of cross-stitching. Instead of his usual assortment of newspaper clippings, he held in his hand an open magazine, which, as I entered, he thrust toward me.

"Here!" he jerked. "What's this mean?"

I recognized with mild surprise the familiar cover of *The Woman's Friend*. A

second glance showed me that the page Mr. Hurd was indicating with staccato movements of a nervous forefinger bore my name. My heart leaped.

"Why," I exclaimed, delightedly, "it's my story!"

Mr. Hurd's hand held the magazine against the instinctive pull I gave it. His manner was unusually quiet. Unusual, too, was the sudden straight look of his tired eyes.

"Sit down," he said, curtly. "I want to ask you something."

I sat down, my eyes on the magazine. As Mr. Hurd held it, I could see the top of one illustration. It looked interesting.

"See here," Mr. Hurd jerked out. "I'm not going to beat around the bush. Did you throw us down on this story?"

I stared at him. For an instant I did not get his meaning. Then it came to me that possibly I should have asked his permission to publish any work outside of the *Searchlight* columns.

"But," I stammered, "you don't print fiction."

Mr. Hurd tapped the open page with his finger. The unusual quiet of his manner began to impress me. "*Is* it fiction?" he asked. "That's what I want to know."

Godfrey Morris rose from his desk and came toward us. Until that instant I had only vaguely realized that he was in the room.

"Hurd," he said, quickly, "you're in the wrong pew. Miss Iverson doesn't even know what you're talking about." He turned to me. "He's afraid," he explained, "that Mrs. Brandow confessed to you in Fairview, and that you threw us down by suppressing the story."

For an instant I was dazed. Then I laughed. "Mr. Hurd," I said, "I give you my word that Mrs. Brandow never confessed anything to me."

Mr. Hurd's knitted brows uncreased. "That's straight, is it?" he demanded.

"That's straight," I repeated.

Hurd dropped the magazine on the floor and turned to his papers. "'L right," he muttered, "don't let 't happen 'gain."

Mr. Morris and I exchanged an understanding smile as I picked up the magazine and left the room.

In the outer room I met Gibson. His grin of greeting was wide and friendly, his voice low and interested.

"Read your story last night," he whispered. "Say, tell me—*did* she, really?"

I filled the next five minutes explaining to Gibson. He looked relieved. "I didn't think there was anything in it," he said. "That woman's no murderess. But, say, you made the story read like the real thing!"

Within the next few days everybody on the *Searchlight* staff seemed to have read *The Woman's Friend*, and to be taking part in the discussion my story aroused. Those of my associates who believed in the innocence of Mrs. Brandow accepted the tale for what it was—a work of fiction. Those without prejudice were inclined to think there was "something in it," and at least half a dozen who believed her guilty also firmly believed that I had allowed an acute and untimely spasm of womanly sympathy to deprive the *Searchlight* of "the best and biggest beat in years." For a few days I remained pleasantly unconscious of being a storm-center, but one morning a second summons from Mr. Hurd opened my eyes to the situation.

"See here!" began that gentleman, rudely. "What does all this talk mean, anyway? They're saying now that you and Morris suppressed the Brandow confession between you. Jim, the elevator-boy, says he heard you agree to do it."

Godfrey Morris leaped to his feet and came toward us. "Good Lord, Hurd," he cried, fiercely, "I believe you're crazy! Why don't you come to me with this rot, if you're going to notice it, and not bother Miss Iverson? We joked about a confession, and I suppose Jim heard us. The joke was what suggested the magazine story."

"Well, *that's* no joke." Hurd spoke grudgingly, as if unwillingly impressed. "Suppose the woman had confessed," he asked me, suddenly—"would you have given us the story?"

I shook my head. "Certainly not," I admitted. "You forget that I had agreed not to print a word she said."

Hurd's expression of uncertainty was so funny that I laughed. "But she didn't," I added, comfortingly. "Do you think I'd lie to you?"

"You might." Hurd was in a pessimistic mood. "To save her, or—" A rare phenomenon occurred; he smiled—all his boyish dimples suddenly revealed —"to save Morris from losing his job," he finished, coolly.

I felt my face grow hot. Morris rushed to the rescue. "The only thing I regret in this confounded mess," he muttered, ignoring Hurd's words, "is the effect on Mrs. Brandow. *The Woman's Friend* has half a million readers. They'll all think she's guilty."

"Good job," said Hurd. "She *is* guilty!"

"Rot! She's absolutely innocent," replied Morris. "Why, even the fool jury acquitted her on the first ballot!"

I left them arguing and slipped away, sick at heart. In the sudden moment of illumination following Morris's words it had come to me that the one person to be considered in the whole episode was the person of whom I had not thought at all! I had done Helen Brandow a great wrong. Her case had been almost forgotten; somewhere she was trying to build up a new life. I had knocked out the new foundations.

It was a disturbing reflection, and the events of the next few days deepened my depression. Several reviewers commented on the similarity of my story to the Brandow case. People began to ask where Mrs. Brandow was, began again to argue the question of her innocence or her guilt. Efforts were made to find her hiding-place. The thought of the injury I had done the unhappy woman became an obsession. There seemed only one way to exorcise it, and that was to see or write to my "victim," as Hurd jocosely called her, make my confession, and have her absolve me, if she would, of any intent of injury.

On the wings of this inspiration I sought Mr. Davies, and, putting the situation before him, asked for his client's address.

"Of course I can't give you her address," he explained, mildly. "But I'll write to her and tell her you want it. Yes, yes, with pleasure. I know how you feel." He smiled reflectively. "She's a wonderful woman," he added. "Most remarkable woman I ever met—strongest soul." He sighed, then smiled again. "I'll write," he repeated; and with this I had to be content. I had done all that I could do. But my nerves began to feel the effect of the strain upon them, and it was a relief when I reached my home in Madison Square late one evening and found Mrs. Brandow waiting for me.

She was sitting in a little reception-room off the main hall of the building, and as I passed the door on my way to the elevator she rose and came toward me. She wore a thick veil, but something in me recognized her even before I caught the flash of her eyes through it, and noticed the characteristically erect poise of the head which every reporter who saw her had described.

"Mr. Davies said you wanted to talk to me," she began, without greeting me. "Here I am. Have I come at the wrong time?"

I slipped my hand through her arm. "No," was all I could say. "It was very good of you to come at all. I did not expect that." In silence we entered the elevator and ascended to my floor. As I opened the door with my latch-key and waited for her to go in I spoke again. "I can't tell you how much I've been thinking of you," I said.

She made no reply. We passed through the hall into my study, and while I turned on the electric lights she dropped into a big arm-chair beside a window overlooking the Square, threw back her veil, and slipped off the heavy furs she wore. As the lights flashed up we exchanged a swift look. Little more than a year had passed since our former meeting, but she seemed many years older and much less beautiful. There were new lines about her eyes and mouth, and the black hair over her temples was growing gray. I started to draw down the window-shades, for it was snowing hard, and the empty Square below, with a few tramps shivering on its benches, afforded but a dreary vista. She checked me.

"Leave them as they are," she directed, imperiously, adding as an afterthought: "Please. I like to be able to look out."

I obeyed, realizing now, as I had not done before, what those months of confinement must have meant to her. When I had removed my hat and coat, and lit the logs that lay ready in my big fireplace, I took a chair near her.

"First of all," I began, "I want to thank you for coming. And then—I want to beg your forgiveness."

For a moment she studied me in silence. "That's rather odd of you," she murmured, reflectively. "You know I'm fair game! Why shouldn't you run with the pack?"

My eyes, even my head, went down before that. For a moment I could not reply.

Then it seemed to me that the most important thing in the world was to make her understand.

"Of course," I admitted, "I deserve anything you say. I did a horrible thing when I printed that story. I should never have offered it to an editor. My defense is simply that I didn't realize what I was doing. That's what I want to make clear to you. That's why I asked to see you."

"I see," she said, slowly. "It's not the story you're apologizing for. It's the effect."

"Yes," I explained, eagerly, "it's the effect. I hadn't been out of school more than a year when I came to you in Fairview," I hurried on. "I was very young, and appallingly ignorant. It never occurred to me that any one would connect a fiction story with—with your case."

She looked at me, and with all the courage I could summon I gazed straight back into her strange, deep eyes. For a long instant the look held, and during it something came to me, something new and poignant, something that filled me with an indescribable pity for the loneliness I now understood, and for the courage of the nature that bore it so superbly. She would ask nothing of the world, this woman. Nor would she defend herself. People could think what they chose. But she would suffer.

I leaned toward her. "Mrs. Brandow," I said, "I wish I could make you understand how I feel about this. I believe it has made me ten years older."

She smiled. "That would be a pity," she said, "when you're so deliciously young."

"Is there anything I can do?" I persisted.

She raised her eyebrows. "I'm afraid not," she murmured, "unless it is to cease doing anything. You see, your activities where I am concerned are so hectic."

I felt my face burn. "You're very hard on me, but I deserve it. I didn't realize," I repeated, "that the story would suggest you to the public."

"Even though you described me?" she interjected, the odd, sardonic gleam deepening in her black eyes.

"But I didn't describe you as you are," I protested, eagerly. "I made you a blonde! Don't you remember? And I made a Western city the scene of the trial, and

changed some of the conditions of the—" I faltered—"of the crime."

"As if that mattered," she said, coolly. "You described *me*—to the shape of my finger-nails, the buttons on my shoes." Suddenly she laughed. "Those dreadful buttons! I see them still in my dreams. It seems to me that I was always sewing them on. The only parts of me I allowed to move in the court-room were my feet. No one could see them, under my skirt. I used to loosen a button almost every day. Then of course I had to sew them on. I had a sick fear of looking messy and untidy—of degenerating physically."

She faced the wide windows and the snow-filled sky. In my own chair, facing the fire, I also directly faced her.

"I'm going to Europe," she announced at last. "I'm sailing to-morrow morning—to be gone 'for good,' as the children say. That's why I came to-night." For a moment she sat in silence, wholly, restfully at her ease. Dimly I began to realize that she was enjoying the intimacy of the moment, the sense of human companionship, and again it came to me how tragically lonely she must be. She had no near friends, and in the minds of all others there must always be the hideous interrogation-point that stood between her and life. At best she had "the benefit of the doubt." And I had helped to destroy even the little that was left to her. I could have fallen at her feet.

"I'm going away," she added, "to see if there is any place for me in the life abroad. If there is I want to find it. If I were the sort of woman who went in for good works, my problem would be easier; but you see I'm not."

I smiled. I could not see her as a worker in organized charity, parceling out benefits tied with red tape. It was no effort, however, to picture her doing many human and beautiful kindnesses in her own way.

We talked of Europe. I had never been there. She spoke of northern Africa, of rides over Morocco hills, of a caravan journey from Tangier to Fez, of Algerian nights, of camping in the desert, of palms and ripe figs and of tropical gardens. It was fascinating talk in the purple lights of my driftwood fire, with a snow-storm beating at my windows. Suddenly she checked herself.

"I think, after all," she said, lightly, "you're rather good for me. You've done me good to-night. You did me good the day you visited me at Fairview. You were so young, so much in earnest, so much in love with life, and you saw so much with your big, solemn eyes. You gave me something new to think about, and I needed

it. So—don't regret anything."

I felt the tears spring to my eyes.

She drew on her gloves and buttoned them slowly, still smiling at me.

"I might never even have seen your story," she went on, quietly, "if my maid had not brought it to me. I don't read *The Woman's Friend*." There was a hint of the old superciliousness in her tone and about her upper lip as she spoke. "On the whole, I don't think it did me any harm. The opinion of strangers is the least important thing in my little arctic circle. So, forget me. Good night—and good-by."

I kept her hand in mine for a moment. "Good-by," I said. "Peace be with you."

She drew her veil down over her face, and moved to the door. I followed and opened it for her. On the threshold she stopped and hesitated, looking straight at me; and in that instant I knew as surely as I ever knew anything in my life that now at last her guard was down—that from the fastness of her soul something horrible had escaped and was leaping toward me. She cast a quick glance up and down the outer hall. It was dim and empty. I hardly dared to breathe.

"There is one thing more," she said, and her words rushed out with an odd effect of breathlessness under the continued calm of her manner. "The only really human emotion I've felt in a long time is—an upheaval of curiosity."

I looked at her, and waited.

She hesitated an instant longer, then, standing very close to me, gripped my shoulders hard, her eyes deep in mine, her voice so low I hardly caught her meaning.

"Oh, wise young judge!" she whispered. "Tell me, before we part—*how did you know*?"

VI

THE LAST OF THE MORANS

On my right rose a jagged wall of rock, hundreds of feet high and bare of vegetation save for a few dwarfed and wind-swept pines. On my left gaped the wide mouth of what seemed to be a bottomless ravine. Between the two was a ledge not more than six feet wide, along which "Jef'son Davis," my mountain horse, was slowly and thoughtfully making his difficult way. Occasionally from the pit's depths a hawk or turkey-buzzard rose, startling me with the flapping of its strong wings, and several times the feet of Jef'son Davis dislodged a bit of rock which rattled across the ledge, slipped over the side, and started on a downward journey whose distance I dared not estimate.

For more than an hour I had not met a human being. I had not seen a mountain cabin or even a nodding plume of smoke. I had not heard the bark of a dog, the tinkle of a cow-bell, nor any other reassuring and homely testimony that I was in a world of men. Yet I knew that somewhere around me must be lurking figures and watchful eyes, for I was in the stronghold of the Morans and the Tyrrells, and the Morans and Tyrrells were on the war-path, and therefore incessantly on guard.

This journey through the Virginia mountains to "write up family feuds" was the result of an inspiration recently experienced by Colonel Cartwell, our editor-in-chief. He was sure I could uncover "good dramatic stuff."

"They're potting at each other every minute down there," he explained to me when he sent me off on the assignment. "Give their time to it. Morans and Tyrrells are the worst. Tyrrell has killed six Morans. Get his story before the Morans get him. See? And find out what it's all about, anyway."

According to the map I had made that morning under the direction of the postmaster of Jayne's Crossroads, I knew I must be even now within a mile of the cabin of the Morans.

'"Tain't healthy travelin' fo' men," that gentleman had volunteered languidly, "but I reckon a lady's safe 'nuff, 'specially ef yo' leave the jou'ney to the hawse. Jef'son Davis, he knows ev'ry inch of that thar trail. All yo' got t' do is t' give Jef'son his haid."

Jef'son Davis was having his head, and he had thus far been true to his trust. At a certain point on the trail I was to look for huge boulders in a strange position, with a big and lonely cedar standing guard near them. At the right of this cedar was an almost hidden trail, which, followed for twenty minutes, would lead me to the Moran cabin. I was not to be alarmed if a bullet whispered its sinister message in my ear. To kill women was no part of the Moran traditions, and a fatality to me would be a regrettable incident, due wholly, if it occurred at all, to the impulsive nature of Samuel Tyrrell, who had formed the careless habit of firing at moving objects without pausing to discover what they were. It was because of this eccentricity, I gathered, that the sympathy of the mountain people lay largely with Moran—who, moreover, though both men were the last of their respective lines, was a boy of twenty-two, while Tyrrell was well on in middle life.

I rode slowly along the trail, which, clear in the high lights of the noonday sun, was now widening and turning to the right. The ravine appeared to be growing more shallow. Flashes of red haw and scarlet dogwood began to leap out at me from the edges. Presently, beyond the turn, I discovered the boulders, silhouetted sharply against the soft October sky. Near them was the lonely cedar, and after twice passing it I found the side-trail, and rode peacefully down its dim corridor.

There was nothing to mark the Moran home, and that, too, I almost passed before I noticed it, a strongly built log cabin, backed against the side of a hill, and commanding from its three barred windows the approaches on every side. As I rode up, the door opened and an old woman in a homespun dress stood before me. Her shoulders sagged under the burden of seventy-five years, but the flame of an unconquerable spirit burned in the keen black eyes set bead-like in her withered little brown face. This, I knew, was Betsy Moran, who had helped to bury her husband, four sons, and a grandson, all killed by the Tyrrells, and who was said finally to have seized a gun herself and added at least one Tyrrell to the row in the family burial-lot.

"How do you do?" I asked, cheerfully. "May I come in and rest for a few moments?"

Her face did not soften, nor did she speak, but there was neither suspicion nor fear in her steady regard; it held merely a dispassionate curiosity. I slipped from the back of Jef'son Davis and hesitated, looking around for a post or tree to tie him to, and the old woman, stirred to a quick instinct of hospitality, looked uncertainly behind her into the cabin. At the same instant a young giant appeared behind her, pushed her lightly to one side, and strode toward me with a nod of greeting. Then, taking the bridle-rein from my hand, and still in silence, he led the horse away. Evidently the Morans were not a talkative family.

Wholly forgetting the old woman, I stared after him. Here, obviously, was young "Shep," the last of the Morans; and from the top of his curly black hair to the boot-soles six feet two inches below it, he looked extremely well able to take care of himself. He was powerfully built, and he moved with the natural grace of the superb young animal he was. He wore a rough homespun blue shirt, open at the neck, and a pair of corduroy trousers tucked into high boots. From the swing of his back as he strode off with Jef'son Davis I should hardly have been surprised to see him throw that weary animal across his mighty shoulders.

When he had disappeared I walked thoughtfully to the cabin door, meeting again the level gaze of my hostess. A sudden gleam in her eyes and a quick lift of her white head showed me she had caught my unconscious tribute to the strength and beauty of the young man, who was not only the last of her line, but, according to mountain traditions, the "apple of her eye."

"Come 'long in," she said, quietly; and she added as I crossed her threshold, "Ef yo' rid 'crost th' Gap, yo' mus' be mi-i-ghty ti'ed."

IT WAS YOUNG "SHEP," THE LAST OF THE MORANS

She pushed a chair in front of the great fireplace which filled one side of the cabin, and I dropped gladly into it and took off my hat, while she bustled about with hospitable enterprise, heating water and rattling tea-cups. Suddenly she disappeared, and in another instant I heard the despairing, final squawk of an unfortunate hen. I knew that within the hour it would be served to me in a strange dish in which the flavors of burnt feathers and of tough, unseasoned meat would struggle for recognition, and I sighed. But the great logs burning in the old fireplace were good to watch, and their warmth was comforting, for the sun had suddenly gone behind a cloud and an autumn wind had begun to whine around the cabin and in the big chimney.

There were only five pieces of furniture in the room—a narrow, home-made wooden bed occupying one corner, a large spinning-wheel, a pine table, a rough log settle, and the chair in which I sat. At the right of the fireplace a ladder led to a trap-door which evidently opened into a low attic—young Moran's quarters, I assumed. Just outside the open door stood a low, flat-topped tree-trunk, holding a tin basin full of water; a homespun towel on a nail below it testified mutely to its past usefulness. While I was regarding these, the master of the house reappeared, plunged his black head into the basin, flung the water in a spray over his face and hands, wiped them on the towel, and entered the cabin, ready for dinner. His immediate impulse was to attend to the fire, and as he approached it he cast a side glance at me, as shy and curious as that of some half-tamed creature of the open. When he had put on another log he spoke without looking at me, his brown cheeks flushing with the effort.

"Done fed th' critter," he announced, laconically.

I thanked him, and mercifully kept my eyes on the fire. For a time he remained there, too, with occasional darting glances at me, which finally, as I seemed unaware of them, settled into a steady and close inspection. I realized what a strange, new type I presented to him—a young woman from New York, wearing a riding-habit and riding-boots, trim and slim and tailor-made. His glance lingered a long time on my hair and my hands. There was nothing offensive about it. At first merely curious, it had finally become reflective and friendly. At last I began to talk to him, and after several false starts he was able to respond, sprawling opposite me on the big settle, his hands clasped behind his curly head, his legs extended toward the fire, while I told him of New York and answered his extraordinary questions.

It had seemed somehow fitting that the sun should go behind a cloud when I entered this tragic home; but for a long time there was no intimation in our talk of the other shadows that lay over the cabin, of the bloody trail that led to it, of the tragic row of graves on the hill beside it, or of the bullets that had whispered the failure of their mission in this boy's ears. We were a fairly cheerful company as we drew up to the pine table when the old woman announced dinner, and even the stoic calm of her face relaxed over the story of some of my experiences on the trail with Jef'son Davis. She did the honors of her house a little stiffly, but with dignity; and always, except when she was thus engaged, her black eyes focused on the face of her grandson and clung there, fixed. Her contribution to our talk consisted of two eloquent sentences:

"Sometimes we got but'r," she remarked, as we sat down, "sometimes we hain't. T'day we hain't."

We had, however, the expected chicken, with corn bread and tea, and in the perfect flowering of his hospitality, young Shep Moran heaped these high upon my plate, and mourned when I refused to devour the entire repast. He was chatting now with much self-possession, while under his talk and his occasional shy but brilliant smile his grandmother expanded like a thirsty plant receiving water. He had, he told me proudly, learned to read, and he owned two books—the Bible and some poems by a man named Whittier. He knew most of the poems "by hea't." He had never ridden on a railroad-train, but he could ride any animal that traveled on four legs, and he had heard a fiddle played upon during his one expedition out into the great world—his solitary visit to Jayne's Crossroads, two years before.

When dinner was over he smoked a clay pipe before the fire, and gradually his talk grew more intimate. He and his grandmother were going to leave the cabin, he said, and live on the other side of the mountain. A man had offered him a job in some coal-mines that were being opened up. But he could not go yet—there was something he had to do first. The shadow over the cabin seemed to deepen as he spoke. I knew what he had to do—he had to kill Samuel Tyrrell, who had killed his father. His uncles, his brother, and Samuel Tyrrell's sons had killed one another. There were only himself and Samuel Tyrrell left.

He turned and looked at me. His whole expression had changed—his brow was somber, his eyes brooding, his lips drawn back from his teeth in an odd, unconscious snarl. Quite naturally he took it for granted that I knew of him and his feud.

"Sam Tyrrell, he'd—" he hesitated, then added under his breath, as he glanced at the old woman moving toward the cupboard with her dishes—"he'd even shoot at gran ef he ketched 'er on the trail."

I rose and put on my hat. Before my eyes my mountain demigod had suddenly been transformed into a young beast, lusting for blood. I felt that I must get away from the oppression of the place. He made no comment, but picked up his hat and went for my horse. When he returned he was leading Jef'son Davis and riding his own horse, a rough-coated mountain animal which, powerful though it was, seemed hardly up to the huge bulk astride it. With a jerk of his head, he checked my protest and the little cry that broke from his grandmother's lips.

"I'm jes' gwine ter th' bend," he told her, "t' p'int aout th' trail t' Clapham's. She's gwine t' stay all night thar. Look fo' me home 'fore sundown."

The grandmother cast a quick glance at me, then dropped her eyes. The fire seemed to have flickered and died out. Her steps dragged. In an instant she had become a feeble, apprehensive old woman.

"Don't you take Shep no furder 'n th' bend," she quavered. "Will yuh?"

I met her look squarely. "You may be sure I will not," I promised, and we rode away.

Young Moran's horse proved better than he looked. With the greatest ease and lightness he carried his rider along the trail, a little in advance of me where it was narrow, and close beside me when it widened out. As we rode, the young man became all boy again. He knew every mountain tree and shrub, every late plant that had raised a brave head above the pall of autumn leaves, every bird whose note sounded near us or which winged its flight above us. He pointed out the bright yellow blossoms of the evening primrose, the bursting pods of the milkweed, the "purty look" of asters, gentian, and white everlasting against the somber background of the hills. He was delighted when we flushed a covey of quail, and at one point he stopped abruptly to show me the old swimming-hole which he and his brother had used, and on the banks of which, he added grimly, his brother had been killed by Tyrrell's eldest son. At this memory the shadow fell upon him again, and it was while we were riding on in a silence broken only by the padded hoof-beats of the horses that we heard a shot. Something from the underbrush at our right went humming past me, clipped a leaf from an overhanging bough above my companion's head, and sped onward to its harmless finish. Moran's horse, jerked back on its haunches by the rider's powerful grip on the bridle, stopped, trembling. Jef'son Davis shied violently, only to be caught and steadied by the instantaneous grasp of Moran's right hand. In the same second the young man himself was transformed from the simple, gentle nature-lover of the trail to a half-human spirit of hatred and revenge.

"The polecat!" he hissed. "I know whar he is. I'll *git* him this time!" With a quick swing he turned his horse. "Thar's your trail," he called back over his shoulder. "Straight on tuh th' bend—then go left."

He put his horse at a low but sharp incline on the right, and the animal scrambled up it with straining muscles and tearing hoofs that sent back a shower of stones and earth. In another moment horse and rider were out of sight.

It had all happened so suddenly that I had felt no fear. Now, left alone, it seemed incredible that it should have happened at all. Outwardly, everything was as it had been a moment before. The soft haze of the October atmosphere still lay over the silent hills; the reassuring whir of crickets was in the air. Jef'son Davis, happy in the comfort of a lax bridle, was eagerly cropping the leaves from an overhanging tree-branch. Yet within pistol-shot of this spot an assassin had crouched. Even now he and his enemy were perhaps having their last struggle.

With a deep breath, I gathered up the bridle and rode back at full speed along the trail over which I had come. When I drew near the Moran cabin I checked Jef'son Davis's pace and proceeded at a gentle canter. I did not wish to alarm Betsy Moran, but the door flew open while I was still some distance away, and the old woman hurried to meet me. Almost as soon as I had jumped from the saddle she was beside me, her eyes staring into mine with the question she dared not ask.

"Nothing serious has happened," I said, quickly, "but—" As I hesitated, she finished the sentence.

"They're arfter each othe'?" she said, dully. "They're shootin'?"

I nodded. Without another word, she turned and entered the cabin. I tethered my horse to a tree and followed her. There was nothing of helpless age about her now. Instead there was something horrible in her silence, something appalling in the preparations she at once began to make. She had gone through it all before—many, many times. She was ready to go through it again whenever the hour struck, and she had developed a terrible efficiency.

She filled the great kettle with water. She turned down the covers of the bed. From a closet in the wall she brought out linen and bandages, a few bottles, and several bundles of herbs, of which she began to make some sort of brew. At last she came and sat by the fire, crouched over it, waiting and listening. Occasionally she rose, went to the door, and looked out. Once or twice she whimpered a little, but she did not speak.

Darkness came. Several times I rose and put fresh logs on the fire. I found and lit a candle, to help out the firelight. It had become impossible to sit longer in that dim room, with its shadows and its memories, watching the terrible patience of the mountain woman and picturing a dead man, or a wounded one, lying helpless near the trail.

"Can't I ride somewhere and get some one?" I suggested once.

"No," the old woman answered, curtly. Half an hour later she added, more gently, and as if there had been no interval between her words: "They ain't no doctor in thirty miles. Ef Shep gits home, I kin tend t' him."

It was after ten o'clock before we heard a sound outside. I jumped to my feet, but the old woman was before me. Hurrying to the door, she flung it wide, and, shielding the candle with her hand, peered out into the blackness. Then, with a little cry, she handed the candle to me and ran forward. In the darkness something was crawling toward us, something that stumbled and rose and stumbled again. It collapsed just as it reached us, and fell near the threshold.

Someway, together, we dragged the last of the Morans into his home, and closed the door between him and his mountain world. His great body seemed to fill the cabin as it lay upon the floor, the arms and legs sprawling in incredible helplessness, the boots and trousers covered with mud, the blue shirt torn and blood-stained. Seizing one of her bottles, the old woman forced some of its contents between the boy's teeth, and as she did so he opened his eyes. For a moment he stared at her, at me, and around the cabin, dim in the flickering light of logs and candle. Then a gleam lit up his black eyes. His lips drew back over his teeth in a hideous, wolflike grin.

"He's done daid, gran," he choked out. "I got 'im!"

The old woman, who had been bending above him, dropped the bottle and sat back suddenly, flinging her lean arms above her head in a movement of wild exultation. A high cackle of joy broke from her. Then, remembering his need, she bent over him again and tried to force him to take more of the liquor; but he frowned it away, his stiff tongue seeking to form words.

"I—watched—him—die," he finally articulated, "'fo'—ever—I—tho't—o'—home!"

He closed his eyes and lapsed into unconsciousness. The old woman rocked above him.

"He's daid," she crooned. "He's daid, daid, daid!"

For a moment I thought it was her grandson she meant, but I saw that she was continuing her ministrations, accompanying them with this reassurance to those deaf ears. For a long time the hideous lullaby went on, while she washed the

wound in the boy's breast and checked its flow of blood, bandaging it as skilfully as any surgeon could have done the work. She let me help her now—keeping cold compresses on his hot head, for he was moaning with pain and fever, and giving him from time to time the medicine she had brewed. We could not move his great body, but we made him as comfortable as we could on the floor, and worked over him there while the night wore on, and the cries of prowling animals came to us from the mountainside.

Toward dawn the fever subsided. The boy's high color faded, and he hardly seemed to breathe. In my inexperience I was not sure whether these were good or bad signs, and I had no indication from Betsy Moran, whose face never changed as she hung above him. At sunrise she rose and went to the door, motioning to me to accompany her. There, following the direction indicated by her pointing, shaking old finger, I saw on the side of the hill, at the left of the cabin, six low mounds marked by six great boulders. For a long time the mountain woman looked at them in silence. Then she turned to me.

"He's daid," she whispered, with a kind of fierce delight. "*Tyrrell's daid.* Here's the e-end."

She leaned against the jamb of the door, staring up at the row of mounds defined against the desolate mountain by the first clear rays of the sun. A light breeze lifted the loose locks of her white hair and blew them about her face. In her eyes shone the wild exultation that had burned there the night before, when her boy had gasped out his message.

"Mrs. Moran," I asked, quietly, "how many Tyrrell graves are there?" She answered me somberly, almost absently. "Five," she said. Then, on a sudden memory, her shriveled arm went up in a gesture of triumph. "*Six!*" she corrected herself, exultantly. "Be six in th' Tyrrell lot t'-morrer."

Six in the Tyrrell lot to-morrow. Six in the Moran lot to-day—perhaps seven there to-morrow. And why? Unconsciously I uttered the word aloud, and the hills seemed to fling back the ironic question. Beside me the old woman stirred, thinking I was speaking to her. As if the words had touched a hidden spring, her confidence gushed forth, and as she talked she lifted her hands and began to twist into the tiny knob of hair at the back of her head the white locks that blew about her eyes.

"'Twas fo'ty yeahs back," she said, at last, almost to herself. "Come Christmas, hit's fo'ty yeahs back. Er yearlin' o' ourn had tooken up with neighbor cattle, an'

Tyrrell, he done claimed hit. They was always polecats, th' Tyrrells. Words come o' that, an' licks follered clost. At las' Tyrrell, he shot Amos—my man. 'Twa'n't long fo' Jep, my oldest, Shep's father, he killed Tyrrell. That's th' sta't of it. Now we've come t' th' e-end," she finished, and drew a long breath. "He's daid—Tyrrell's daid. Shep, he seen 'um die."

She led the way back into the cabin, and stopped at the foot of the ladder. "Go up thar," she said, almost gently. "Git some sleep. I reckon ye're perished fo' it."

I protested, but in vain. It finally became plain that for some reason she wished to be rid of me. She brought me a cup of some dark liquid and urged me to drink it. It was not tempting in appearance or flavor, but I drank it down. Then, as she still waited, I ascended the ladder and found myself in Shep's room—a tiny attic, its rafters hung with drying herbs, its pallet on the floor surprisingly clean, its one narrow window covering the Tyrrell trail. I had not expected to sleep, but I did—slept while the day mounted to high noon and waned to a gorgeous autumnal sunset.

I was awakened by the sound of hoof-beats, of men's voices, of many steps on the floor of the room below. For an instant I lay in puzzled silence, staring at the rafters above my head. Then, as memory awakened in its turn, I rose hurriedly and began to dress, my fingers shaking with excitement and nervousness. I understood the meaning of those pawing hoofs, of those heavy steps and rough voices, and as I dressed I listened. But all I caught was the tramp of feet, the scrape of furniture dragged across the floor, the whinnying of horses, impatient in the rising evening wind. Once I heard the old woman's voice, but I could distinguish only the word "sheriff." Soon I heard the heavy steps pass out of the house, and the creak and rattle of saddles and bridles as the visitors mounted their horses and rode away. They went slowly. They had arranged, I assumed, some sort of litter for the wounded man. In the room below there was absolutely no sound.

For a moment I hesitated. How could I go down and face that stricken old creature to whom life had just given this final turn of its relentless screw? Then, very slowly, I descended the ladder, my back to the room, afraid to move my eyes for fear of the scene they might rest upon. It was not until I stood on the cabin floor that I dared to look around me.

The living-room was swept and in perfect order. The last reflection of the setting sun lay in a brilliant line across its immaculate floor. The door was open,

affording a view of the long trail, along which the horsemen could be seen, riding slowly in single file. The kettle hung on the crane, the table was set for supper, and in the center of this peaceful scene my hostess sat alone, knitting a blue yarn sock.

Slowly she looked up at me. "Ef yo' slep' well," she said, quietly, "mou't be yer ready t' eat?"

She rose, laid down the blue sock, and began to move about the room. Speechless, I stared at her. I had thought the night before that, coming from her, no evidence of self-control could surprise me. But this uncanny poise filled me with a sort of awe. I dared not even ask a question. She had erected between us the barrier of her primitive dignity, her terrible courage. I could no more pass it than I could have broken through the thick walls of her cabin.

She placed the chair at the table, and in silence I sat down. She poured tea for me, and cut a wedge of corn bread, but I could not eat. After a few moments I gave up the effort, rose, and took my hat from the nail on which it hung. She watched me as I drew on my gloves. The action seemed to recall something to her.

"Shep," she said, casually, "he had t' borry yo' critter. Ye'll git it back soon's he kin send it."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, startled. "But—but was he able to ride—with his wound?"

She looked at me, her eyes showing the scorn of the primitive woman for such softness. "Lordy! Hawseback's same's a cradle to Shep," she muttered.

I drew a deep breath.

"They rode very slowly," I said. "I hope it won't hurt him. Good-by," and I held out my hand. "I'll walk to Clapham's. I know the way."

She put her hand in mine. In her eyes danced a sudden light, half mocking, half ecstatic. "Shep, he got off 'bout sun-up," she drawled. "Fo'ty mile along he wuz 'fo' ever sheriff come a-nigh this place!"

I could not speak, but something, I know, flashed in my face and was reflected in hers. For a moment longer her wrinkled old hand lay still in mine. She seemed loath to withdraw it, anxious to say more. Perhaps she was recalling the long vigil of the night, when we two had worked together over the unconscious form

of the last of the Morans. But her vocabulary offered her nothing with which to clothe those naked hours.

"Good-by," she repeated. And she ended primly: "I wish yo' well, miss. I sho'ly hev inj'yed yo' comp'ny!"

VII

TO THE RESCUE OF MISS MORRIS

I met Grace Morris for the first time at Mrs. Hatfield's musical tea—a unique affair at which the half-dozen world-famous artists our hostess had engaged for the afternoon strove vainly to make their music heard above the care-free voices of her guests. I had isolated myself behind a potted palm in the great music-room, and was trying to distinguish the strains of Mischa Elman's playing from the conversational high notes around me when a deprecating little laugh sounded in my ear.

"It's no use," said a clear, languid young voice. "We might as well chat, too. But first *do* rise on your toes, look over the purple plume on the fat woman's hat, and catch one glimpse of Elman's expression! He thinks we're all insane, or that he is."

I did not follow this stimulating suggestion. Instead I looked at the speaker. She was a typical New York society girl of twenty-three, or possibly twenty-four, dressed to perfection and bored to extinction, her pale, pretty features stamped with the avid expression of the chronic seeker of new sensations.

"You're Miss Iverson, aren't you?" she went on, when I had smiled my acknowledgment of her swift service across the conversational net. "My brother pointed you out to me at the theater the other night. He wants us to meet. He's one of your editors on the *Searchlight*, you know—Godfrey Morris."

In another minute we were chatting with as little compunction as the ruthless throng around us, and while we talked I studied Miss Morris. I knew a great deal about her. She had only recently returned from Germany, where for two years she had been studying singing with Lehmann. She had an exquisite voice, and, though it was understood that she would make no professional use of it, she had already sung at several concerts given in behalf of charities that appealed to her. She possessed a large fortune, inherited from her grandfather; her brother

Godfrey had inherited one of equally impressive proportions, but its coming had not interrupted the daily and nightly grind of his editorial work. Evidently the Morrises, despite their languid air, sprang from energetic stock. It was whispered that Miss Morris's energies occasionally lent themselves to all-night tango parties, and late suppers with Bohemian friends in operatic and dramatic worlds whose orbits hardly touched the exclusive one in which she dwelt; but thus far there had been nothing more significant than a few raised eyebrows to emphasize this gossip.

"I'm lucky to meet you," she ran on now. "It saves writing a note. Mother and I want you to dine with us Thursday evening of next week, at our hotel. We haven't gone to housekeeping. We're at the Berkeley for the winter, because Godfrey has an apartment there. Can you come?—I'm so glad. At eight, then."

A ravishing strain of music reached us. Simultaneously the voice of the fat woman with the purple plume uttered the final notes of the recital she had been pouring into the ears of the acquaintance on her left. "Then, and not till then," she shouted, "I found that the unhappy woman *lived on the West Side*!"

Miss Morris's eyes and mine exchanged a look that carried us a long way forward on the road of friendship.

"I wouldn't miss these musicales for the world," she murmured. "Isn't Mrs. Hatfield unique? Look at her now, out in the dining-room, putting a layer of French pastry over Amato's perfectly good voice! He won't be able to sing for a week. Oh, Elman has finished. Do you know him? No? Then come and meet him."

Miss Morris interested me, and I was sorry to say good-by to her when we parted, and genuinely disappointed when I reached the Berkeley the following Thursday night, to learn that she was not to be with us at dinner. Her mother lost no time in acquainting me with this distressing fact.

"Grace wants me to apologize for her, and to tell you how *very* sorry she is to miss you," Mrs. Morris drawled at once, as she came forward to receive me.

She was a charming woman of fifty, with white hair, a young face, and the figure of a girl of twenty. Under the controlled calm of her manner a deep-seated nervousness struggled for expression. She had her daughter's languor, but none of her cool insolence or cynicism; in the look of her gray eyes I caught a glint oddly like that in the eyes of her son.

"Grace was looking forward to your coming," she went on, as she seated herself on a davenport facing the open fire, and motioned me to a place beside her. "But an hour ago she received a note from a friend who is in town only for the night. There was something very urgent in it, and Grace rushed off without stopping to explain. My son Godfrey will be with us—and we hope Grace will be back before you leave."

As if in response to his cue, "my son Godfrey" appeared, looking extremely handsome in his evening clothes, and rather absurdly pleased to find his mother and me so deep in talk that we did not hear him approach.

"Friends already, aren't you?" was his comment on the effective tableau we made, and as we descended in the elevator to the hotel dining-room he explained again how glad he was to have his mother and sister home after two years of absence, and to bring us together at last.

The little dinner moved on charmingly, but before an hour had passed I realized that my host and hostess were under some special strain. Mrs. Morris wore a nervous, expectant look—the look of one who is listening for a bell, or a step long overdue. Several times I saw Godfrey glance toward the door, and once I caught a swift look that passed between him and his mother—a look charged with anxiety. Both obviously tried to throw off their care, whatever it was, and to a degree they succeeded. I was sending my spoon into the deep heart of a raspberry-ice when a servant leaned over the back of my chair and confidentially addressed me.

"Beg pardon, miss," he murmured, deprecatingly. "But if it's Miss Iverson, a person wants Miss Iverson on the wire."

I flushed and hesitated, glancing at Mrs. Morris.

"Party says it's urgent, miss," prompted the servant.

I apologized to my hostess, and rose. There seemed no other course open to me. Mrs. Morris looked mildly amused; her son looked thoughtful as he, too, rose and accompanied me across the dining-room to the door, returning then to the table, as I insisted that he must. In the telephone-booth the voice of Grace Morris came to me over the wire, not languid now, but quick and imperative.

"Miss Iverson?" she called. "Is that you at last? Thank Heaven! I thought you were never coming. Are mother and Godfrey still in the dining-room? Good!

Will you do me a favor? It's a big one—vital."

I expressed my willingness to do Miss Morris a vital favor.

"Thank you," she said. "Then please do exactly what I tell you. Go to the hotel desk and ask the clerk for the key to my suite. I left it with him. Then go up to my bedroom. On my dressing-table you'll find an open letter I dropped there—or perhaps it's on the floor. Conceal it in your bosom, the way they do in books, and keep it for me till we meet."

I gasped. With a rush, my mind leaped at some of the possible results of carrying out this startling suggestion.

"Really, Miss Morris," I protested, "I can't do that. Suppose some one caught me in the act? It's likely to happen. We're at dessert, and I heard your mother order the coffee brought up to her sitting-room. Isn't the letter safe till you get home?"

There was a sharp exclamation at the other end of the line. Then Miss Morris's voice came to me again, in the controlled accents of desperation.

"Miss Iverson," she urged, "you've simply got to help me out! If my mother goes into my room and sees that letter, she'll read it. She'll think it's her duty. If she reads it—well, in plain words, there will be the devil to pay. Now do you understand?"

"But why not come home and get it yourself?" I persisted.

"I can't. There isn't time. I'm away down at the Lafayette. Heavens! I didn't mean to let that slip out, I'm so nervous I don't know what I'm saying. Don't tell a soul where I am. Don't even let any one know I've talked to you. And you *must* get that letter. There isn't a minute to lose!"

It began to look as if I had to get that letter. And since the thing must be done, I wanted it over.

"Very well," I said, between my teeth, and hung up the receiver, shutting off the stream of thanks that gushed forth from the other end of the wire. In the same mood of grim acceptance I went to the hotel desk. I did not intend to make this part of my task more difficult than it need be, so I paid the clerk the compliment of truth.

"I want to get something from Miss Morris's room," I told him, casually. "Will

you give me the key, please? I am dining with Mrs. Morris to-night."

He gave me a swift glance, then took the key from its rack and handed it to me with a little bow. In another moment I was in the elevator and on my way to the tenth floor, on which, as I had learned, each independent member of the Morris family occupied a separate apartment, though the suites of Mrs. Morris and her daughter had a connecting door. The tag on Miss Morris's key gave me the number of her suite, and I found her door without difficulty. My fingers shook with nervousness as I inserted the key in the lock. I felt like a housebreaker, and probably looked like one, as I glanced anxiously over my shoulder and up and down the long hall, which, fortunately, was empty.

Once inside the apartment I regained my courage. I went swiftly through the entrance-hall and the sitting-room, turning, by instinct as it seemed, to the door that opened into the bedroom. This, like the sitting-room, was dark, and I could not immediately find the switch that turned on the electric light. There was, however, an open fire burning behind a brass fender, and by its uncertain light I made my way to the dressing-table, my eyes racing ahead in their eager search. There, among a litter of silver and glass toilet articles, powder-puffs, and shell-pins, was the letter I was after—an unfolded sheet, lying face downward. An envelope, obviously that from which it had been taken, had fallen to the floor.

I picked up the letter. Just as I did so the door at the other end of the bedroom opened, and Mrs. Morris entered. For an instant, startled, we faced each other in the gloom. The next second, acting on an impulse which seemed to flex the muscles of my arm before it touched my brain, I flung the letter into the fire. At the same moment Mrs. Morris touched an electric switch beside the door and filled the room with light. Then she came toward me, easily and naturally.

"Oh, here you are," she said. "The elevator-boy told me you had come this way. Is anything wrong? Are you ill?"

Her manner was perfect. There was exactly the right degree of solicitude in her voice, of quiet assurance that everything would be at once and satisfactorily explained. But as she spoke she turned and fixed her eyes on the blazing letter in the fire. All but one corner was burned, but the thick paper kept its perfect outline. Bending, she picked up the envelope from the floor, glanced at the address, and nodded as if to herself, still holding it in her hand.

For a second I remained speechless. It was a hideous situation to be in. Still, even confronted by Godfrey Morris's mother, I felt that I had done right, and

before the pause was too deeply underlined I managed to reply naturally that nothing was wrong and that I was quite well. When my hostess realized that I did not intend to make any explanation, she threw her arm across my shoulder and led me from the room. It was not until we were again in her sitting-room, and side by side on her big davenport, that she spoke.

"My dear," she said, then, very quietly, "won't you trust me?"

I looked at her, and she smiled back at me, but with something in her face that hurt. She seemed suddenly to have grown old and care-worn.

"Do you imagine I don't understand?" she went on. "I have not lived with my daughter Grace for almost a quarter of a century without knowing her rather well. Of course it was she who telephoned you. Of course she asked you to find and burn that letter. What else did she say? Where is she now? There is a vital reason why her brother and I should know. We have been anxious about her all evening. I am afraid you noticed it."

I admitted that I had. "I'm sorry," I added. "But I can't explain. I really can't say anything. I wish I could. I'm sure you will understand."

Mrs. Morris studied me in silence for a moment. The glint in her gray eyes deepened. Her jaw-line took on a sudden firmness, oddly like that of her son.

"Of course I understand," she said. "It's girlish loyalty. You think you must stand by Grace—that you must respect her confidence. But can't you believe that Grace's mother and brother may be wiser than she is?"

This, to one only two years emancipated from family rule, had a familiar sound. Instinctively I resented it.

"Aren't you forgetting," I asked, gently, "that Miss Morris is really a woman of the world? It isn't as if she were merely a school-girl, you know, with immature judgment."

Mrs. Morris sighed. "You don't understand," she murmured. "You may feel differently when you talk to my son. I see that we must be very frank with you."

With an effort she talked of other things for a few moments, until Godfrey joined us. His face brightened as he entered, and darkened when his mother told him briefly what had occurred. Without preface, he went at the heart of the tangle, in as direct and professional a manner as if he were giving me an assignment in the

Searchlight office.

"It all means just this, Miss Iverson," he said. "Grace has fallen in love with an utterly worthless fellow. He has no family, no position; but those things don't matter so much. Perhaps she has, as she says, enough of them for two. What does matter is that he comes of bad stock—rotten stock—that he's a bounder and worse."

That surprised me, and I showed it.

"Oh, he has some qualities, I admit," added Morris. "The most important one is a fine tenor voice. He is a professional singer. That interested Grace in the beginning. Now she is obsessed by him. She has lost her head. Evidently he's in town to-night—you heard my mother say that envelope was addressed in his handwriting. They're together somewhere, and Heaven only knows what they're hatching up."

I resented that at first. Then it disturbed me. Perhaps they *were* hatching up something.

"I'm sorry to bore you with all this," Mr. Morris apologized, "but Grace seems to have dragged you into it. She and Dillon—that's the fellow's name—have been trying to bring us 'round to their marriage. Lately they've about given up hope of that. Now I believe Grace is capable of eloping with him. Of course, as you say, we can't control her, but I've been looking up his record, and it's mighty bad. If I could show her proofs of what I know is true, she would throw him over. With a little more time I can get them. I expect them this week. But if in the mean time—to-night—"

He broke off suddenly, stood up, and began to stride about the room.

I rose. "I haven't any idea what she intends to do," I told him, truthfully. "And I can't tell you where she is. But I'll do what I can. I'll try to find her, and tell her what you say." I turned to his mother. "Good night," I said. "I'll go at once."

They looked at each other, then at me. There was something fine in the way their heads went up, in the quiet dignity with which they both bade me good-by. It was plain that they were hurt, that they had little hope that I could do anything; but they would not continue to humiliate themselves by confidences or appeals to one who stood outside the circle of anxiety which fate had drawn around them.

Arrived at the Lafayette, I went patiently from room to room of the big French restaurant, glancing in at each door for the couple I sought. It was not long before I found them. They were in a corner in one of the smallest of the side rooms—one which held only four or five tables. Grace Morris's back was toward me as I entered the room, but her escort faced me, and I had a moment in which to look him over. He was a thin, reedy person, about thirty years old, in immaculate evening dress, with a lock of dry hair falling over a pale and narrow brow, and with hollow, hectic eyes that burned into those of his companion as he leaned over the table, facing her. They were talking in very low tones, and so earnestly that neither noticed me until I drew out a third chair at the table and quietly dropped into it. Both started violently. The man stared; Miss Morris caught my arm.

"What happened?" she asked, quickly. "Mother didn't get that letter?"

"No," I said. "No one saw it. It's burned."

She relaxed in her chair, with a laugh of relief.

"Speaking of angels," she quoted. "I was telling Herbert about you only a few moments ago." Her manner changed. "Miss Iverson," she said, more formally, "may I present Mr. Dillon?"

The reedy gentleman rose and bowed. She allowed him the barest interval for this ceremony before she continued.

"Herbert, listen to me," she said, emphatically. "If Miss Iverson will stand by us, I'll do it."

The young man's sallow face lit up. He had nice teeth and a pleasant smile. He had, also, the additional charm of a really beautiful speaking-voice. Already I began to understand why Miss Morris liked him.

"By Jove, that's great!" he cried. "Miss Iverson, Heaven has sent you. You've accomplished in ten seconds what I've failed to do in three hours." He turned to Miss Morris. "You explain," he said, "while I pay the bill and get the car ready. I'm not going to give you a chance to change your mind!"

He disappeared, and Miss Morris remarked, casually: "We're going to be married to-night, with you as maid of honor. Herbert gave me all the plans in his letter, and I came down fully determined to carry them out; but I've been hanging back. It's frightfully dismal to trot off and be married all by one's self—"

I stopped her, and hurriedly described what had occurred at the Berkeley. She listened thoughtfully.

"The poor dears," she murmured. "They can't get over the notion that I'm still in leading-strings. They'll feel better after it's all over, whereas if mother knew it was really coming off to-night she'd have a succession of heart attacks between now and morning, and Godfrey would spend the night pursuing us. We're going to Jersey for the ceremony—to a little country minister I've known since I was a child. Herbert will drive the car, and we'll put you into the chauffeur's fur coat."

It took me a long time to convince her that I would not play the important rôle she had assigned to me on the evening's program. At last, however, she seemed impressed by my seriousness, and by the emphasis I laid on the repetition of her brother's words. She rose, resumed her usual languidly insolent air, and led the way from the room. In the main hall, near the door, we found Mr. Dillon struggling into a heavy coat while he gave orders to a stout youth who seemed to be his chauffeur. Miss Morris drew Dillon to one side, and for a few moments the two talked together. Then they came toward me, smiling.

"All right," said the prospective bridegroom, with much cheerfulness. "Since she insists, we'll take Miss Iverson home first."

He gave me a cap that lay in the tonneau, helped Miss Morris and me into fur coats, settled us comfortably in the back seat, folded heavy rugs over our knees with great care, sprang into the driver's place, and took the wheel. In another moment the car leaped forward, turned a corner at an appallingly sharp angle, and went racing along a dark side-street at a speed that made the lamp-posts slip by us like wraiths. The wind sang past our ears. Miss Morris put her lips close to my face and laughed exultantly.

"You're going, after all, you see," she triumphed. "Herbert and I aren't easy to stop when we've set our hearts on anything. Here—what are you doing? Don't be an idiot!"

She caught me as I tried to throw off the rugs. I had some mad idea of jumping out, of stopping the car, even if I paid for it by serious injury; but her strong grip held me fast.

"I thought you had more sense," she panted. "There, that's right. Sit still."

I sat still, trying to think. This mad escapade would not only cost me my position

on the *Searchlight*, where Godfrey Morris was growing daily in power, but, what was infinitely worse, it would cost me his interest and friendship. More than any one else, in my two years on the newspaper, he had been helpful, sympathetic, and understanding. And this was my return to him. What would he think of me? What must I think of myself?

We were across the ferry now. Dillon stopped the car and got out to light the lamps. During the interval Miss Morris held me by a seemingly affectionate, but uncomfortably tight, pressure of an arm through mine. I made no effort to get away. Whatever happened, I had now decided I must see the thing through. There was always a chance that in some way, *any* way, I could prevent the marriage.

The great car sped on again, through a fog that, thin at first, finally pressed against us like a moist gray net. Though we could see hardly a dozen yards ahead of us, Dillon did not slacken his alarming speed. From time to time we knew, by the wan glimmer of street lamps through the mist, that we were sweeping through some town. Gradually the roads grew rougher. Occasionally we made sharp turns, Dillon stopping often to consult with Miss Morris, who at first had seemed to know the way, but who now made suggestions with growing uncertainty. Plainly, we had left the highway and were on country roads. The fog lifted a trifle, and rain began to fall—lightly at first, then in a cold, steady downpour. The car jolted over the ruts in the road, tipped at a dangerous angle once or twice, but struggled on.

In varying degrees our tempers began to feel the effect of the cold, the roughness, and the long-continued strain. Miss Morris and I sat silent. At his wheel Dillon had begun to swear, at first under his breath, then more audibly, in irritable, muttered words, and finally openly and fluently, when he realized that we had lost our way. Suddenly he stopped the car with a jerk that almost threw us out of our seats.

"What dashed place is this?" he demanded, turning for the first time to face us. "Thought you knew the way, Grace?"

With an obvious effort to ignore his manner, Miss Morris peered unhappily into the gray mist around us. "I don't recognize it at all," she confessed, at last. "We must have taken the wrong turn somewhere. I'm afraid we're lost."

Our escort swore again. His self-control, sufficient when all was going smoothly, had quite deserted him. I stared at him, trying to realize that this was the

charming young man I had met at the Lafayette less than three hours ago.

"This is an infernal mess," he exclaimed at last. "We're in some sort of marsh! The mud's a foot deep!"

He continued to pull and tug and twist and swear, while the car responded with eager throbs of its willing heart, but with lagging wheels. At last, however, we were through the worst of the marsh and out into a wider roadway, and just as we began to go more smoothly there was a sudden, loud report. The car swerved. A series of oaths poured from Dillon's lips as he stopped the car and got out in the mud to inspect the damage.

"Cast a shoe, dash her," he snarled. "And on a road a million miles from any place. Of all the fool performances this trip was the worst. Why didn't you watch where you were going, Grace? You said you knew the way. You knew I didn't know it."

His last words had degenerated into an actual whine. Looking at him, as he stood in the mud, staring vacantly at us, I had a feeling that, absurd and impossible as it seemed, in another minute the young man would burst into tears! His nerves were in tatters; all self-control, all self-respect, was gone.

Miss Morris did not answer. She merely sat still and looked at him, at first in a white, flaming anger that was the more impressive because so quiet, later in an odd, puzzled fashion, as if some solution of the problem he presented had begun to dawn upon her. He meantime took off his fur coat and evening coat, rolled up his sleeves, and got ready for his uncongenial task of putting on a new tire. I took the big electric bull's-eye he handed me, and directed its light upon his work. By the time the new tire was on, his light evening shoes were unrecognizable, his clothes were covered with mud, his face was flushed with exertion and anger, and the few words he spoke came out with a whine of exhausted vitality. At last he stopped work, straightened up, reached into the car, and fumbled in the pocket of his overcoat. Then he walked around to the side of the car farthest from us, and bent forward as if to inspect something there. I started to follow him, but he checked me.

"Stay where you are," he said, curtly. "Don't need you."

A moment later he came back to us, opened the door, and motioned us into the tonneau. In the short interval his whole manner had changed. He had stopped muttering and swearing; he seemed anxious to make us comfortable, and he

folded the rugs over our knees with special care, casting at Miss Morris a series of anxious glances, which she quietly ignored. Before he got in and took his place at the wheel he made a careful inspection of the other tires, and several times, as I changed the position of the light to fall more directly upon them, he smiled and thanked me. Miss Morris was evidently impressed by his change of mood. Quietly and seriously she studied him.

He was directly beside me now, bending over the rear right tire, and suddenly, as his bare arm came into view, I saw on it something that made me start and look at it again. I had not been mistaken. I glanced at Miss Morris. Her eyes were on Dillon, but in her place on the left side of the car she commanded a view of only his head and shoulders. As if annoyed by a flicker in the light, I lifted the bull's-eye into my lap and began to fumble with the snap, turning off the light. The little manœuver had the effect I expected. Mr. Dillon stood up at once, and his bare arm came helpfully forward.

"What's the matter?" he asked, trying to take the bull's-eye. "Let me see."

I held it tight. At the same instant I flashed the light on again.

"*This* is the matter," I said. "There's no mistaking what it means!"

To my ears my voice sounded hysterical, and I have no doubt it was, for what I was doing went against the grain. The one thing I most desire is to play the great game of life according to the highest rules. Yet here, under the eyes of Dillon's future wife, I was directing a relentless light on the young man's bare arm—an arm peppered with dark needle-pricks, and covered with telltale scars. For one instant, before the mind of its owner took in what I was saying, it remained before us, giving its mute, horrible testimony to constant use of the hypodermatic syringe. The next, it was wrenched away with a jerk that knocked the bull's-eye from my hand. Over me Dillon leaned, his face livid with rage.

"I'll make you regret that!" he snarled.

"Oh no, you won't, Herbert," Miss Morris said, gently. "This is not a melodrama, you know. And you haven't anything against Miss Iverson, for I was already beginning to—to—understand. Take us home."

He started to speak, but something in her eyes checked him, and with a little shrug—no doubt, too, with the philosophy of the drug victim who has just had his drug—he turned away. In silence he rolled down his sleeves, put on his fur

coat, took his place at the wheel, and, turning the car, started back through the clearing fog toward the far lights of the city.

It was a long ride and a silent one. At his wheel Dillon sat motionless, his jaws set, his eyes staring straight ahead. His driving, I noticed, was much more careful than on our outward ride. Not once did I see Grace Morris look at him. Once or twice she shivered, as if she felt cold. When we were on the ferry-boat Dillon turned and spoke to her.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," he said. "I suppose—your manner seems to mean—that—I've lost everything."

For a moment Miss Morris did not reply. Under the robe her hand slipped into mine and clung there, as if in a lonely world she suddenly felt the need of a human touch.

"Poor old Herbert," she said, then, very gently. "I'm afraid we've both lost everything. This has been a nightmare, but—I needed it."

There was absolute finality in her voice. Without a word the young man turned from her and sat staring at the river lights before us. Miss Morris pressed my hand.

"I'm going to take you home with me," she announced. She took out her watch and looked at it. "Quarter to three," she murmured. "What a night!" And after a moment she added under her breath, "And what an escape!"

She threw back her shoulders with a gesture as energetic as if at the same time she had cast off some intolerable burden. Then she added, in her cool, cynical fashion, "It's only fair, you know, that after such a vigil your drooping spirit should be refreshed by the rain of my mother's grateful tears—not to speak of Godfrey's!"

VIII

MARIA ANNUNCIATA

It had been a trying day in the *Searchlight* office. Godfrey Morris, our assistant feature editor, was ill, and much of his work had devolved on me. From ten o'clock in the morning I had steadily read copy and "built heads," realizing as my blue pencil raced over the sheets before me that my associates would resent the cutting of their stories and that Colonel Cartwell would freely condemn the heads. It was a tradition in Park Row that no human being save himself had ever built a newspaper head which satisfied our editor-in-chief, and his nightly explosions of rage over those on the proofs that came to his desk jarred even the firm walls of the *Searchlight* building.

To-day I sympathized with Colonel Cartwell, for as I bent wearily over my desk, cutting, rewriting, adding to the pile of edited copy before me, a scare-head in a newspaper I had received that morning from my home city swung constantly before my tired eyes. It was plain that the ambitious Western editor had been taking lessons in head-building from the *Searchlight* itself, and was offering us the tribute of humble imitation; for, in the blackest type he could select, and stretching across two columns of the *Sentinel's* first page, were these startling lines:

From City Room to Convent Cell

Miss May Iverson, Daughter of General John Lamar Iverson of This City, to Take the Vows of a Nun of the Sacred Cross

The article which followed was illustrated with photographs of my father, of me, and of the convent from which I had graduated nearly four years ago. It sketched my career as a reporter on the New York *Searchlight*, mentioned my newspaper work and my various magazine stories with kindly approval, and stated that my intention when I graduated at eighteen had been to enter the convent at twenty-one, but that in deference to the wishes of my father I had consented to wait

another year. This time of probation was almost over, the *Sentinel* added, and it was "now admitted" that Miss Iverson, "despite the brilliant promise of her journalistic career," would be one of the thirty novices who entered the convent of St. Catharine in July.

All this I had read only once before thrusting the *Sentinel* out of sight under the mass of copy on my desk. Now, word by word, it returned to me as I built the heads that were to startle our reading public in the morning. Around me the usual sounds of the city room swelled steadily into the familiar symphony of our work. Typewriters clicked and rattled, telephone bells kept up their insistent summons, the presses, now printing the final evening editions, sent from far below their deep and steady purr, while through it all the voices of Farrell and Hurd cut their incisive way, like steamboat whistles in a fog, to members of the staff. It was an hour I loved, even as I loved the corresponding hour at St. Catharine's, when students and nuns knelt together in the dim, beautiful convent chapel while the peace of benediction fell upon our souls. I wanted both the convent and my work. I could not have them both. And even now, toward the end of my fourth year of professional life, I was still uncertain which I was to choose. For months I had been hesitating, the helpless victim of changing moods, of conflicting desires. Now, I realized, there must be an end to these. The article in the *Sentinel* had brought matters to a focus. In one way or the other, and for all time, I must decide my problem.

It was six o'clock when I sent down the last pages of copy, closed my desk, and walked out of the *Searchlight* building to find myself in an unfamiliar world. Around me lay the worst fog New York had ever known—a fog so dense that the forms of my fellow pedestrians were almost lost in it, though I could hear their voices on every side. From the near-by river the anxious warnings of horns and whistles came to my ears thickly, as if through padded walls. The elevated station I had to reach was less than a block away, but to-night no friendly eye of light winked at me from it, and twice as I walked cautiously forward I was jostled by vague bulks from which came short laughs and apologies as they groped their way past me.

It was an uncanny experience, but it seemed, in my present mood, merely a fitting accompaniment to my own mental chaos. Resolutely I tried to steady my thoughts to pull myself together. I knew every inch of the little journey to the station. In a few moments more, I reflected, I would be comfortably seated in an elevated train, and within half an hour, if all went normally, I would be safely at home and dressing for dinner. It was pleasant to remember that I had made no

engagement for that evening. I could dine alone, slowly and luxuriously, with an open book before me if I cared to add that last sybaritic touch to my comfort—and later I could dawdle before my big open fire, with a reading-lamp and half a dozen new magazines wooing me at my elbow. Or I could take up my problem and settle it before I went to bed.

My groping feet touched the lowest step of the elevated stairs. I put my hand forward to raise my skirt for the ascent, and simultaneously, as it seemed, a cold hand slipped through the fog and slid into mine, folding around two of my fingers. It was a very tiny hand—almost a baby's hand. Startled, I looked down. Something small and plump was pressing against my knee, and as I bent to examine it closely I saw that it was a child—a little girl three or four years old, apparently lost, but obviously unafraid. Through the mist, as I knelt to bring her face on a level with my own, a pair of big and wonderful brown eyes looked steadily into mine, while a row of absurdly small teeth shone upon me in a shy but trustful smile.

"Fine-kine-rady," remarked a wee voice in clear, dispassionate tones.

Impulsively I gave the intrepid adventurer a friendly hug. "Why, you blessed infant!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here all alone? Where do you live? Where's your mama?"

Still kneeling, I waited for an answer, but none came. The soft little body of the new-comer leaned confidingly against my shoulder. A small left hand played with a button on my coat; its mate still clung firmly to my fingers. The child's manner was that of pleased acceptance of permanent and agreeable conditions. Into the atmosphere of well-being and dignified reserve which she created, my repeated question projected itself almost with an effect of rudeness. On its second repetition it evoked a response, though merely an echo.

"Fine-kine-rady," repeated the young stranger, patiently. She continued her absorbing occupation of twirling my coat button while I pondered over the cryptic utterance. It meant nothing to me.

"She's certainly lost," I thought. "I wonder if Casey would remember her if he saw her."

I peered through the fog, looking for the big Irish policeman whose post for the past two years had been here at the junction of the three tenement streets that radiated, spoke-like, from under the elevated station. He must be somewhere

near, I knew, possibly within ear-shot. I decided to try the effect of a friendly hail.

"*Oh-ho—Officer Casey!*" I called, careful to speak cheerfully, that the cry might not frighten the child beside me. "*Where—are—you?*"

After a moment I heard an answering hail; an instant later the familiar bulk of Casey towered above me in the mist.

"Who's wantin' me?" he demanded, and then, as he recognized me: "Hel-*lo*, Miss Iverson! Sure ye're not lost, are ye?" he added, facetiously.

"I'm not," I told him, "but I think some one else is. Do you recognize this youngster? I found her here just now—or, rather, she found me."

"Fine-kine-rady," murmured the child, antiphonally. She had turned her brown velvet eyes on the policeman in one fleeting glance which seemed to label and dismiss him. His existence, her manner plainly said, was no concern of hers. Casey bent down and surveyed her with interest—a task made somewhat difficult by the fact that she was coldly presenting the back of her head to him and that the top of it was about on a level with his knee.

"Let's take her up t' the waitin'-room," he suggested, "an' have a good look at her. Can she walk, I wonder—or will I carry her?"

At the words the independent explorer below us started up the stairs, dragging me with her, her hand still clinging to my fingers, her short, willing legs taking one step at a time and subject to an occasional embarrassing wabble, but on the whole moving briskly and with the ease of habit.

"She understands English," remarked Casey, as he admiringly followed her, "an' she's used to stairs. *That's* clear."

We found the waiting-room deserted except by the ticket-seller and the ticket-chopper, who were languidly discussing the fog. Both took an animated interest in our appearance, and, when they learned our mission, eagerly approached the child for minute inspection of her. In the center of the little circle we made under the station lamp the mite bore our regard with the utmost composure, her brown eyes on my face, her hand still firmly grasping my third and fourth fingers. She seemed mildly surprised by this second delay in getting anywhere, but entirely willing to await the convenience of these strange beings who were talking so much without saying anything. The ticket-seller finally summed up the result of

our joint observation.

"Whoever that kid is, she's a peach," he muttered, in spontaneous tribute to the living picture before us.

She *was* a peach. Her bare head was covered with short, upstanding curls, decorated on the left side with a cheap but carefully tied scarlet bow that stood out with the vivid effect of a poinsettia against black velvet. In her cheeks were two deep dimples, and a third lurked in the lower right side of her chin, awaiting only the summons of her shy smile to spring into life. When she lowered her eyes her curly black lashes seemed unbelievably long, and when she raised them again something in their strange beauty made me catch my breath.

She wore no mittens, though the night was cold, but her tiny body was buttoned tightly into a worn, knitted, gray reefer-jacket, under which showed a neat little woolen skirt and black stockings and shoes which, though very shabby, revealed no holes. She was surprisingly clean. She had, indeed, an effect of having been scrubbed and dressed with special care and in her best clothes, poor though they were. Her complexion had the soft, warm olive tint peculiar to Latin races.

For a long time she bore the close scrutiny of our four pairs of eyes with her astonishing air of calm detachment. Then, as the inspection threatened to be indefinitely prolonged, she became restless and took refuge against my knee. Also, with an obvious effort to rise to any social demands the occasion presented, she produced again the masterpiece of her limited vocabulary.

"Fine-kine-rady," she murmured, anxiously, and this time her lips quivered.

"She's Eye-talian," decided Casey, sagely, "an' 'tis a sure thing she lives somewhere near. Hasn't *anny* of yez set eyes on her before? Think, now."

Hopefully he and I gazed at the station employees, but both heads shook a solemn negative. The light of a sudden inspiration illumined the Celtic features of Casey.

"I'll tell ye what we'll do," he announced. "'Tis plain she's strayed from home. I c'u'd take her t' th' station an' let her folks come fur her—but that's the long way t' do ut. There's a shorter wan. 'Tis this."

He tried to draw me to one side, but the little manœuver was not successful. Tightening her grasp on my fingers, the object of our solicitude promptly accompanied us. Casey lowered his voice to a whisper which was like the

buzzing of a giant bee.

"I'll take her back to the fut of th' stairs an' *lave* her," he pronounced. "She'll start home, an' she'll find her way like a burrd. Av course," he added, hastily, apparently observing a lack of response in my expression, "I'll folly her an' watch her. Av she don't find th' place, I'll take her t' th' station. But she *will*. Lave it to her."

I hesitated. "I suppose that's the best plan," I unwillingly agreed, at last. "Probably her mother is half frightened to death already. But—couldn't we lead her home?"

Casey shook his head. "Not an inch w'u'd she budge, that wan," he declared, "unless she was on her own. But lave her be, an' she'll find her way. They're wise, thim young Eye-talians. Come, now."

He took the child's free hand and tried to draw her away. A pathetic wail burst from her. Frantically, with both arms she clasped my knee. Her poise, so perfect until now, deserted her wholly, as if she had finally decided to admit to an unfeeling world that after all there was a limit to the self-control of one of her tender age.

"Fine-kine-rady," she sobbed, while great tears formed and fell from the brown eyes she still kept fixed on my face, a look of incredulous horror dawning in them.

"I simply cannot send her away," I confessed to Casey, desperately. "It seems so heartless. I'll go with her."

Officer Casey was a patient man, but he was also a firm one. "Now, see here, Miss Iverson," he urged. "You've got sinse. Use ut. 'Tis just a fancy she's takin' t' ye, an' sure I'm th' last t' blame her," he added, gallantly. "But think av th' child's good. Ain't her mother raisin' th' roof over her head somewhere this minute?" he added, with deep craft. "Wud ye be killin' th' poor woman wid anxiety?"

"Well—" Again I gave way. "But you won't lose sight of her for one second, will you?" I demanded. "You know if you did, in this fog—"

Casey turned upon me the look of one who suffers and forbears. "W'u'd ye think ut?" he asked, coldly. "An' me wit' kids o' me own? But I'll make her *think* I've left her," he added. "I'll have to."

There seemed nothing to do but try his plan. Holding fast to the mental picture of the anxious mother "raising the roof" somewhere in the neighborhood, I gently pried loose the child's convulsively clinging fingers and turned away. The wail and then the sobs that followed wrung my heart. Casey picked up the frightened, almost frantic baby and started down the stairs, while I followed at a safe distance to watch their descent. As they went I heard him talking to and coaxing the small burden he carried, his rich Irish voice full of friendly cajolery, while, as if in sole but eloquent rebuttal of all he said, the shrill treble refrain, "Fine-kine-rady," came back to me sobbingly from the mist.

At the foot of the steps he set the child on her feet, told her to "go home now like a good wan," and disappeared under the stairway. I crept down the steps as far as I dared, and watched. The forlorn little wanderer, left alone in a fog that was alarming many grown-ups that night, stood still for a moment staring around her, as if trying to get her bearings. A final sob or two came from her. Then in another instant she had turned and trotted away, moving so fast that, though I immediately ran down the remaining steps and followed her, I could hardly keep her in sight. A little ahead of me I saw Casey hurriedly cross the street and shadow the tiny figure. I pursued them both, keeping my eyes on the child. I trusted Casey—indeed, my respect for his judgment had increased enormously during the last two minutes—but I felt that I must see for myself what happened to that baby.

Like wraiths the two figures in front of me hurried through the fog, so close now that they almost touched, Casey unaware of my presence, the child unconscious of us both. Not once, from the time she started, had the little thing looked back. She made her way swiftly and surely along the dingy tenement street that stretched off to the right; and at a certain door she stopped, hesitated a moment, and finally entered. Casey promptly followed her.

For a moment I stood hesitating, tempted to return to the station and resume my interrupted journey home. The little episode had already delayed me half an hour, and it seemed clear that the child was now safe. Surely nothing more could be done. Yet even as these logical reflections occurred to me I entered the door, impelled by an impulse which I did not stop to analyze, but which I never afterward ceased to bless. The heavy, typical smell of a tenement building rose to meet me, intensified by the dampness of the night. It seemed incredible that anything so exquisite as that baby could belong to such a place; but, looking up, I saw her already near the head of a long flight of dirty steps that rose from the dimly lighted hall. Casey, moving as quietly as his heavy boots permitted, was at

the bottom. I waited until he, too, had climbed the uneven staircase. Then I followed them both.

At the right of the stairs, off a miserable hall lit by one dim, blinking gas-jet, was an open door, which the child had evidently just entered. As I paused for breath on the top step I caught a glimpse of Casey's rubber coat also vanishing across the threshold. I slipped back into the shadow of the hall and waited. What I wanted was to hear the reassuring tones of human voices, and I found myself listening for these with suspended breath and straining ears; but for a long moment I heard nothing at all. I realized now that there was no light in the room, and this suddenly seemed odd to me. Then I heard Casey's voice, speaking to the child with a new note in it—a note of tense excitement that made my heart-beats quicken. The next instant I, too, was in the room.

Casey stood under the single gas-bracket, striking a match. As I went toward him, the light flickered up, dimly revealing a clean, bleak room, whose only furniture was a bed, a broken chair, and a small gas-stove. On the chair lay an empty tin cup and a spoon. The child, her back to both her visitors, stood beside the bed. Characteristically, though Casey had spoken to her, she ignored his presence. She was whimpering a little under her breath, and pulling with both hands at something that lay before her, rigid and unresponsive.

With a rush I crossed the room, and the desolate mite of humanity at the bed turned to stare at me, blinking in the sudden light. For an instant her wet brown eyes failed to recognize me. In the next, with an ecstatic, indescribably pathetic little cry, she lurched into the arms I opened to her. I could not speak, but I sat down on the floor and held her close, my tears falling on her curly head with its brave red bow. For a moment more the silence held. Then the child drew a long, quivering breath and patiently uttered again her parrot-like refrain.

"Fine-kine-rady," she murmured, brokenly.

Casey, his cap in his hand, stood looking down upon the silent figure on the bed. "Starvation, most likely," he hazarded. "She's bin dead fur an hour, maybe more," he mused aloud. "An' she's laid herself out, d'ye mind. Whin she found death comin' she drew her feet together, an' crost her hands on her breast, an' shut her eyes. They do ut sometimes, whin they know they's no wan to do ut for thim. But first she washed an' dressed her child in uts best an' sint ut out—so ut w'u'dn't be scairt. D'ye know th' woman?" he added. "Have ye ivir seen her? It seems t' me *I* have!"

Holding the baby tight, her head against my shoulder, that she might not see what I did, I went forward and looked at the wasted face. There was something vaguely familiar about the black hair-line on the broad, Madonna-like brow, about the exquisitely shaped nose, the sunken cheeks, the pointed chin. For a long moment I looked at them while memory stirred in me and then awoke.

"Yes," I said, at last. "I remember her now. Many evenings last month I saw her standing at the foot of the elevated stairs when I was going home. She wore a little shawl over her head—that's why I didn't recognize her at once. She never begged, but she took what one gave her. I always gave her something. She was evidently very poor. I remember vaguely that she had a child with her—this one, of course. I hardly noticed either of them as I swept by. One's always in a rush, you know, to get home, and, unfortunately, there are so many beggars!"

"That's it," said Casey. "I remember her now, too."

"If only I had realized how ill she was," I reflected aloud, miserably, "or stopped to think of the child. She called me 'kind lady.' Oh, Casey! And I let her starve!"

"Hush now," said Casey, consolingly. "Sure how could ye know? Some of thim that's beggin' has more than you have!"

"But she called me 'kind lady,'" I repeated. "And I let her—"

"Fine-kine-rady," murmured the child, drowsily, as if hearing and responding to a cue. She was quiet and well content, again playing with a coat-button; but she piped out her three words as if they were part of a daily drill and the word of command had been uttered. Casey and I looked at each other, then dropped our eyes.

"D'ye Know the Woman?" He Said

"*Find kind lady*," I translated at last. Then I broke down, in the bitterest storm of tears that I have ever known. Beside me Casey stood guard, silent and unhappy. It was the whimper of the child that recalled me to myself and her. She was growing frightened.

"Oh, Casey," I said again, when I had soothed her, "do you realize that the poor woman sent this baby out into New York to-night on the one chance in a million that she might see me at the station and that I would remember her?"

"What else c'u'd the poor creature do?" muttered Casey. "I guess she wasn't dependin' on her neighbors much. 'Tis easy to see that ivery stick o' furniture an' stitch o' clothes, ixcept th' child's, was pawned. Besides, thim tiniment kids is wise," he repeated. His blue eyes dwelt on the baby with a brooding speculation in their depths. "She's sleepy," he muttered, "but she's not starved. Th' mother fed her t' th' last, an' wint without herself; an' she kep' her warm. They do that sometimes, too."

With quick decision he put on his cap and started for the door. "I'll telephone me report," he said, briskly. "Will ye be waitin' here till I come back? Thin we'll take th' mother t' th' morgue an' the child t' th' station."

"Oh no, we won't," I told him, gently. "We'll see that the mother has proper burial. As for this baby, I'm going to take care of her until I find an ideal home for her. I know women who will thank God for her. I wish," I added, absently —"I wish I could keep her myself."

Casey turned on me a face that was like a smiling full moon. "'Tis lucky th' child is to have ye for a friend. But she'll be a raysponsibil'ty," he reminded me, "and an expinse."

I kissed the tiny hand that clung to mine. "That won't worry me," I declared. "Why, do you know, Casey"—I drew the soft little body closer to me—"I feel that if I worked for her a thousand years I could never make up to this baby for that horrible moment when I turned her adrift again—after she had found me."

Two hours later my waif of the fog, having been fed and tubbed and tucked into one of my nightgowns, reposed in my bed, and, still beatifically clutching a

cookie, sank into a restful slumber. My maid, a "settled" Norwegian who had been with me for two years, had welcomed her with hospitable rapture. A doctor had pronounced her in excellent physical condition. A trained nurse, hastily summoned to supervise her bath, her supper, and her general welfare, had already drawn up an impressive plan indicating the broad highway of hygienic infant living. Now, for the dozenth time, we were examining a scrap of paper which I had found in a tiny bag around the child's neck when I undressed her. It bore a brief message written in a wavering, foreign hand:

Maria Annunciata Zamati
3½ years old

Parents dead. No relations. Be good to her and God will be good to you.

Besides this in the little bag was a narrow gold band, wrapped in a bit of paper that read:

Her mother's wedding-ring.

Broodingly I hung over the short but poignant record. "Maria Annunciata," I repeated. "What a beautiful name! Three and a half years old! What an adorable age! No relations. No one can ever take her from us! I shall be her godmother and her best friend, whoever adopts her. And I'll keep her till the right mother comes for her, if it takes the rest of my life."

The doctor laughed and bade us good night, after a final approving look at the sleeping baby in the big bed. The trained nurse departed with evident reluctance for her room.

The telephone beside my bed clicked warningly, then tinkled. As I took up the receiver a familiar voice came to me over the wire.

"Is that you, May?" it said. "This is Josephine Morgan. Did you get a dinner invitation from me yesterday? Not hearing from you, I've been trying to get you on the telephone all evening, but no one answered."

"I know," I said, cheerfully. "Awfully sorry. I've been busy. I've got a baby."

Maria Annunciata stirred in her sleep. Speaking very softly, that I might not awaken her, I told Josephine the story of my adventure.

"Come and see her soon," I ended. "I mustn't talk any more. Annunciata is here

beside me. She's absolutely different from any other child in the world. Good night."

I undressed slowly, stopping at intervals to study the pleasing effect of Maria Annunciata's short black curls on the pillow. At last, moving very carefully for fear of disturbing her, I crept into bed. As promptly as if the yielding of the mattress had been a signal that set her tiny body in motion, Maria Annunciata awoke, smiled at me, cuddled into the curve of my left arm, reached up, and firmly grasped my left ear. Then, with a long sigh of ineffable content, she dropped back into slumber.

The only light was the soft glow of an electric bulb behind an amber shade. The button that controlled it was within easy reach of my hand; a touch would have plunged the room into darkness. But I did not press the little knob. Instead, I lay for a long, long time looking at the sleeping child beside me.

There was a soft knock at the door. It opened quietly and my servant appeared.

"Mr. and Mrs. Morgan are outside," she whispered. "They say they've come to see the baby."

"But," I gasped, "it's after eleven o'clock!"

"I know. Mrs. Morgan said they couldn't wait till morning. Shall I show her in?"

I hesitated. I felt a sense of unreasonable annoyance, almost of fear. "Yes," I said, at last, "let her come in."

Josephine Morgan came in with a soft little feminine rush. Something of the atmosphere of the great world in which she lived came with her as far as the bedside, then dropped from her like a garment as she knelt beside us and kissed me, her eyes on Maria Annunciata's sleeping face.

"Oh, the darling, the lamb!" she breathed. "She's the most exquisite thing I ever saw! And the pluck of her! George says she ought to have a Carnegie medal." Still kneeling, she bent over the child, her beautiful face quivering with feeling. "What do you know about her family?" she asked.

With a gesture I indicated the scrap of paper and the ring that lay on my dressing-table. "There's the whole record," I murmured.

She rose and examined them, standing very still for a moment afterward,

apparently in deep thought. Then, still holding them, she returned to the bedside and with a quick but indescribably tender movement gathered Maria Annunciata into her arms. "Let me show her to George," she whispered.

I consented, and she carried the sleeping baby into the next room. I heard their voices and an occasional low laugh. A strange feeling of loneliness settled upon me. In a few moments she came back, her face transfigured. Bending, she put the child in bed and sat down beside her.

"May," she said, quietly, "George and I want her. Will you give her to us?"

The demand was so sudden that I could not speak. She looked at me, her eyes filling.

"We've been looking for a little daughter for two years," she added. "We've visited dozens of institutions."

"But," I stammered, "I wanted to keep her myself—for a while, anyway."

She smiled at me. "Why, you will—" she began, and stopped.

"You may have her," I said, quietly.

She kissed me. "We'll make her happy," she promised. "I suppose," she added, "we couldn't take her away *to-night*? Of course the first thing in the morning will *do*," she concluded, hastily, as she met my indignant gaze.

"Josephine Morgan," I gasped, "I never met such selfishness! Of course you can't have her to-night. You can't have her in the morning, either. You've got to adopt her legally, with red seals and things. It will take lots of time."

Mrs. Morgan laughed, passing a tender finger through one of Maria Annunciata's short curls. "We'll do it," she said. "We'll do anything. And we're going to be in New York all winter, so you can be with her a great deal while she's getting used to us. Now I'll go." But she lingered, making a pretext of tucking in the bedclothes around us. "You've seen the *Sentinel*," she asked, "with that story about you?"

I shook my head at her. "Don't, please," I begged. "We'll talk about that to-morrow."

She kissed the deep dimple in Maria Annunciata's left cheek. "Good night," she said, again. "You'll never know how happy you have made us."

The door closed behind her. I raised my hand and pressed the button above my head. Around me the friendly darkness settled, and a silence as warm and friendly. In the hollow of my neck the face of Maria Annunciata rested, a short curl tickling my cheek. I recalled "the great silence" that fell over the convent at nine o'clock when the lights went out, but to-night the reflection did not bring its usual throb of homesickness and longing. Relaxed, content, I lay with eyes wide open, looking into the future. Without struggle, without self-analysis, but firmly and for all time, I had decided *not* to be a nun.

IX

THE REVOLT OF TILDY MEARS

Every seat in the primitive town hall was occupied, and a somber frieze of Dakota plainsmen and their sad-faced wives decorated the rough, unpainted sides of the building. On boxes in the narrow aisles, between long rows of pine boards on which were seated the early arrivals, late-comers squatted discontentedly, among them a dozen women carrying fretful babies, to whom from time to time they addressed a comforting murmur as they swung them, cradle-fashion, in their tired arms.

The exercises of the evening had not yet begun, but almost every eye in the big, silent, patient assemblage was fixed on a woman, short and stout, with snow-white hair and a young and vivid face, who had just taken her place on the platform, escorted by a self-conscious official of the little town. Every one in that gathering had heard of Dr. Anna Harland; few had yet heard her speak, but all knew what she represented: "new-fangled notions about women"—women's rights, woman suffrage, feminism, unsettling ideas which threatened to disturb the peace of minds accustomed to run in well-worn grooves. Many of the men and women in her audience had driven twenty, thirty, or forty miles across the plains to hear her, but there was no unanimity in the expressions with which they studied her now as she sat before them. In the men's regard were curiosity, prejudice, good-humored tolerance, or a blend of all three. The women's faces held a different meaning: pride, affectionate interest, admiration tinged with hope; and here and there a hint of something deeper, a wireless message that passed from soul to soul.

At a melodeon on the left of the platform a pale local belle, who had volunteered her services, awaited the signal to play the opening chords of the song that was to precede the speaker's address. In brackets high on the rough walls a few kerosene lamps vaguely illumined the scene, while from the open night outside came the voices of cowboys noisily greeting late arrivals and urging them to "go on in an' git a change of heart!"

The musician received her signal—a nod from the chairman of the evening—and the next moment the voices of a relieved and relaxed audience were heartily swelling the familiar strains of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." As the men and women before her sang on, Dr. Harland watched them, the gaze of the brilliant dark eyes under her straight black brows keen and intent. Even yet she had not decided what she meant to say to these people. Something in the music, something in the atmosphere, would surely give her a cue, she felt, before she began to speak.

Sitting near her on the platform, I studied both her and her audience. The Far West and its people were new to me; so was this great leader of the woman's cause. But it behooved me to know her and to know her well, for I had accompanied her on this Western campaign for the sole purpose of writing a series of articles on her life and work, to be published in the magazine of which I had recently been appointed assistant editor. During our long railroad journeys and drives over hills and plains she had talked to me of the past. Now, I knew, I was to see her again perform the miracle at which I had not yet ceased to marvel—the transformation of hundreds of indifferent or merely casually interested persons into a mass of shouting enthusiasts, ready to enlist under her yellow banner and follow wherever she led.

To-night, as she rose and for a moment stood silent before her audience, I could see her, as usual, gathering them up, drawing them to her by sheer force of magnetism, before she spoke a word.

"My friends," she began, in the beautiful voice whose vibrating contralto notes reached every person in the great hall, "last Monday, at Medora, I was asked by a missionary who is going to India to send a message to the women of that land. I said to him, 'Tell them the world was made for women, too.' To-night I am here to give you the same message. The world is women's, too. The West is women's, too. You have helped to make it, you splendid, pioneer women, who have borne with your husbands the heat and burden of the long working-days. You have held down your claims through the endless months of Western winters, while your men were away; you have toiled with them in the fields; you have endured with them the tragedies of cyclones, of droughts, of sickness, of starvation. If woman's work is in the home alone, as our opponents say it is, you have been most unwomanly. For you have remained in the home only long enough to bear your children, to care for them, to feed them and your husbands. The rest of the time you have done a man's work in the West. The toil has been yours as well as man's; the reward of such toil should be shared by you. The West is yours, too.

Now it holds work for you even greater than that you have done in the past, and I am here to beg you to begin that work."

The address went on. In the dim light of the ill-smelling lamps I could see the audience leaning forward, intent, fascinated. Even among the men easy tolerance was giving place to eager response; on row after row of the rough benches the spectators were already clay in the hands of the speaker, to be molded, for the moment at least, into the form she chose to give them. My eyes momentarily touched, then fastened intently on a face in the third row on the left. It was the face of a woman—a little, middle-aged woman of the primitive Western type—her graying hair combed straight back from a high, narrow forehead, her thin lips slightly parted, the flat chest under her gingham dress rising and falling with emotion. But my interest was held by her eyes—brown eyes, blazing eyes, almost the eyes of a fanatic. Unswervingly they rested on the speaker's face, while the strained attention, the parted lips, the attitude of the woman's quivering little body betrayed almost uncontrollable excitement. At that instant I should not have been surprised to see her spring to her feet and shout, "*Alleluia!*"

A moment later I realized that Dr. Harland had seen her, too; that she was, indeed, intensely conscious of her, and was directing many of her best points to this absorbed listener. Here was the perfect type she was describing to her audience—the true woman pioneer, who not only worked and prayed, but who read and thought and aspired. The men and women under the flickering lights were by this time as responsive to the speaker's words as a child to its mother's voice. They laughed, they wept, they nodded, they sighed. When the usual collection was taken up they showed true Western generosity, and when the lecture was over they crowded forward to shake hands with the woman leader, and to exhaust their limited vocabulary in shy tributes to her eloquence. Far on the outskirts of the wide circle that had formed around her I saw the little woman with the blazing eyes, vainly endeavoring to force her way toward us through the crowd. Dr. Harland observed her at the same time and motioned to me.

"Will you ask her to wait, Miss Iverson?" she asked. "I would like to talk to her before she slips away." And she added, with her characteristic twinkle, "That woman would make a perfect 'Exhibit A' for my lecture."

I skirted the throng and touched the arm of the little woman just as she had given up hope of reaching the speaker, and was moving toward the door. She started and stared at me, almost as if the touch of my fingers had awakened her from a dream.

"Dr. Harland asks if you will wait a few moments till the others leave," I told her. "She is anxious to meet you."

The brown-eyed woman drew in a deep breath.

"Tha's whut I want," she exclaimed, ecstatically, "but it looked like I couldn't git near her."

We sat down on an empty bench half-way down the hall, and watched the human stream flow toward and engulf the lecturer. "Ain't she jest wonderful?" breathed my companion. "She knows us women better 'n we know ourselves. She knows all we done an' how we feel about it. I felt like she was tellin' them people all my secrets, but I didn't mind." She hesitated, then added dreamily, "It's high time men was told whut their women are thinkin' an' can't say fer themselves."

In the excited group around the speaker a baby, held high in its mother's arms to avoid being injured in the crush, shrieked out a sudden protest. My new acquaintance regarded it with sympathetic eyes.

"I've raised six of 'em," she told me. "My oldest is a girl nineteen. My youngest is a boy of twelve. My big girl she's lookin' after the house an' the fam'ly while I'm gone. I druv sixty miles 'cross the plains to hear Dr. Harland. It took me two days, an' it's jest about wore out my horse—but this is worth it. I ain't had sech a night sence I was a girl."

She looked at me, her brown eyes lighting up again with their queer, excited fires.

"My Jim he 'most fell dead when I told him I was comin'," she went on. "But I says to him, 'I ain't been away from this place one minute in twenty years,' I says. 'Now I guess you folks can git 'long without me fer a few days. For, Jim,' I says, 'ef I don't git away, ef I don't go somewhere an' have some change, somethin's goin' to snap, an' I guess it'll be me!'"

"You mean," I exclaimed, in surprise, "that you've never left your ranch in twenty years?"

She nodded.

"Not once," she corroborated. "Not fer a minute. You know whut the summers are—work, work from daylight to dark; an' in the winters I had t' hol' down the claim while Jim he went to the city an' worked. Sometimes he'd only git home

once or twice the hull winter. Then when we begin to git on, seemed like 'twas harder than ever. Jim he kept addin' more land an' more stock to whut we had, an' there was more hands to be waited on, an' the babies come pretty fast. Lately Jim he's gone to Chicago every year to sell his cattle, but I ain't bin able to git away till now."

During her eager talk—a talk that gushed forth like a long-repressed stream finding a sudden outlet—she had been leaning toward me with her arm on the back of the bench and her shining eyes on mine. Now, as if remembering her "company manners," she sat back stiffly, folded her work-roughened hands primly in her lap, and sighed with supreme content.

"My!" she whispered, happily, "I feel like I was in a diff'rent world. It don't seem possible that only sixty miles out on the plains that ranch is right there, an' everything is goin' on without me. An' here I be, hearin' the music, an' all the folks singin' together, an' that wonderful woman talkin' like she did! I feel"—she hesitated for a comparison, and then went on, with the laugh of a happy girl—"I feel like I was up in a balloon an' on my way to heaven!"

I forgot the heat of the crowded hall, the smell of the smoking lamps, the shuffle of hobnailed shoes on the pine floors, the wails of fretful babies. I almost felt that I, too, was floating off with this ecstatic stranger in the balloon of her imagination.

"I see," I murmured. "You're tired of drudgery. You haven't played enough in all these years."

She swung round again until she faced me, her sallow cheeks flushed, her eager, brilliant eyes on mine.

"I ain't played none at all," she said. "I dunno what play is. An' work ain't the only thing I'm tired of. I'm tired of everything. I'm tired of everything—except this."

Her voice lingered on the last two words. Her eyes left my face for an instant and followed the lecturer, of whose white head we obtained a glimpse from time to time as the crowd opened around her. Still gazing toward her, but now as if unseeingly, the plainswoman went on, her voice dropping to a lower, more confidential note.

"I'm sick of everything," she repeated. "Most of all, I'm sick of the plains and the

sky—stretching on and on and on and on, like they do, as if they was no end to 'em. Sometimes when I'm alone I stand at my door an' look at 'em an' shake my fists an' shriek. I begun to think they wasn't anything but them nowhere. It seemed 's if the little town back East where I come from was jest a place I dreamed of—it couldn't really be. Nothin' *could* be 'cept those plains an' the cattle an' the sky. Then, this spring—"

She turned again to face me.

"I dunno why I'm tellin' you all this," she broke off, suddenly. "Guess it's because I ain't had no one to talk to confidential fer so long, an' you look like you understand."

"I do understand," I told her.

She nodded.

"Well, this spring," she went on, "I begun to hate everything, same as I hated the plains. I couldn't exactly hate my children; but it seemed to me they never did nothin' right, an' I jest had to keep tellin' myself they was mine, an' they was young an' didn't understand how they worried me by things they done. Then the hands drove me 'most crazy. They was one man—why, jes' to have that man pass the door made me feel sick, an' yet I hadn't nothin' again' him, really. An' finally, last of all, Jim—even Jim—"

Her voice broke. Sudden tears filled her eyes, quenching for the moment the sparks that burned there.

"Jim's a good man," she continued, steadily, after a moment's pause. "He's a good, hard-workin' man. He's good to me in his way, an' he's good to the children. But of course he ain't got much time for us. He never was a talker. He's a worker, Jim is, an' when night comes he's so tired he falls asleep over the fire. But everything he done always seemed pretty near right to me—till this spring."

Her voice flattened and died on the last three words. For a moment she sat silent, brooding, a strange puzzled look in her brown eyes. The crowd around Dr. Harland was thinning out, and people were leaving the hall. We could easily have reached her now, but I sat still, afraid to dam the verbal freshet that was following so many frozen winters.

"This spring," she went on, at last, "it jest seems like I can't bear to have even Jim around." She checked herself and touched my arm timidly, almost

apologetically. "It's a terrible thing to say, ain't it?" she almost whispered, and added slowly, "It's a terrible thing to *feel*. I can't bear to see him come into the room. I can't bear the way he eats, or the way he smokes, or the way he sets down, or the way he gits up, or the way he breathes. He does 'em all jest like he always has. They ain't nothin' wrong with 'em. But I can't bear 'em no more." She beat her hands together softly, with a queer, frantic gesture. Her voice took on a note of rising excitement. "I can't," she gasped. "I can't, *I can't*!"

I rose.

"Come," I said, cheerfully. "Dr. Harland is free now. I want you to talk to her. She can help you. She's a very wise woman."

A momentary flicker of something I did not recognize shone in my companion's eyes. Was it doubt or pity, or both?

"She ain't a married woman, is she?" she asked, quietly, as she rose and walked down the aisle by my side.

I laughed.

"No," I conceded, "she isn't, and neither am I. But you know even the Bible admits that of ten virgins five were wise!"

Her face, somber now, showed no reflection of my amusement. She seemed to be considering our claims to wisdom, turning over in her mind the possibility of help from either of us, and experiencing a depressing doubt.

"Well, you're women, anyway," she murmured, at last, a pathetic note of uncertainty lingering in her voice.

"Will you tell me your name?" I asked, "so that I may introduce you properly to Dr. Harland?"

"Tildy Mears," she answered, promptly; then added, with stiff formality, "Mrs. James Mears of the X. X. M. Ranch."

We were already facing Dr. Harland, and I presented Mrs. Mears without further delay. The leader met her with the brilliant smile, the close hand-clasp, the warm, human sympathy which rarely failed to thrill the man or woman she was greeting. Under their influence Mrs. Mears expanded like a thirsty plant in a gentle shower. Within five minutes the two women were friends.

"You're at the hotel, of course," Dr. Harland asked, when she heard of the sixty-mile drive across the country. "Then you must have supper with Miss Iverson and me. We always want something after these long evenings, and I will have it sent up to our sitting-room, so that we can have a comfortable talk."

Half an hour later we were grouped around the table in the little room, and over the cold meat, canned peaches, lemonade, and biscuits which formed our collation Tildy Mears retold her story, adding innumerable details and intimate touches under the stimulus of the doctor's interest. At the end of it Dr. Harland sat for a long moment in silent thought. Then, from the briskness with which she began to speak, I knew that she had found some solution of the human problem before us.

"Mrs. Mears," she said, abruptly, and without any comment on the other's recital, "I wish you would travel around with us for a fortnight. We're going to remain in this part of the state, and you would find our meetings extremely interesting. On the other hand, you could give me a great deal of help and information, and, though I cannot offer you a salary, I will gladly pay your expenses."

This was a plan very characteristic of Dr. Harland, to whom half-way measures of any kind made no appeal. I looked at Tildy Mears. For an instant, under the surprise of the leader's unexpected words, she had sat still, stunned; in the next, her eyes had flashed to us one of their ecstatic messages, as if she had grasped all the other woman's proposition held of change, of interest, of growth. Then abruptly the light faded, went out.

"I'd love to," she said, dully, "I'd jest *love* to! But of course it ain't possible. Why, I got to start home to-morrer. Jim," she gulped, bringing out the name with an obvious effort, "Jim expecks me back Sat'day night."

"Listen to me, Mrs. Mears"—Dr. Harland leaned forward, her compelling eyes deep in those of the Western woman—"I'm going to speak to you very frankly—as if we were old friends; as if we were sisters, as, indeed, we are."

Tildy Mears nodded. Her eyes, dull and tired now, looked trustfully back at the other woman.

"I feel like we are," she agreed. And she added, "You kin say anything you've a mind to."

"Then I want to say this."

I had never seen Dr. Harland more interested, more impressive. Into what she was saying to the forlorn little creature before her she threw all she had of persuasiveness, of magnetism, and of power.

"If you don't have a change," she continued, "and a very radical change, you will surely have a bad nervous breakdown. That is what I want to save you from. I cannot imagine anything that would do it more effectively than to campaign with us for a time, and have the whole current of your thoughts turned in a new direction. Why, don't you understand"—her deep voice was full of feeling; for the moment at least she was more interested in one human soul than in hundreds of human votes—"it isn't that you have ceased to care for your home and your family. It's only that your tortured nerves are crying out against the horrible monotony of your life. Give them the change they are demanding and everything else will come right. Go back and put them through the old strain, and—well, I'm afraid everything will go wrong."

As if something in the other's words had galvanized her into sudden action Mrs. Mears sprang to her feet. Like a wild thing she circled the room, beating her hands together.

"I can't go back!" she cried. "I can't go back! Whut'll I do? Oh, whut'll I do?"

"Do what I am advising you to do."

Dr. Harland's quiet voice steadied the hysterical woman. Under its calming influence I could see her pull herself together.

"Write Mr. Mears that you are coming with us, and give him our advance route, so that he will know exactly where you are all the time. If your daughter can manage your home for five days she can manage it for two weeks. And your little jaunt need not cost your husband one penny."

"I brought twenty dollars with me," quavered Tildy Mears.

"Keep it," advised the temporarily reckless leader of the woman's cause. "When we reach Bismarck you can buy yourself a new dress and get some little presents to take home to the children."

Tildy Mears stopped her reckless pacing of the room and stood for a moment very still, her eyes fixed on a worn spot in the rug at her feet.

"I reckon I will," she then said, slowly. "Sence you ask me, I jest reckon I'll

stay."

The next evening, during her remarks to the gathering she was then addressing, Dr. Harland abruptly checked herself.

"But there is some one here who knows more about that than I do," she said, casually, referring to a point she was covering. "Mrs. Mears, who is on the platform with me to-night, is one of you. She knows from twenty years of actual experience what I am learning from study and observation. She can tell you better than I can how many buckets of water a plainsman's wife carries into an unpiped ranch during the day. Will you tell us, Mrs. Mears?"

She asked a few questions, and hesitatingly, stammeringly at first, the panic-stricken plainswoman answered her. Then a woman in the audience spoke up timidly to compare notes, and in five minutes more Dr. Harland was sitting quietly in the background while Tildy Mears, her brown eyes blazing with interest and excitement, talked to her fellow plainswomen about the problems she and they were meeting together.

Seeing the success of Dr. Harland's experiment, I felt an increased respect for that remarkable woman. She had known that this would happen; she had realized, as I had not, that Tildy Mears could talk to others as simply and as pregnantly as to us, and that her human appeal to her sister workers would be far greater than any even Anna Harland herself could make. One night she described a stampede in words that made a slow chill run the length of my spine. Half an hour later she was discussing "hired hands," with a shrewd philosophy and a quaint humor that drew good-natured guffaws from "hired hands" themselves as well as from their employers in the audience.

Within the next few days Tildy Mears became a strong feature of our campaign. Evening after evening, in primitive Dakota towns, her self-consciousness now wholly gone, she supplemented Dr. Harland's lectures by a talk to her sister women, so simple, so homely, so crudely eloquent that its message reached every heart. During the days she studied the suffrage question, reading and rereading the books we had brought with us, and asking as many questions as an eager and precocious child. Openly and unabashedly Dr. Harland gloried in her.

"Why, she's a born orator," she told me one day, almost breathlessly. "She's a feminine Lincoln. There's no limit to her possibilities. I'd like to take her East. I'd like to educate her—train her. Then she could come back here and go through the West like a whirlwind."

The iridescent bubble was floating so beautifully that it seemed a pity to prick it; but I did, with a callous reminder.

"How about her home?" I suggested—"and her children? and her husband?"

Dr. Harland frowned and bit her lip.

"Humph!" she muttered, her voice taking on the flat notes of disappointment and chagrin. "Humph! I'd forgotten them."

For a moment she stood reflecting, readjusting her plans to a scale which embraced the husband, the home, and the children of her protégée. Then her brow cleared, her irresistible twinkle broke over her face; she smiled like a mischievous child.

"I had forgotten them," she repeated. "Maybe"—this with irrepressible hopefulness—"maybe Tildy will, too!"

That Tildy did nothing of the kind was proved to us all too soon. Six days had passed, and the growing fame of Mrs. Mears as a suffrage speaker was attracting the attention of editors in the towns we visited. It reached its climax at a mass-meeting in Sedalia, where for an hour the little woman talked to an audience of several hundred, making all Dr. Harland's favorite points in her own simpler, homelier words, while the famous leader of the cause beamed on her proudly from the side of the stage. After the doctor's speech the two women held an informal reception, which the Mayor graced, and to which the Board of Aldermen also lent the light of their presence. These high dignitaries gave most of their attention to our leader; she could answer any question they wished to ask, as well as many others they were extremely careful not to bring up. But the women in the audience, the babies, the growing boys and girls—all these turned to Tildy Mears. From the closing words of her speech until she disappeared within the hotel she was followed by an admiring throng. As I caught the final flash of her brown eyes before her bedroom engulfed her it seemed to me that she looked pale and tired. She had explained that she wanted no supper, but before I went to bed, hearing her still moving around her room, I rapped at her door.

"Wouldn't you like a sandwich?" I asked, when she had opened it. "And a glass of lemonade?"

She hesitated. Then, seeing that I had brought these modest refreshments on a

tray, she stepped back and allowed me to pass in. There was an unusual self-consciousness in her manner, an unusual bareness in the effect of the room. The nails on the wall had been stripped of her garments. On the floor lay an open suit-case closely packed.

"Why!" I gasped. "Why are you packing? We're going to stay here over to-morrow, you know."

For an instant she stood silent before me, looking like a child caught in some act of disobedience by a relentless parent. Then her head went up.

"Yes," she said, quietly. "I'm packed. I'm goin' home!"

"Going home!" I repeated, stupidly. It seemed to me that all I could do was to echo her words. "When?" I finally brought out.

"To-morrer mornin'." She spoke almost defiantly. "I wanted to go to-night," she added, "but there wasn't no train. I got to go back an' start from Dickinson, where I left my horse."

"But why?" I persisted. "*Why?* I thought you were going to be with us another week at least?"

"Well"—she drew out the word consideringly. Then, on a sudden resolve, she gave her explanation. "They was a man in the fourth row to-night that looked like Jim."

"Yes?" I said, and waited. "Was he Mr. Mears?" I asked, at last.

"No."

She knelt, and closed and locked the suit-case.

"He looked like Jim," she repeated, as if that ended the discussion.

For an instant the situation was too complicated for me. Then, in a flash of understanding, I remembered that only the week before I had been made suddenly homesick for New York by one fleeting glimpse of a man whose profile was like that of Godfrey Morris. Without another word I sought Dr. Harland and broke the news to her in two pregnant sentences.

"Mrs. Mears is going home to-morrow morning. She saw a man at the meeting to-night who looked like her husband."

Dr. Harland, who was preparing for bed, laid down the hair-brush she was using, slipped a wrapper over her nightgown, and started for Mrs. Mears's room. I followed. Characteristically, our leader disdained preliminaries.

"But, my dear woman," she exclaimed, "you can't leave us in the lurch like this. You're announced to speak in Sweetbriar and Mendan and Bismarck within the coming week."

"He looked jest like Jim," murmured Tildy Mears, in simple but full rebuttal. She was standing with her back to the door, and she did not turn as we entered. Her eyes were set toward the north, where her home was, and her children and Jim. Her manner dismissed Sweetbriar, Mendan, and Bismarck as if they were the flowers of last year. Suddenly she wheeled, crossed the room, and caught Dr. Harland by the shoulders.

"Woman," she cried, "I'm homesick. Can't ye understand that, even ef you ain't got a home an' a husband ye been neglectin' fer days, like I have? I'm homesick." Patiently she brought out her refrain again. "The man looked jest like Jim," she ended.

She turned away, and with feverish haste put her case on a chair, and her jacket and hat on the case, topping the collection with an old pair of driving-gloves. The completeness of this preparation seemed to give her some satisfaction. She continued with more animation.

"I'm startin' early," she explained. "I told the hotel man soon's I come in to have me called at five o'clock. So I'll say good-by now. An' thank ye both fer all yer kindness," she ended, primly.

Dr. Harland laughed. Then, impulsively, she took both the woman's toil-hardened hands in hers.

"Good-by, then, and God bless you," she said. "My cure has worked. I'll comfort myself with that knowledge."

For a moment the eyes of Tildy Mears fell.

"You ben mighty good," she said. "You both ben good. Don't think I ain't grateful." She hesitated, then went on in halting explanation. "'S long's you ain't married," she said, "an' ain't got nothin' else to do, it's fine to travel round an' talk to folks. But someway sence I see that man to-night, settin' there lookin' like Jim, I realize things is different with us married women."

She drew her small figure erect, her voice taking on an odd suggestion of its ringing platform note.

"Talkin' is one thing," she said, tersely, "livin' is another thing. P'rhaps you ain't never thought of that. But I see the truth now, an' I see it clear."

Her peroration filled the little room, and like a swelling organ tone rolled through the open door and down the stairs, where it reached the far recesses of the hall below. Her lean right arm shot upward in her one characteristic gesture, as if she called on high Heaven itself to bear witness to the wisdom of her words in this, her last official utterance.

"Woman's place," ended Tildy Mears, "is in the home!"

X

A MESSAGE FROM MOTHER ELISE

The Authors' Dinner had reached that peak of success which rises serenely between the serving of the dessert and the opening words of the first postprandial speech. Relaxed, content, at peace with themselves and their publisher-host, the great assemblage of men and women writers sipped their coffee and liqueurs, and beamed benignly upon one another as they waited for the further entertainment the speeches were expected to afford. Here and there, at the numerous small tables which flowered in the great dining-room, a distinguished author, strangely modest for the moment, stealthily consulted some penciled notes tucked under his napkin, or with absent eyes on space mentally rehearsed the opening sentences of his address. Even the least of these men was accustomed to public speaking; but what they had said to Chautauqua gatherings or tossed off casually at school commencements in their home towns was not quite what they would care to offer to an audience which included three hundred men and women representing every stage of literary success, and gifted, beyond doubt, with a highly developed sense of humor. A close observer could discover the speakers of the evening by running an eye over the brilliantly decorated tables and selecting those faces which alone in that care-free assemblage wore expressions of nervous apprehension.

At my table, well toward the center of the room, I felt again a thrill of delight at being a part of this unique composite picture. My first book, still an infant in the literary cradle, had won me my invitation; and nothing except the actual handling of the volume, hot from the press, had given me so strong a sense of having at last made a beginning in the work I loved. Save myself, every man and woman of the eight at our table stood on the brow of the long hill each had climbed. Three of them—a woman playwright, a man novelist, and a famous diplomat—were among my close friends. The others I had met to-night for the first time. The Playwright sat opposite me, and over the tall vase of Spanish iris which stood between us I caught the expression of her brown eyes, thoughtful

and introspective. For the moment at least she was very far away from the little group around her. Beside her sat the Author, his white locks caressing a suddenly troubled brow. He was one of the speakers of the evening, and he had just confided to his companions that he had already forgotten his carefully prepared extemporaneous address. At my right the grand old man of American diplomacy smiled in calm content. He rarely graced such festive scenes as this; he was over ninety, and, he admitted cheerfully, "growing a little tired." But his Reminiscences, recently published, was among the most widely read literature of the day, and the mind which had won him distinction fifty years ago was still as brilliant as during his days at foreign courts.

Over our group a sudden stillness had fallen, and with an obvious effort to break this, one of my new acquaintances addressed me, her cold blue eyes reflecting none of the sudden warmth of her manner.

"Do you know, Miss Iverson," she began, "I envy you. You have had five years of New York newspaper experience—the best of all possible training. Besides, you must have accumulated more material in those five years than the average writer finds in twenty."

I had no opportunity to reply. As if the remark had been a gauntlet tossed on the table in challenge, my companions fell upon it. Every one talked at once, the Best Seller and the Author upholding the opinion of the woman with the blue eyes, the rest disputing it, until the Playwright checked the discussion with a remark that caught the attention of all.

"There's nothing new in this world," she said, "and therefore there's nothing interesting. We all know too much. The only interesting things are those we can't understand, because they happen—elsewhere."

The Author looked at her and smiled, his white eyebrows moving upward ever so slightly. "For example?" he murmured.

Almost imperceptibly the Playwright shrugged her shoulders.

"For example?" she repeated, lightly. "Oh, I wasn't contemplating an example. Not that I couldn't give one if I chose." She stopped. Then, stirred by the skeptical look in the Author's eyes, her face took on a sudden look of decision. "And I might," she added, quietly, "if urged."

The Best Seller leaned across the table and laid a small coin on her plate. "I'll

urge you," he said. "I'll take a story. We want the thing in fiction form."

The Playwright smiled at him. "Very well," she said, indifferently; "call it what you please—an instance, a story."

"And mind," interrupted the Best Seller, "it's something that didn't happen on this earth."

The Playwright sat silent an instant, intent and thoughtful, as if mentally marshaling her characters before her. "Part of it happened on this earth," she said. "It began two years ago, when a friend of mine, a woman editor, received a letter from a stranger, who was also a woman. The stranger asked for a personal interview. She wished, she said, for the editor's advice. The need had suddenly come to her to make her living. She had had no special training; would the editor talk to her and give her any suggestions she could? The editor consented, naming a day and an hour for the interview, and at the time appointed the stranger called at the other's office.

"She proved to be a beautiful woman, a little over forty, dressed quietly but exquisitely in black, and with the walk and manner of an empress. The editor was immensely impressed by her, but she soon discovered that the stranger was wrapped in mystery. She could learn nothing about her past, her friends, or herself. She was merely a human package dropped from space and labeled 'Miss Driscoll'—the name engraved on her card. Who 'Miss Driscoll' was, where she had come from, what she had done, remained as much of a problem after half an hour of conversation as at the moment she had entered the editor's room. She wanted work; how could she get it? That was her question, but she had no answers for any questions asked by the editor. When they were put to her she hedged and fenced with exquisite skill. She had a charming air of intimacy, of confidence in the editor's judgment, yet nothing came from her that threw any light on her experience or her qualifications.

"All the time they talked the editor studied her. Then suddenly, without warning, she leaned forward and shot out the question that had been slowly forming in her mind.

"'When did you leave your Order?' she asked.

"The stranger stiffened like one who had received an electric shock. The next moment she sagged forward in her chair as if something in her had given way. 'How did you know?' she breathed, at last.

"The editor shook her head. 'I did not know,' she admitted. 'I merely suspected. You have one or two habits which suggest a nun, especially the trick of crossing your hands as if you expected to slip them into flowing sleeves. They look like a nun's hands, too; and your complexion has the convent pallor. Now tell me all you can. I cannot help you until I know more about you.'"

Around us there was the scrape of chairs on the polished floor. Some of the dinner-guests were rising and crossing the room to chat with friends at other tables. But the little group at our table sat in motionless attention, every eye on the Playwright's charming face.

"Good beginning," remarked the Best Seller, helpfully. "And, by Jove, the orchestra is giving you the 'Rosary' as an obbligato. There's a coincidence for you."

"Then the story came out," resumed the Playwright, ignoring the interruption. "At least part of it came out. The stranger had been the Mother General of a large conventual Order, which she herself had founded twenty years ago. She had built it up from one convent to thirty. She had established schools and hospitals all over America, as well as in Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines. She was a brilliant organizer, a human dynamo. Whatever she touched succeeded. She did not need to explain this; the extraordinary growth of her Community spoke for her. But a few months before she came to the editor, she said, a cabal had been established against her in her Mother House. She had returned from a visit to one of her Philippine convents to find that an election had been held in her absence, that she had been superseded, that the local superior of the Mother House had been elected Mother General in her place; in short, that she herself was deposed by her Community.

"She said that she never knew why. There was much talk of extravagance, of too rapid growth; her broadening plans, and the big financial risks she took, alarmed the more conservative nuns. She took their breath away. Possibly they were tired of the pace she set, and ready to rest on the Community's achievements. All that is not important. Mother General Elise was deposed. She could not remain as a subordinate in the Community she had ruled so long. Neither could she, she said, risk destroying the work of her life by making a fight for her rights and causing a newspaper sensation. So she left the Order, taking with her her only living relative, her old mother, eighty-one years of age, to whom for the previous year or two she had given a home in her Mother House."

"I am afraid," murmured the Best Seller, sadly, "that this story is going to depress me."

The Playwright nodded. "At first," she admitted. "But it ends with what we will call 'an uplift.'"

The Best Seller emptied his glass. "Oh, all right," he murmured. "Here's to the uplift!"

"The editor listened to the story," continued the Playwright. "Then she advised Miss Driscoll to go to Rome and have her case taken up at the Vatican. Surely what seemed such injustice would be righted there, and without undesirable notoriety for the Community. She introduced the former Mother General to several prominent New York men and women who could help her and give her letters she needed. There were various meetings at the houses of these people, who were all impressed by the force, the magnetism, and the charm of the convent queen who had been exiled from her kingdom. Then Miss Driscoll and her mother sailed for Italy."

The Diplomat leaned forward, his faded eyes as eager as a boy's. "Let me tell some of it!" he begged. "Let me tell what happened in Rome!"

The blue-eyed woman who had started the discussion clapped her hands. "Let each of us tell some of it," she cried. The Playwright smiled across at the Diplomat. "By all means," she urged, "tell the Roman end of it."

The Diplomat laid down his half-finished cigar, and put his elbows on the table, joining his finger-tips in the pose characteristic of his most thoughtful moments. He, too, took a moment for preparation, and the faces of the others at the table showed that they were already considering the twist they would give to the story when their opportunity came.

"The mother and daughter reached Rome in May," began the Diplomat. "They rented a few rooms and bought a few pieces of furniture, and, because they were very poor, they lived very frugally. While the daughter sought recognition at the Vatican the old mother spent her days pottering around their little garden and trying to learn a few words of Italian from her neighbors. It was hard to be transplanted at eighty-one, but she was happy, for she was with the daughter she had always adored. She would rather have been alone with her in a strange land than in the highest heaven without her.

"One of the Cardinals at the Vatican finally took up the case of Miss Driscoll. It interested him. He knew of the splendid work she had done as Mother General Elise. He began an investigation of the whole involved affair, and he had accumulated a great mass of documents, and was almost ready to submit a formal report to the Holy Father, when he fell ill with pneumonia and died a few days later.

"That was a crushing blow for Mother Elise. Under the shock of the disappointment she, too, fell ill, and was taken to what we will call the Hospital of the White Sisters. Her mother went with her, because an old lady of eighty-two could not be left alone."

The old Diplomat paused and looked unseeingly before him, as if he were calling up a picture.

"The convent hospital had a beautiful garden," the Diplomat resumed, at last. "There the mother spent the next few days working among the flowers and following the lay Sisters along the garden walks as a contented child follows its nurse. Once a day she was allowed to see her daughter for a few moments. It was her custom to reach the sick-room long before the hour appointed and to wait in the hall until she was admitted. She said the time of waiting seemed shorter there, where she was so near. So one day, when a pale Sister told her that her daughter was not quite ready to be seen, the old lady was not surprised. This was her usual experience.

"Nothing warned her, no intuition told her, that her daughter had died exactly five minutes before and that the Sisters back of that closed door were huddled together, trying to find words to tell her what had happened. They could not find them; words scamper away like frightened beings in moments like that. So they sent for their Mother Superior, and she came and put an arm around the bent shoulders of the old woman and told her that her daughter's pain and trouble were over for all time. Later they took her into the room where her daughter lay in a peace which remained triumphant even while the mother's heart broke as she looked upon it. When they found that they could not persuade her to leave the room they allowed her to remain; and there she sat at the foot of the bed day and night, while the Sisters came and went and knelt and prayed, and the long wax tapers at the head and feet of the dead nun burned slowly down to their sockets."

The Diplomat stopped. Then, as no one spoke, he turned to the Author.

"Will you go on?" he asked.

The Author took up the tale. "Mother Elise was buried in Rome," he said, "and in the chapel of the White Sisters tapers still burn for her. Her mother remained there, and was given a home in the convent, because she had no other place to go. It was kind of the Sisters, for, unlike her daughter, she was not a Catholic. But her old heart was broken, and as months passed and she began to realize what had happened she was filled with a great longing for her native land. The bells of Rome got on her shattered nerves. They seemed eternally ringing for her dead. From the garden she could see her daughter's grave on the hill just beyond the convent walls. She longed for the only thing she had left—her own country. She longed to hear her native tongue. She said so to all who would listen. One day she received an anonymous letter, inclosing bank-notes for five thousand lira. The letter read:

> "I hear that you are homesick. Take this money and return to your native land. It will pay your passage and secure your admission to a home for aged gentlewomen. Do not try to discover the source of the gift.
>
> "FROM ONE WHO LOVED YOUR DAUGHTER.

"A little blossom of comfort bloomed in the old woman's heart, like an edelweiss on a glacier. She packed her few possessions and sailed for America. There was no one to meet her, but she had kept the name and address of the woman editor; she was sure the editor would advise her about getting into the right home. In the mean time she went from the steamer to a cheap New York lodging-house, of which some fellow passenger had told her, and from there she sent a hurried summons to the editor. She was already panic-stricken in this big country, which held the graves of all she loved but one. It suddenly seemed to her as strange, as terrible as Italy. She was afraid of everything—afraid of the people she met, of the sounds she heard, of the prying lodging-house keeper and her red-eyed husband. Most of all, she was afraid of these two, and she had reason to be.

"The editor had not even known the old lady was coming to this country, but she responded to the call the night she received it, for she could tell that the writer was frantic with fear. She climbed three flights of rickety stairs and found the old woman in a state of unreasoning terror, like a lost child in the dark. Already the keepers of the lodging-house had tried to get her money from her; she was hungry, for they did not furnish meals, and she had been afraid to go out for food. The editor took her away from the place that night and home to her own apartment. There she had a long talk with her.

"'Now, Mrs. Driscoll,' she said, 'I want you to forget your troubles if you can and settle down here and be at peace. Leave the matter of the home to me. I will find the right place, and when I have found it I will tell you about it and take you to see it. Then, if you approve, in you go. We will put your money in the bank to-morrow and leave it there until the matter of the home is settled. In the mean time don't think or talk about the future. It may take some time to find the right home. I'm not going to run to you with every hope or disappointment that my investigation brings. Forget about it yourself, but don't think I have forgotten because I am not keeping you stirred up with daily or weekly reports.'

"The old lady settled down like a contented child in its mother's lap. As the weeks passed her eyes lost their look of panic and took on the serenity of age. Her thin figure filled out. She transferred to her only friend something of the devotion she had given her daughter. She was almost happy.

"In the mean time the editor began her investigations, and she at once discovered that it is not easy to find a home for an aged and indigent gentlewoman. All the institutions to which she applied were filled, and each had waiting-lists that looked, she said, 'yards long.' The secretaries were courteous. They almost invariably sent her lists of other institutions, and she wrote to these, or visited them if they were within reach; and the weeks and months crawled by, and the city grew hot and stifling. She was worn out by the quest to which she was giving every hour of her spare time, but she was no nearer success than she had been the first day. She had arranged to go to Europe for a rest which she sadly needed, and the date of her sailing was very near. But she could not go and leave her protégée unprovided for, nor could she leave her alone with a servant. Her search became a very serious thing; it kept her awake nights; it got on her nerves; it became an obsession which, waking or sleeping, she could not forget. She began to go down under it, but no one knew that, for she kept it to herself; and the least suspicious person of all her friends was the old lady, who each evening listened for her footstep as one listens for that of the best beloved, coming home."

The Author stopped.

"By Jove!" said the Best Seller, "it *is* a depressing yarn. Let me see if I can't brighten it up a bit."

But the Author glanced at me. "Forgive me, old man," he said to the Best Seller, who was a friend of his. "I know what you would do. You would certainly brighten it up. You would discover a long-lost son, throw in Thanksgiving at the old home, and wind up with the tango. I think Miss Iverson ought to go on with the story."

He and the Playwright smiled at me. I felt neither nervous nor self-conscious as I took up the story, but the Best Seller openly grumbled.

"I could put some snap in that," he exclaimed. "But go on, Miss Iverson. Only I call this a close corporation."

"There came," I began, "a very hot day. The editor had heard of a home beyond the city limits, where the view was beautiful and the air was pure. She went to see it. The date was the twenty-second of July, and the day was the hottest of the season. At the end of the trolley-line there was a broiling walk in the sun. The editor dragged her weary feet along the dusty road, her eyes on the great brick building she was approaching. Before it a cool lawn sloped down to a protecting

hedge. She could see old ladies sitting on benches under trees, and a big lump came into her throat as she thought of her protégée and wondered if at last she had found her a permanent resting-place, if this haven was for her. In the dim reception-room she waited hopefully, but almost the first words of the Sister who finally appeared showed that nothing could be expected from her.

"She was merely repeating all the phrases the editor knew by heart. The place was 'full to overflowing.' There were 'almost two hundred on the waiting-list.' But, of course, there were other places. She rattled off an impressive list. Every home on it was one the editor had already visited or heard from; there was no room, she knew, in any of them. At her side the Sister uttered sympathetic murmurs. It was, she said, very sad. Then briskly she arose. She was a busy woman, and she had already given this caller more time than she could well spare. Perhaps the look on the editor's face checked her steps. Uncertainly for a second she hesitated at the threshold. She could do nothing, but—yes, there was still the impulse of hospitality.

"'Would you like to see our new chapel?' she asked, kindly. 'It is just finished, and we are very proud of it.'

"The editor did not really care to see the new chapel. In her depression she would not have cared to see anything. But she was very warm, very tired, utterly discouraged. She wanted a few quiet moments in which to pull herself together, to rest, to think, and to plan. The new chapel would give her these. She followed the Sister to its dim shelter, and, crossing its threshold, knelt in a pew near the door. Sister Italia, kneeling beside her, suddenly leaned toward her and whispered in her ear.

"'Remember,' she smiled, 'when you pray in a new chapel three prayers are surely answered.'

"The editor returned her smile. Already she was feeling better. The chapel was really beautiful, and its atmosphere was infinitely soothing. Before the altar gleamed one soft light, like a distant star, and like larger stars the rose windows at the right and left seemed to pulse with color. Here and there a black-veiled nun knelt motionless with bowed head. The editor offered two of her prayers: that she might soon find a home for Mrs. Driscoll; that Mrs. Driscoll might be happy and content in the home when she had found it. Then, her eyes still on the distant altar light, her thoughts turned to Mother Elise—at rest in her Roman grave. Here, surely, was a fit setting for thought of her—a convent chapel such

as those in which she had spent years of her life. How many vigils she must have had in such a place, how many lonely hours of fasting and of prayer!

"'I wish,' the editor reflected, dreamily, 'I wish I could feel that she is with me in this search for the home. Of course she is—if she knows. I'm sure of that. But *does* she know? Or is she in some place so inconceivably remote that even the tears and prayers of her helpless old mother have never reached her? I wish I could know that she is watching—that she won't let me make a mistake.'

"She sighed. Close to her Sister Italia stirred, then rose from her knees and led the way from the chapel. The editor followed. At the outer door of the main building Sister Italia asked a question.

"'Did you offer your three prayers?' she wanted to know.

"The editor reflected. 'I offered two,' she said, slowly. Then a sudden memory came to her, and she smiled. 'Why, yes,' she said, 'I offered all three, without realizing it.'"

The Best Seller interrupted. He was an irrepressible person. "It's still too somber," he said. "But I see now how it can be lightened a bit. Take your cue from the musicians. They're playing the Maxixe."

"Hush!" begged the woman with the blue eyes. She turned them on me. There was an odd mist over their cold brilliance. "Please go on, Miss Iverson," she said, gently.

I glanced at the Best Seller. "I'll lighten it a bit," I promised.

The face of the Best Seller brightened. "Good for you!" he exclaimed, elegantly.

"The editor went home," I resumed. "She was very tired and still very much discouraged. The long, hot ride had dispelled the memory of her moments of peace. As she put her key in the lock of her door the old mother heard the sound and came trotting down the hall to meet her. She always did that, and usually she had a dozen questions to ask. Was the editor tired? Had she had a hard day? Had it been very hot in her office? But to-night she asked none of these. She came straight to the editor and laid her hands on the other's shoulders; her face held an odd look, apologetic, almost frightened.

"'Oh, my dear,' she quavered. 'I have a confession to make to you. I have been false to a sacred trust.'

"The editor laughed and led her back into the living-room, where she seated her in a big chair by an open window. She did not believe the old lady had ever been false to any trust, and she was very anxious to get out of her working-clothes and into cool garments.

"'I suppose it's something simply appalling,' she said. 'Let me fortify myself for it with a bath and a glass of lemonade. Then I'll listen to it.'

"But the old lady shook her head. 'No, no,' she gulped. 'I've waited too long already. I *must* do it now. Oh, listen; *please* listen!'

"The editor humored her. The old lady was not often unreasonable, and it was clear that she was desperately in earnest. The editor sat down and rested her tired head against the back of her chair while she drew off her gloves.

"'Very well,' she said, 'I'm listening.'

"The old lady began at once. Her words came out with an indescribable effect of breathlessness, as if she could not make her explanation soon enough. She leaned forward, her faded eyes, with their old frightened look, fastened on the editor's face.

"'The day before my daughter died,' she began, almost in a whisper, 'she and I had our last talk. She seemed better. Neither of us thought she was very ill. But she said it was wise when she felt well to discuss a few things. She told me how little money we had and where it was, and she said the Mother Superior had promised to let me stay in the convent if ever I needed a home. Then she took off her ring, the Community ring she had always worn as the symbol of her office, and handed it to me. 'If I go before you,' she ended, 'I want you to send this ring to our friend in New York—our friend the editor.'

"The old woman stopped. In her hand she held something with which her fingers fumbled. Her head drooped.

"'I forgot it,' she confessed, in a whisper the editor strained her ears to catch. 'When she died so suddenly the next day I forgot everything except her going. When I remembered a few months later I did not know how to send the ring to you, so I waited. And when I came to New York those first horrible days in the lodging-house sent everything else out of my mind.' Her head drooped lower. 'You'll forgive me,' she ended.

"She rose and came toward the editor, and the editor rose to face her.

"'Why, my dear,' she began, 'you mustn't give it a second thought. Why should you worry about it?'

"But the old lady interrupted her and went on, as if she had been checked in a recital which she must finish without a break. 'Wait,' she said. 'To-day, this afternoon, I remembered it! The memory came to me with a kind of shock. I thought, "I have never given her the ring." It brought me out of my chair. I started to get the ring at once, but I could not remember where it was. I stood still, trying to think. Then suddenly that came to me, too. It was down in the corner of my biggest trunk, the one I had not unpacked, the one that holds all my winter things. So I unpacked it—and here is the ring.'

"She held it out. It was a heavy gold band with a raised Latin inscription on its outer surface. The editor took it in her hand, but her mind held only one idea.

"'You unpacked that great trunk,' she gasped, 'this frightfully hot day? With all those furs and flannels? Why, Mrs. Driscoll, how *could* you do such a thing?'

"The old woman drew a deep breath. 'I had to,' she muttered. Her eyebrows puckered. Plainly, she was puzzled and a little afraid. 'I felt I had to,' she repeated. 'It seemed,' she added, slowly, 'almost like a message from my daughter!'

"The editor turned the ring in her hand and looked at the Latin inscription, and as she did so she saw again, not the face of the beautiful woman who had come to her after her downfall, but the quiet convent chapel in which she herself had knelt that afternoon. A little chill ran the length of her spine. For there were three words on the ring."

The Diplomat leaned forward. "That's interesting," he said. "I didn't know about the inscription. The three words were—"

"'*Adveniat Regnum Tuum*,'" said the editor.

"'Thy Kingdom Come,'" translated the Best Seller, swiftly, proud of his Latin. "By Jove, the editor got her message, didn't she? I like your ending, Miss Iverson. But it doesn't prove the original point."

The Playwright leaned across the table. "Doesn't it?" she asked, gently. "Then show them the ring, May."

I drew the heavy circle from my finger. In silence it was passed from palm to

palm. The glance of the blue-eyed woman touched the face of the Playwright, the Diplomat, and the Author and rested on me. Then she drew a deep breath.

"So it's true!" she said. "You four saw it work out! Where is Mrs. Driscoll now?"

"In the Emerson Home for Gentlewomen," the Diplomat told her. "The best, I think, in this country. You ran out to see her last week, didn't you, Bassinger?"

The Author admitted the charge. "She's very happy there," he said.

At his table at the head of the room our host was on his feet. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began—

But the Best Seller was whispering to me. "It wasn't exactly telepathy," he said, "for no one but the old lady knew anything about that ring. It was just an odd coincidence that sent her burrowing into furs and moth-balls that hot day. But you can make a story of it, Miss Iverson—a good one, too, if you'll work in a lot of drama and pathos."

XI

"T. B." CONDUCTS A REHEARSAL

The stage director rose and rolled up his copy of the play, pushing toward me with his disengaged hand the half-dozen round white peppermints which, arranged on a chalk-lined blue blotter, had been chastely representing my most important characters in their most vital scene. His smooth, round face was pale with fatigue; the glow of his brown eyes had been dimmed by sleepless nights; he had the weary air of a patient man who has listened to too much talk—but not for one moment had he lost his control of the situation or of us.

"That might have made a better picture," he conceded, graciously. "But we can't make any more changes till after the dress rehearsal to-night; and if that goes well we won't want to make any. Don't you worry, Miss Iverson. We've got a winner!"

This, coming from Herbert Elman at the close of our last official conference, was as merciful rain to a parched field, but I was too weary to respond to it, except by a tired smile. Under its stimulation, however, our star, who had been drooping forward in her chair surveying the peppermints much as Lady Macbeth must have gazed upon the stain on her hand, blossomed in eager acknowledgment.

"Bertie, you are a trump!" she exclaimed, gratefully. "It's simply wonderful how you keep up your enthusiasm after three weeks of work. It was criminal of Miss Iverson and me to drag you here this afternoon. I suppose we had lost our nerve, but that doesn't excuse us."

Elman had started for the door on the cue of his valedictory. At her words he turned and came back to the desk where we sat together, his face stamped with a sudden look of purpose; and upon my little study, in which for the past three hours we had wrangled over a dozen unimportant details, a hush fell, as if now, at last, something had entered which was real and vital. For an instant he stood before us, looking down at us with eyes that held an unaccustomed sternness.

Then he spoke.

"I had a few words to say to you two when I came here," he began, "but you were both so edgy that I changed my mind. However, if you're talking about losing your nerve you need them, and I'm going to get them off my chest."

Miss Merrick interrupted him, her blue eyes widening like those of a hurt baby.

"Oh, Bertie," she begged, "p-please don't say anything disagreeable. Here we've been rehearsing for weeks, and we three still speak. We're *al-most* friendly. And now, at the eleventh hour, you're going to spoil everything!"

Her words came out in a little wail. She dropped her head in her hands with a gesture of utter fatigue.

"You are," she ended. "You know you are, and I'm *so-o* tired!"

Elman laughed. No one ever took Stella Merrick seriously, except during her hours on the stage when she ceased to be Stella Merrick at all and entered the soul of the character she was impersonating.

"Nonsense," he said, brusquely. "I'm going to show my friendship by giving you a pointer, that's all."

Miss Merrick drew a deep breath and twisted the corner of her mouth toward me —a trick I had learned from Nestor Hurd five years ago and had unconsciously taught her in the past three weeks.

"Oh, if that's all!" she murmured, in obvious relief.

"You should have been in your beds the entire day," continued Elman, severely, "both of you, like the rest of the company. We'll rehearse all night, and you know it; and I'll tell you right now," he added, pregnantly, "that you're going to be up against it."

He waited a moment to give his words the benefit of their cumulative effect, and then added, slowly:

"Just before I came here this afternoon T. B. told me that to-night he intends to rehearse the company himself."

I heard Stella Merrick gasp. The little sound seemed to come from a long distance, for the surprise of Elman's announcement had made me dizzy. "T. B."

was our manager, better known as "The Governor" and "The Master." He had more friends, more enemies, more successes, more insight, more failures, more blindness, more mannerisms, more brutality, and more critics than any other man in the theatrical world. His specialty was the avoidance of details. He let others attend to these, and then, strolling in casually at the eleventh hour, frequently undid the labor to which they had given weeks.

Though his money was producing my play, I had met him only once; and this, I had been frequently assured by the company, had been the one redeeming feature of an unusually strenuous theatrical experience. "T. B." never attended any but dress rehearsals, leaving everything to his stage directors until the black hours when he arrived to consider the results they had accomplished. It was not an infrequent thing for him on these occasions to disband the company and drop the play; that he should change part of the cast and most of the "business" seemed almost inevitable. For days I had been striving to accustom myself to the thought that during our dress rehearsal "T. B." would be sitting gloomily down in the orchestra, his eyes on the back drop, his chin on his breast, a victim to that profound depression which seized him when one of his new companies was rehearsing one of his new plays. At such times he was said to bear, at the best, a look of utter desolation; at the worst, that of a lost and suffering soul.

At long intervals, when Fate perversely chose to give her screw the final turn for an unhappy playwright, "T. B." himself conducted the last rehearsal, and for several months after one of these tragedies theatrical people meeting on Broadway took each other into quiet corners and discussed what had happened in awed whispers and with fearsome glances behind them. It had not occurred to any of us that "T. B." would be moved to conduct *our* last rehearsal. This was his busiest season, and Elman was his most trusted lieutenant. Now, however, Elman's quiet voice was giving us the details of "T. B.'s" intention, and as she listened Stella Merrick's face, paling slowly under the touch of rouge on the cheeks, took on something of the exaltation of one who dies gloriously for a Cause. She might not survive the experience, it seemed to say, but surely even death under the critical observation of "T. B." would take on some new dignity. If she died in "T. B.'s" presence, "T. B." would see that at least she did it "differently"!

"But, Bertie, that's *great*!" she exclaimed. "He must have a lot of faith in the play. He must have heard something. He hadn't any idea of conducting when I spoke to him yesterday."

"Oh yes, he had!" Elman's words fell on her enthusiasm as frost falls on a tree in bloom. "He didn't want to rattle you by saying so, that's all. And he isn't doing this work to-night because he's got faith in the play. It's more because he hasn't. He hasn't faith in anything just now. Three of his new plays have gone to the store-house this month, and he's in a beastly humor. You'll have the devil of a time with him."

Miss Merrick sprang to her feet and began to pace the study with restless steps.

"What are you trying to do?" she threw back at him over her shoulder. "Take what little courage we have left?"

Elman shook his dark head.

"I'm warning you," he said, quietly. "I want you both to brace up. You'll need all the nerve you've got, and then some, to get through what's before us. He'll probably have an entirely new idea of your part, Stella; and I don't doubt he'll want Miss Iverson to rewrite most of her play. But you'll both get through all right. You're not quitters, you know."

His brown eyes, passing in turn from my face to hers, warmed at what he saw in them. When he began to speak we had been relaxed, depressed, almost discouraged. Lack of sleep, nervous strain, endless rehearsals had broken down our confidence and sapped our energy; but now, in the sudden lift of Stella Merrick's head, the quick straightening of her shoulders, I caught a reflection of the change that was taking place in me. At the first prospect of battle we were both as ready for action as Highland regiments when the bagpipes begin to snarl. Looking at us, Elman's pale face lit up with one of his rare and brilliant smiles.

"That's right," he said, heartily. "A word to the wise. And now I'm really off."

Almost before the door had closed behind him Miss Merrick had seized her hat and was driving her hat-pins through it with quick, determined fingers.

"I'm going home and to bed," she said. "We can both get in three hours' sleep before the rehearsal—and believe me, Miss Iverson, we'll need it! Do you remember what General Sherman said about war? He should have saved his words for a description of 'T. B.'"

I followed her out into the hall and to the elevator door. I felt oddly exhilarated, almost as if I had been given some powerfully stimulating drug.

"He doesn't exactly kill, burn, or pillage, does he?" I asked, gaily.

With one foot in the elevator, our star stopped a second and looked back at me. There was a world of meaning in her blue eyes.

"If he did nothing but that, my lamb!" she breathed, and dropped from sight.

I returned to my desk. I had no idea of going to bed. I was no Napoleon, to slumber soundly on the eve of a decisive battle, but there was nothing else I could do except to sweep the peppermint drops out of sight and tuck the diagrammed blotter behind a radiator. While I was engaged in these homely tasks the bell of my telephone rang.

"Hello, Miss Iverson," I heard when I took down the receiver. "Are you going to be at home to-night?"

My heart leaped at the familiar greeting of Billy Gibson, star reporter of the *Searchlight,* and one of my stanch friends ever since the days, five long years ago, when he had given me my first lesson in practical reporting. Almost before I could reply to him I noticed something unnatural in the quality of his voice. It was a little too easy, too casual, too carefully controlled.

"Heard any late news about Morris?" asked Gibson.

"News?" I echoed. "What news? What do you mean?"

"Oh, then you don't know."

Gibson's voice was still ostentatiously cheerful, but it dropped a little on his next words.

"Why, he's sick," he said. "Pretty sick. Has pneumonia."

"I didn't know," I said, slowly. It had been difficult to bring out the words. It was for some reason impossible to say more, but Gibson went on without waiting, thus giving me time to think.

"Haven't lost all interest in us, have you, now that you've been away from us a year and are writing plays?" he asked, cheerfully.

"Oh, Billy, what about him?" At last I was able to bring out the words. "Is it serious?" I asked.

"No one at the office realized it was until to-day," said Gibson. "This morning

Colonel Cartwell stopped at the Morris house on his way down-town and happened to meet one of the consulting physicians. Godfrey's pretty low," he added, gently. "The crisis is expected to-night."

For what seemed a long time I sat staring blankly at the telephone. Once or twice I tried to speak, but no speech came. The forgotten receiver shook in my hand. Every thought but one was wiped out of my mind. Godfrey Morris was ill—very ill. He had been ill for days—perhaps for weeks—and I had not known it because I had been absorbed in my petty interests, which until this moment had seemed so big.

"If you care to have me," went on Gibson, hesitatingly, "I'll telephone you later. I'm to be at the Morris house most of the night and keep the office posted from there. I can call you up once or twice if—it won't disturb you."

I found my voice, but it sounded strange in my own ears. For an instant I had seen myself sitting in my study the long night through, getting messages from the sick-room, but now I remembered my work and the others who were concerned in it.

"Billy," I said, "we're having the dress rehearsal of my play to-night. I may have to be at the Berwyck Theater until three or four in the morning. Can you send me word there—several times?"

Gibson's answer was prompt.

"You bet I can," he said. "I'll bring it. The Morris house is only a few blocks from the Berwyck, and I'll be glad of something to do besides receiving and sending bulletins. Tell your door-man to let me pass, and I'll drop in two or three times during the night." His voice changed. "I thought," he added, almost diffidently, "you'd want to know."

"Yes," I said, slowly, "I want to know. Thank you."

I hung up the receiver, which slipped in my stiff fingers. The exhilaration of a few minutes before lay dead within me. I felt cold and numb. From the living-room off my study the light of my open fire winked at me as if in cheery reassurance. I crossed the room and crouched down before it, stretching out shaking hands to the blaze. I seemed to be moving in a nightmare, but with every sense horribly acute. I remembered previous dreams in which I had seemed to see, as I saw now, the familiar objects of my home around me. I heard the

beating of my heart, the hammering of the blood in my head, the sound of the quick breath I drew—almost the murmur of Godfrey's voice as he babbled in delirium in his distant sick-room.

"*The crisis is expected to-night.*" Gibson's words came back to me. What was it we had arranged? Oh yes—that he was to drop into the Berwyck several times and give me the latest bulletins. But that would be hours from now, and suddenly I realized that I could not wait. With a rush I was back at the telephone asking for the Morris home. I had neglected Grace Morris during the past few months, as I had neglected all my other friends in the work which had absorbed me. I dared not ask for her now, when the English accents of the Morris butler met my ear.

"Is that you, Crumley?" I asked. "This is Miss Iverson. I've just heard that Mr. Morris is very ill. Can you tell me how he is?"

Crumley's reply showed the impassiveness of the well-trained servant.

"He's very low, Miss," he replied, evenly. "Very low indeed. Two of the doctors are here now. They don't hope for any change till toward morning."

I found words for one more question.

"Is he suffering?" I asked, almost in a whisper.

"Suffering, Miss?" echoed Crumley. "No, Miss, I think not. He's very quiet indeed—in a stupor-like."

I hung up the receiver with a steadier hand and sat down, staring straight before me. As I had rallied to Elman's words half an hour ago, so now I tried to meet this new demand upon me. There was nothing I could do for Godfrey; but a few hours later there might be much to do for the manager and the company who were giving my work to the public. I must stand by them and it—that was the one clear fact in a reeling world. I must be very cool, very clear-headed, very alert. I must have, Elman had told me, all my nerve, "and then some." All this, as I repeated it to myself, was quite plain, yet it meant nothing vital to me. It was as if one side of me had lashed with these reminders of duty another side which remained unmoved. The only thing of which I was vividly conscious was a scene which I suddenly visualized—a sick-room, large and cool and dim, a silent figure in a big bed, doctors and nurses bending over it. At the foot of the bed sat a figure I recognized, Godfrey's mother. Of course she would be there. I saw the

gleam of her white hair, the look in the gray eyes which were so like her son's.

"*The crisis is expected to-night.*" The old clock in my hall seemed to be ticking off the words, over and over. The hammering blood in my brain was making them into a refrain which I found myself dully repeating.

With a start I pulled myself together. I was on my feet again, walking back and forth, back and forth, across my study. It was growing late. Through my dark windows the lights of surrounding buildings glowed in at me like evil eyes. I must get ready for my work. Resolutely I held my thoughts to that point for an instant, then they swung away. "*The crisis is expected to-night. The—crisis—is—expected—to-night. Time—to—get—to—work. The crisis is expected to-night.*"

I found that I was dressing. Well, let "T. B." do his worst. He could tear me and my play to tatters, he could disband the company and disrupt the universe, if only for a few blessed hours he could keep me from seeing that shadowy room, that still, helpless figure. But he couldn't. "*The—crisis—is—expected—to-night. The—crisis—is—expected—to-night.*" And when it came, while the great battle was waged that I now knew meant life to me, too, I would be in an up-town theater, listening to petty human beings recite the petty lines of a petty play, to which in my incredible blindness I had given my time for months, shutting myself away from my friends, shutting myself away from Godfrey. How many times had he telephoned and written? Half a dozen at least. He had urged me to go to a concert or two, to a play or two, but I had been "too busy." It was monstrous, it was unbelievable, but it was true. "*The—crisis—is—expected—to-night.*"

I was at the theater now. How I had reached it was not quite clear. The members of the company were there before me, scattered about in the wings and on the big empty stage, lit by a single "bunch" light. The information that "T. B." himself was to conduct had fallen upon them like a pall. Under its sable influence they whispered together in stricken groups of three or four. Near the right first entrance Elman and Miss Merrick sat, their heads close, the star talking softly but rapidly, Elman listening with his tired, courteous air. They nodded across the stage at me when I appeared, but I did not join them. Instead I slipped down into the dark auditorium and took my place in an orchestra seat, where I could be alone. The whole thing was a nightmare, of course. I could not possibly be sitting there when only a few blocks away that sick-room held its watching group, its silent, helpless patient. "*The—crisis—is—expected—to-night.*"

There was a sudden stir on the stage, a quick straightening of every figure there, a business-like bustle, and much scurrying to and fro. "T. B." had entered the theater by the front door and was striding down the middle aisle. I saw a huge bulk that loomed grotesque for an instant as it leaned toward the dark footlights for a word with Mr. Elman, and dropped with a grunt into a chair in the third row. Other figures—I did not know how many—had entered the dark theater and taken their places around me. From where I sat, half a dozen rows behind him, I had a view of "T. B.'s" hair under the slouch hat he kept on his head, the bulge of his jaw as he turned his profile toward me, the sharp upward angle of the huge cigar in his mouth. The company were in their places in the wings and on the stage. I heard Elman's quick word, "Curtain." The rehearsal had begun. The familiar words of the opening scene rolled over the footlights as cold and vague as a fog that rolls in from the sea. "*The—crisis—is—expected—to-night.*" No, that was not what the office boy on the stage had just said. It was what Gibson had said that afternoon, a thousand years ago, when he had called me on the telephone.

Things were going badly up there on the stage. Like a patient coming out of ether during an operation, and vaguely conscious of what was passing around her, I had moments of realizing this. Boyce did not know his lines; he was garbling them frightfully, and, by failing to give his associates their cues, was adding to the panic into which "T. B.'s" presence had already thrown them. There! He had ruined Miss Merrick's opening scene, which was flattening out, going to pieces. It seemed as if some one should do something. Yet, what could be done? "*The—crisis—is—expected—to-night.*" What difference did it make what happened on that stage? The conscious interval was over. The babble that came over the footlights meant nothing.

From his orchestra seat, into which he seemed to be sinking deeper as the moments passed, "T. B." sent forth a sardonic croak. It was a horrible noise—nerve-racking. It reached down to where I was submerged, caught me, drew me up to the surface again. I saw the company cringe under it, heard Elman's reprimand of Boyce, and his sharp command to begin the scene again. Confusion, confusion, so much confusion over such little things, when only a few blocks away was that shadowy sick-room in which the great battle between life and death was being fought with hardly a sound.

It was midnight. "T. B." was conducting the rehearsal. For three hours he had poured upon the company the vitriol of his merciless tongue. For three hours he

had raced up and down the aisles of the theater, alternately yelping commands and taking flying leaps across the footlights to the stage to go through a scene himself. He had laughed, he had wept, he had pleaded, he had sworn, he had cooed, he had roared. He had been strangely gentle with the white-haired old man of the company, and wholly brutal to a young girl who was doing beautiful work. He had reduced every woman to tears and every man to smothered and stuttering profanity. And all the time, sitting in my seat in the auditorium, I had watched him as dispassionately and with almost as detached an interest as if he were a manikin pulled by invisible wires and given speech by some ventriloquist. It was all a bad dream. He did not exist. We were not really there. The things he said to the company swept by my ears like the wail of a winter wind, leaving an occasional chill behind them. The remarks he addressed directly to me touched some cell of my brain which mechanically but clearly responded. I struck out lines and gave him new speeches, scrawling them with a pencil on a pad upon my knee; I "rebuilt" the curtain speech of the second act according to his sudden notion and to his momentary content; I transferred scenes and furnished new cues while he waited for the copy with impatiently extended hand. All the time the hush of the sick-room lay around me; I saw the still figure in the great four-poster bed.

I had never seen Godfrey Morris's bedroom, though his sister had shown me his study. But now it was clear in every detail—the polished, uncarpeted floor, the carved pineapple tops of the four-poster, the great windows, open at top and bottom, the logs on the brass andirons in the grate, the brass-bound wood-box near it, the soft glow of the night lamps, the portrait of his mother which Sargent had painted ten years ago and which Godfrey had hung in his own room at the front of his bed. Yes, I remembered now, he had told me about the portrait. That was why I saw it so plainly, facing him as he lay unconscious. He had told me about the four-poster, too, and the high-boys in the room, and some chests of drawers he had picked up. He was interested in old mahogany. No, he was not interested now in anything. He was "in a stupor-like," Crumley had said. "*The—crisis—is—expected—to-night.*"

"Great Scott, Miss Merrick!" shouted "T. B." "Don't you realize that the woman would have hysterics at this point? First she'd whimper, then she'd cry, then she'd shriek and find she couldn't stop. Like this—"

The theater filled with strange sounds—the wail of a banshee, the yelps of a suffering dog, a series of shrieks like the danger-blasts of a locomotive whistle. Something in me lent an ear to them and wondered what they meant. Surely they

could not mean that my heroine was to have an attack of hysteria at that moment in my play. That was all wrong—wholly outside of the character and the scene; enough, indeed, to kill the comedy, to turn it into farce.

"That's the idea," I heard "T. B." say. "Now you try it. Here, we'll do it together."

Something flamed within me, instinctive, intense. I half rose, then sank numbly back into my chair. What did it matter? The only thing that disturbed me was the noise. The uproar beat against my eardrums in waves of sound that threatened to burst them. My nightmare was growing worse. Was it taking me to Bedlam? Was I shrieking, too? I must not shriek in the big, quiet room where the silent figure lay "in a stupor-like."

The chair beside me creaked. Gibson had dropped into it. "T. B." and Miss Merrick were on the top notes of their hysteria, but suddenly I ceased to hear them. Every sense I had hung on the new-comer's words. "No change," said Gibson, briefly. "None expected till three or four o'clock. Thought I'd drop in, anyway. Say"—a wraith of his wide and boyish grin appeared—"what's going on? Is *this* your rehearsal?"

The question meant nothing to me.

"Did you see any of the family?" I whispered.

Gibson nodded.

"Miss Morris came in for a minute at midnight," he told me, "while I was having supper. I opened the door of Godfrey's room an inch, too, and saw him through the crack."

"See here!" "T. B." was bellowing to a frightened boy on the stage. "You're not giving an imitation of Corbett entering the ring; you're supposed to be a gentleman coming into a drawing-room. See? Hook in your spine an' try it. And now you're not havin' a hair-cut. You're greeting a lady. And you're not makin' a face at her, either. You're smiling at her. Smile, smile—my God, man, smile! Try it. T-r-y-y it!"

His voice broke. He seemed about to burst into tears. I caught Gibson's arm.

"Oh, Billy," I gulped, "how did he look?"

Gibson patted my hand glancing away from me as he answered.

"Very quiet," he said. "He's unconscious. The nurse said he was 'resting comfortably.' That's their pet formula, you know. Occasionally he mutters something—a few disconnected words. By Jove, what *is* that fellow doing now?"

I followed the direction of his eyes. "T. B." had taken one of his flying leaps over the footlights, assisted midway by a chair in the aisle which served the purpose of a spring-board in this acrobatic feat. Now he was at the right first entrance, swaggering through the open door, his hands deep in his pockets, every tooth in his head revealed in a fixed and awful grin. Yet, strangely, through the swagger, under the grin, one detected for an instant something resembling a well-bred college boy entering a drawing-room—something, too, of radiant youth, irresponsible and charming.

"Jove," breathed Gibson, "he gets it, somehow, doesn't he? One sees exactly what he's driving at."

But the little scene had faded as I looked at it, like a negative dimming in the light. The door that opened was the door of the sick-room, and the man who had entered was one of the specialists who watched over Godfrey to-night. I saw him approach the bed and lean over the patient, looking at him in silence for a moment, his finger on the pulse of the thin hand that lay so still. Somewhere near a woman was sobbing. Was it Mrs. Morris, or the young girl in the wings? I did not know. "T. B.'s" voice was cutting its way to me like the blast of a steam siren through a fog.

"Miss Iverson," he yelled. "Cut out that kid's love scene. He can't do it, and no one wants it there, anyway. You've got some drama here now, and, by Heaven, it's about time you had! Don't throw it away. Keep to it." His voice broke on the last words. Again he seemed to be on the verge of tears. "*Keep—to—it*," he almost sobbed.

I carried my manuscript to a point in the wings where, vaguely aided by one electric light hanging far above me, I could make the changes for which "T. B." had asked. They meant new cues for several characters and a number of verbal alterations in their lines. Far down within me something sighed over the loss of that love scene—sighed, and then moaned over the loss of something else. "T. B.," his chin on his chest, his eyes on the floor, brooded somberly in an orchestra seat until we were ready to go over the revised scene. As I finished, Stella Merrick leaned over me, her hand clutching my left shoulder in a grip that

hurt. Her teeth were chattering with nervousness.

"How *can* you be so calm?" she gasped. "I've never seen him as devilish as he is to-night. If you hadn't kept your nerve we'd all have gone to smash. As it is, I have a temperature of a hundred and four!"

I wondered what Godfrey's temperature was. Gibson had not told me. There must be a fever-chart in the sick-room. It seemed almost as if I could read it. Certainly I could see the jagged peaks of it, the last point running off in a long wavering line of weakness. Perhaps Gibson knew what the temperature was. But when I returned to my seat in the orchestra Gibson was no longer there.

"Open some of those windows," ordered "T. B.," irritably. "It's like a furnace in here."

Was that an ice-cap on Godfrey's head? Of course. The nurse was changing it for a fresh one. For a moment, the first in that endless night, I seemed to see his face, waxen, the sensitive nostrils pinched, the gray eyes open now and staring unseeingly into space.

"No change," said Gibson's voice.

Another period of time had dragged its way past me like a sluggish snake.

"What o'clock?" I heard myself ask.

Gibson looked at his watch.

"Quarter of two," he told me, snapping the case shut. "I saw Dr. Weymarth just before I left."

"What did he say?"

Gibson's eyes shifted from mine, which vainly tried to hold them.

"No change," he repeated.

"Was that all?"

Gibson's eyes returned to mine for an instant and shifted again.

"Tell me," I insisted.

"He's disappointed in the heart. It's been holding its own, though the temperature

has been terrific from the first. But since midnight—"

"Yes, since midnight—"

"It's not quite so strong."

Gibson's words came slowly, as if against his will. There was a strange silence over the theater. Through it the voice of "T. B." ripped its way to us.

"Now we'll run through that scene again. And if the author and the ladies and gentlemen of the company will kindly remember that this is a rehearsal, and not an afternoon tea, perhaps we'll get somewhere."

"Billy," I whispered, "I can't bear it."

"I know." Gibson patted my hand. "Sit tight," he murmured. "I'm off again. I'll be back in an hour or so. By then they ought to know."

I watched him slip like a shadow through the dark house, along the wall, and back toward the stage-door. The voice of Stella Merrick was filling the theater. I heard my name.

"Miss Iverson doesn't agree with me," she was saying, "but I think that in this scene, when we are reconciled and I say to my husband, 'My boy,' he ought to answer, 'My mumsey!'"

"T. B.'s" reply sounded like a pistol-shot.

"What for?" he exploded. "Want to turn this play into a farce?"

"Certainly *not*!"

"Then follow the lines."

It was the settlement for all time of an argument which Miss Merrick and I had waged for weeks. One scene at least, the final, vital scene, would be spared to me. I felt a throb of gratitude, followed by a sudden sick, indescribable sinking of the heart. Had I for one instant forgotten? I remembered again. Nothing mattered. Nothing would ever matter.

Some one sat down beside me, smiled at me, then stared frankly. "Good Heaven, Miss Iverson, did I frighten you?" cried Elman. "You look like a ghost!"

Before I could answer, "T. B." approached us both. Leaning over Elman, he

nodded toward the youth who was still vainly trying to act like a gentleman.

"Get rid of him."

"But we open in Atlantic City to-morrow night—" began Elman.

"Get rid of him." "T. B.'s" tones permitted no argument. "Get rid of Haskins, too, and of Miss Arnold."

"But, great Scott, Governor—"

Elman's voice, usually so controlled, was almost a wail. "T. B." strolled away. To "open" the next night with three new members in the company seemed impossible. Probably we wouldn't open at all. By to-morrow night I would know. Godfrey would be out of danger, or Godfrey would be—Why didn't Gibson come? Elman murmured something to me about "not taking it so hard," but I caught only a few words. He said it could be done—that he had the right people at hand. He would see them the first thing in the morning, and go over the lines with them and have them word-perfect by night.

My eyes were strained in the direction of the stage-door. My ears were awaiting the sound of Gibson's quick footsteps. For now, I knew, in the sick-room, where my mind and heart had been all night, the crisis was near. Through the open windows the blue-gray dawn was visible. The shaded lights were taking on a spectral pallor. Nurse and doctors were close to the bed, watching, listening for the change that meant life or death.

"Good—mighty good!" whispered Elman.

On the stage Miss Merrick and Peyton, the leading man, were going through their final scene. The familiar words, over which I had labored for months, came to me as if out of a life I had lived on some other planet ages back.

"You seem so far away," said the man. "I feel as if I'd have to call across the world to make you hear me. But I love you. Oh, Harriet, can't you hear that?"

The voice of his wife, who was forgiving him and taking him back, replied with the little break in its beautiful notes which Stella Merrick always gave to her answer.

"Yes, dear; I guess I'd hear that anywhere." And then, as she drew his head to her breast, "My boy!"

Within me something alive, suffering and struggling, cried out in sick revolt. What did these puppets know about love? What had I known about it when I wrote so arrogantly? But I knew now. Oh yes, I knew now. Love and suspense and agony—I knew them all.

On the dim stage the leading man and woman melted into the embrace that accompanied the slow fall of the curtain. In the wings, but well in view, the members of the company clustered, watching the final scene and wiping their wet eyes. They invariably cried over that scene, partly because the leading man and woman set the example, but more because they were temperamental and tired. Even the brilliant eyes of Elman, who still sat beside me, took on a sudden softness. He smiled at "T. B.," who had dropped into a seat near us.

"No change there, I guess," he hazarded.

"T. B." looked at his watch.

"Quarter of four," he said, with surprise. Then he yawned, and, rising, reached for his light overcoat which lay on the back of a chair.

"That's all," he called, as he struggled into it. "Boyce, study your lines to-morrow, or you're going to have trouble. Peyton, you and Miss Mason better go over that scene in the second act in the morning. So-long, Miss Merrick."

He started to go, then stopped at my seat.

"Good night, Miss Iverson," he said, kindly. "You've got the right nerve for this business. Of course we can't make predictions, but I shouldn't wonder if we're giving the public what they want in this play."

He nodded and was gone. I had barely caught his words. Over his big shoulders I saw Gibson approaching, his face one wide, expansive grin. Never before had anything seemed so beautiful to me as that familiar Gibson smile. Never had I dreamed I could be so rapturously happy in seeing it.

"Good news," he said, as soon as he came within speaking-distance; and he added when he reached me, "He's better. The doctors say they'll pull him through."

At the first glimpse of him I had risen to my feet with some vague impulse to take, standing, whatever was coming. For a moment I stood quite still. Then the thing of horror that had ridden me through the night loosened its grip slowly,

reluctantly, and I drew a deep, deep breath. I wanted to throw myself in Gibson's arms. I wanted to laugh, to cry, to shout. But I did none of these things. I merely stood and looked at him till he took my hand and drew it through his arm.

"Rehearsal's over, I see," he said. "I'm going to hunt up a taxi and take you home."

Together we went out into the gray morning light, and I stood on the curb, full-lunged, ecstatic, until Gibson and the taxi-cab appeared. He helped me into the cab and took the seat beside me.

"You ought to go home," I murmured, with sudden compunction. "You must be horribly tired."

They were my first words. I had made no comment on the message he brought, and it was clear that he had expected none. Now he smiled at me—the wide, kind, understanding smile that had warmed the five years of our friendship.

"Let me do this much for you, May," he said. "You see, it's all I can do."

Our eyes met, and suddenly I understood. An irrepressible cry broke from me.

"Oh, Billy," I said. "Not *you*! Not *me*!"

He smiled again.

"Yes," he replied. "Just that. Just you and me. But it's all right. I'd rather be your friend than the husband of any other woman in the world."

The taxi-cab hummed on its way. The east reddened, then sent up a flaming banner of light. I should have been tired; I should have been hungry; I should, perhaps, have been excited over "T. B.'s" final words. I was none of those things. I was merely in a state of supreme content. Nothing mattered but the one thing in life which mattered supremely. Godfrey was better; Godfrey would live!

XII

THE RISE OF THE CURTAIN

On the desk in my study the bell of the telephone sounded a faint warning, then rang compellingly. It had been ringing thus at five-minute intervals throughout the day, but there was neither impatience nor weariness in the haste with which I responded. I knew what was coming; it was the same thing that had been coming since nine o'clock that morning; and it was a pleasant sort of thing, diverting to an exceedingly anxious mind.

"Hello, hello! Is that you, May? This is your awe-struck friend, George Morgan. Josephine and I want to inquire the condition of your temperature and your pulse."

I laughed.

"Quite normal, thank you," I said.

"Don't believe it." The sympathetic cadence of George Morgan's voice removed all effect of brusqueness from his words. "No playwright was ever normal three hours before the curtain went up on the first night of her play in New York. Now I'll tell you exactly how you feel."

"Don't," I begged. "I *know*."

"But I must!" my friend's remorseless voice went on. "I've got to show my insight into the human heart, as you used to say in your convent days. So here goes. You're sinking into a bottomless pit; you're in a blue funk; your feet are cold and your head is hot; you're breathing with difficulty; you're struggling with a desire to take the first train out of town; you're wondering if you can't go to bed and stay there. You think no one suspects these things, for you're wearing a smile that looks as if it had been tacked on; but it's so painful that your father and mother keep their eyes turned away from it. You're—"

"George, for Heaven's sake—"

"Oh, all right; I merely wanted to show insight and express sympathy. Having lived through four 'first nights' myself, I know what they mean. And say, May,"—his gay voice took on a deeper note—"I needn't tell you that Josephine and I will be going through the whole thing with you. We've chosen seats in the fifth row of the orchestra, instead of taking a box, because we both expect to burst into loud sobs of joy during your speech, and we'll feel less exposed down on the floor. And, oh yes, wait a minute; your god-daughter insists on kissing you through the telephone!"

There was an instance's silence; then the breathless little voice of Maria Annunciata Morgan, aged "four 'n a half, mos' five," according to herself, came to my ear.

"'Lo, May, oh-h, May, 'lo, May," it gurgled, excitedly.

"Hello, babykins," I said. "Is that a new song you've learned that you're singing for me?"

"No-o-o." Maria Annunciata's tones showed her scorn for grown-up denseness. "I was just 'ginning my conversation," she added, with dignity.

I apologized.

"An' papa says," went on the adorable childish treble, "'at if your play lasses till a mat'née, I—can—go—an'—see—it!"

"Bless your heart, so you shall, my baby," I laughed. "And if the play lasses only a few minutes, I'll give you a 'mat'née' all by yourself. Where's that kiss I was to have? I need it very much."

"Here 'tis. Here's fourteen an' 'leven." They came to me over the wire in a succession of reports like the popping of tiny corks. "An' papa says say good-by now, so I mus'. But I love you *very* mush!"

"Good-by, darling. I love you very mush, too."

I turned from the telephone wonderfully cheered by the little talk, but almost before I had hung up the receiver the bell rang again.

"Hello, May. If you've finished that impassioned love scene with which you have kept the wire sizzling for the last half-hour I'd like to utter a few calming words."

Bayard, a brilliantly successful playwright, was talking.

"Feel as if you were being boiled in oil, don't you?" was his cheery beginning. "Feel as if you were being burned at the stake? Feel as if you were being butchered to make a Roman holiday, and all that kind of thing? But it's nothing to the way you're going to feel as you drive to the theater and as you watch the curtain go up. However, keep a stiff upper lip. Margaret and I will be in front, and Margaret says you can have my chest to cry on immediately after the performance. Good luck. Good-by."

Again, before I had left the room, the telephone bell recalled me. It had been like this all day. I had begun to believe that it would always be like this. Life had resolved itself into a series of telephone talks, running through a strenuous but not unpleasant dream. Every friend I had seemed determined to call me up and alternate rosy good wishes with dark forebodings of disasters possible through no fault of mine. The voice that came to me now was that of Arthur Locke, the best actor and the most charming gentleman on the American stage.

"Good luck, Miss Iverson," he said, heartily. "I don't need to tell you all my wife and I wish for you. But I want to give you a word of warning about the critics. Don't let anything they do to-night disturb you. They've all got their bag of tricks, you know, and they go through them whether they like the play or not. For example"—his beautiful voice took on a delicious quality of sympathetic amusement—"Haskins usually drops off to sleep about the middle of the second act. The audience is always immensely impressed by this, and men and women exchange glances and hushed comments over it. But it doesn't mean anything. He wakes up again. He slept through my entire second act last year, and gave me an excellent notice the next morning—to show his gratitude, I suppose. Allen usually leaves during the middle of the third act, gathering up his overcoat with a weary sigh and marching down the middle aisle so that no one can miss his dramatic exit. People are so used to it that they don't mind it much. Northrup sits with his eyebrows up in his pompadour, as if pained beyond expression by the whole performance, and Elkins will take all your best comedy with sad, sad shakes of the head. To equalize this, however, Webster will grin over your pathetic scenes. The best thing to do is not to look at any of them. You know where their seats are, don't you? Keep your eyes the other way."

"Thank you," I said, faintly. "I think I will."

Beyond question Mr. Locke's intentions had been friendly, but his words had not

perceptibly soothed my uneasy nerves. Before I walked from my study into my living-room I stopped a moment to straighten my shoulders and take a deep breath. My entire family had come on from the West to attend the first-night performance of my play in New York—my father, my sister Grace, my brother Jack, now a lieutenant in the army, even my delicate mother, to whom journeys and excitement were not among life's usual privileges. They were, I knew, having tea together, and as I opened the living-room door I found my features taking on the stiff and artificial smile I must have unconsciously worn all day. A saving memory of George Morgan's words came to me in time, and I banished the smile and soberly entered the room.

The members of the familiar group greeted me characteristically. My mother, by whose chair I stopped for an instant, smiled up at me in silence, patting my hand. My father drew a deep, inviting chair close to the open fire; my brother brought me the cup of tea my sister hurriedly prepared. Each beloved face wore a look of acute nervous strain, and from the moment of my entrance every one talked at once, on subjects so remote from the drama that it seemed almost improper to introduce it by repeating the telephone conversations I had just had. I did so, however, and in the midst of the badinage that followed, Stella Merrick, our "star," was announced.

She lived across the Square from me, and she promptly explained as she drank her tea that she had been "too nervous to stay at home." For her comfort I repeated again the pregnant words of Mr. Locke concerning the New York critics, and she nodded in depressed confirmation. During the close association required by our rehearsals, and our months together "on the road," I had not analyzed to my satisfaction the contradictions of Miss Merrick's temperament. She loved every line of my play and was admirable, if not ideal, in the leading rôle. She fiercely resented the slightest suggestion from me, and combated almost every change I wished to make in the text as my work revealed itself to me more clearly during rehearsals and performances. She seemed to have a genuine fondness for me and a singular personal dependence. She was uneasy if I missed a rehearsal, and had been almost panic-stricken when once or twice during our preliminary tour I had missed a first night in an important city. She claimed the credit of all merit in the play and freely passed on to me the criticisms. The slightest suggestion made by the "cub reporter" on any newspaper or the call-boy in any theater seemed to have more weight with her than any advice of mine. To-day, under the soothing influence of tea, fire-light, and the not too stimulating charms of family conversation, we could see her

tense nerves relax.

"I've been working mentally on the critics," she confessed, as she passed her cup to Grace for the second time. "They're the only persons I've been afraid of here in New York. I know we'll get our audience. We always do. And if Miss Iverson will stand by us, and make a speech when she's called for, we're sure to have a brilliant night."

She smiled her charming smile at me.

"But the New York critics are enough to appal the strongest soul," she went on. "They're so unjust sometimes, so merciless, so fiendishly clever in suggesting labels that stick to one through life. Do you remember what they said about Miss Carew—that her play was so feminine she must have done it with crochet needles? And they said Nazimova looked like 'the cussed damosel,' and that Fairbanks had the figure of Romeo and the face of the apothecary. Those things appal me. So for the last few days I've been working on them mentally. I believe in mental science, you know."

She paused for a moment and sat stirring her tea, a reflective haze over the brilliance of her blue eyes.

"Some way," she resumed, "in the forty-eight hours since I've been trying the power of mind on them I have ceased to be afraid of the critics. I realize now that they cannot hurt us or our work. I know they are our friends. I have a wonderfully kind feeling for them. Why,"—her voice took on a seductive tenderness, her eyes dwelt on the fire with a dreamy abstraction in their depths —"now I almost love the damned things!" she ended, peacefully.

My brother Jack choked, then laughed irrepressibly. My sister and I joined him. But my mother was staring at Miss Merrick with startled eyes, while Miss Merrick stared back at her with a face full of sudden consternation.

"Mrs. Iverson," she gasped, "I beg your pardon! I didn't know what I was saying. I was—really—thinking aloud!"

Half an hour later I went with her to the elevator for a final word.

"I'm going straight to the theater," she told me. "Be early, won't you? And come in to see me for a moment just before we begin."

She took my hands in a grip that hurt.

"We're going to win," she said, as she entered the elevator.

It was almost six. I had barely time to dress, to dine comfortably, and to get to the theater before the curtain rose. At every stage of my toilet the inexorable telephone called me; telegrams, too, were coming from all parts of the country. My heart swelled. Whether I proved to be a playwright or not, I had friends—many of them new ones, made during the progress of this dramatic adventure. They would not be too dearly bought, it seemed to me then, even by failure.

Dinner began as a silent meal. No one cared to talk. I recalled with a sardonic smile the invitation of a society friend who had bought three boxes for my first night and was giving a large dinner to precede the play. She had expected me to grace that function and to sit in one of her boxes; and she would never understand, I knew, why I refused to do so. Godfrey Morris was coming at half after seven, with much pomp and his new limousine, to take us to the theater. His mother and sister were giving a box-party, but Godfrey was to sit with us in the body of the house. I had frankly refused to have even him join us at dinner. Four pairs of eyes fixed on me with loving sympathy during that repast were, I realized, all I could endure. Even Godfrey's understanding gaze would be the one thing too much—because it was so understanding.

At the table the first few remarks of the family dropped and lay like visible, neglected things before us. Then Grace and Jack entered upon a discussion which they succeeded in making animated, and in which it was not necessary that I should take part. It gave me an opportunity to swallow naturally, to try to control the queer fluttering of my heart and the sense of faintness, almost of nausea, that threatened to overcome me. When I went to my room to put on my evening coat I looked at myself in the long mirror that paneled the door. To my relief, I looked quite natural—pale, beyond question, but I never had much color. Of the iciness and rigidity of my hands and feet, of the panic that shook the very soul of me, no one but myself need know.

I greeted Godfrey with both hands outstretched and a real smile. I had seen him only once before since his return three days ago from Palm Beach, where he had gone for his convalescence after his attack of pneumonia. He had come back for my first night—he had made that very clear—and for a blessed instant my panic vanished in the comfort of his presence, of the sure grasp of his firm hands, the look in his gray eyes. In the next instant it returned with cumulative force. I could bear failure alone if I had to. Others, many others, had borne it before me, and there was always the future in which one could try again. I could bear it

before my family, for they would never believe that the fault of failure was mine; or before the eyes of all my friends, for the theater would be full of them. But to bear it in the presence of Godfrey, to have him see me fail—no, that was unthinkable. I had reached the point where I must set my teeth, take my nerves and my imagination in hand, and control them as I had once controlled a team of frantic horses plunging toward a river-bank.

"A good deal like being executed in the public square, isn't it?" asked Godfrey, gently. We were on our way up-town, and now over the whole party a sudden silence fell. The illuminated sign of the big Broadway theater was before us: the name of my play and that of our "star" stared at us in letters of fire that took strange shapes before my eyes. My own name modestly adorned the tablet on each side of the entrance and the bill-boards in the lobby. The latter, when we entered it, was banked with flowers. We were early, but the theater was filling rapidly, and the usual throng of "first-nighters," equally ready for an execution or a triumph, chatted on the sidewalk and thronged the entrance. The house manager, his coat adorned with a white carnation, greeted me as we passed in.

"Good luck, Miss Iverson," he said, cordially. "Lots of telegrams here for you. Wait, I'll get them. Here, Fred, let's have Miss Iverson's telegrams."

He checked the line at the box-office, thrust a hand through the little window, and drew it out with a thick package of the yellow envelopes. Godfrey held out his hand.

"I'll take care of them, if you wish," he said, and as I nodded he dropped them into a pocket of his coat.

In silence we filed down the aisle to our seats. The boxes were already filled; the body of the house filled as we watched it. On every side were faces I knew and loved—Mrs. Morris and Grace with Colonel and Mrs. Cartwell and Mr. and Mrs. Nestor Hurd; the Morgans, with Kittie James and Maudie Joyce, who had come from Chicago for this big night in my life; my friend of the rejected dinner and her brilliantly jeweled guests; a deputation from the *Searchlight* and my magazine offices, which, it seemed to me, filled half the house. Mollie Merk was there, and Billy Gibson and Mrs. Hoppen. The occasion had the atmosphere of a reception. Every one knew every one else; friends chatted with each other across the aisles and visited from seat to seat. A few came to greet me. The majority mercifully waited, knowing I would wish them to wait. Godfrey, sitting beside me, opened my program and found the evening bill. As he did so I saw that his hand shook. He followed the direction of my eyes, and his brown cheeks flushed.

"I won't deny it," he whispered. "I'm as excited as you are; probably more so."

Our eyes met. For a moment I almost forgot where we were—almost, but not quite. Then Godfrey went on.

"But I'm not going to tell you about that now," he said, quietly. "Now I'm thinking of nothing but the play."

I rose hurriedly. "I'm afraid I'm not," I admitted. "I forgot to go to Miss Merrick as I promised."

He rose and went with me. From our places at the end of the left-side aisle it was easy to slip back of the boxes and behind the scenes. Godfrey waited in the wings while I tapped at the door of Miss Merrick's dressing-room and entered. The place seemed very full. Elman, the stage director, was in the group that surrounded the star, and Peyton, our leading man, the latter dressed for his

entrance. Both came forward at once to shake hands. Miss Merrick, her eyes on the mirror, following the last touches of her make-up, smiled at me without turning. She was pale under her rouge, and her eyes seemed twice their usual size, but they brightened as she saw me.

"I'm not going to say a word," I told her. "You know how I feel."

It was clear that she hardly heard me.

"Look at all these," she said. "Everybody's awfully kind."

She waved her hand, indicating the masses of flowers around her, the litter of telegrams and notes.

"I'm actually frozen with fear," she went on. "But I always am. It will pass off soon after we begin. Am I speaking in my usual voice? It sounds like a whisper to me."

I reassured her and slipped away. Elman, Peyton, and her maid closed round her again. I heard her describing her symptoms in detail as I closed the door. I recognized them. They were also mine. The theater was dark and the curtain just rising as Godfrey and I returned to our seats. I was deeply thankful for the gloom that enveloped me. My mother, sitting at my right, reached out gently and took my hand, but I was hardly conscious of the action. For the moment there was nothing in the world but the lighted stage on which my familiar characters, my "dea', dea' dollies," as Maria Annunciata called them, were going through their parts.

The house was very still. Every head in the great audience was turned toward the stage, politely attentive, willing to be interested, waiting to know if interest was there. A moment dragged by, another and another—the longest of my life except the moments of the night, three months ago, when I had awaited news from Godfrey's sick-room. And now he was here beside me, superbly well, wholly himself again. At the thought my heart melted. My mind swerved for a second from the interest on which it was focused. I turned and glanced at him. He was leaning forward in his seat, his gray eyes fixed unwinkingly on the stage, his face pale under its coat of Palm Beach tan. For an instant he did not know that I was glancing at him; then he turned, and our eyes met in a look which taught me that of all in the crowded house he understood best what this hour meant to me, because it meant as much to him. It was as if we thought with one mind, responded with one nervous system to the influence around us.

At the back of the house a little ripple began, grew, swelled into a laugh. I drew my first deep breath, and felt it echoed by Godfrey at my side. Again our eyes met. His sparkled in the dimness. Another laugh rippled around us, swelled, reached the balconies, and rolled down from there. I heard the whisper of silk and the creak of seats as the members of my family at last settled comfortably into their seats.

"By Jove," whispered Godfrey, "you've got them! They're with you!"

For the time at least we had them. The big, kindly-disposed audience, anxious to be pleased, met every comedy line with a quick response which grew more generous as the moments passed. The entrance of the star brought an ovation which temporarily checked the progress of the play. Under it Miss Merrick's brilliant eyes lost their look of strain. She touched her highest moments in the pathos of her entrance scene. The audience was again very quiet. Around us handkerchiefs rustled; Godfrey's eyes, meeting mine, were wet, and my heart turned to water as I looked at them. That he should be moved like that by my play—no, by *our* play. Everything, I knew, was *ours* henceforth.

The curtain went down and the lights flared up. The audience had been amused, interested, touched. It called out the players and called them out again, while the curtain rose and fell, rose and fell, and the members of the company, smiling now and with all their panic gone, came before the footlights singly and in groups. So far all was well. Whatever happened later, we had had a triumphant first act. Already the play was a third over. I had no fears now as to the success of the second act. It was almost wholly comedy, and the comedy had "got over" with a rush. But the third act—I was by no means sure of the third act, where our manager's scene of hysteria, the fatal scene he had introduced during the dress rehearsal, still claimed its deadly moments.

My friends were coming up to greet me—George Morgan, Bayard, a dozen of them, congratulatory, jubilant.

"Josephine can't cross the house yet to speak to you herself," explained George, airily, "because her nose isn't fit to be seen. She's crying for joy over there. She'll get around after the next act."

"You've got 'em," said Bayard, heartily. "They're *eating* your comedy and spoiling their complexions over your pathos. What more do you want? Shall I call for the author now, or wait till the end of the second act?"

My mother's gentle voice was in my ear.

"I'm so very happy, dear," she said, quietly.

I looked at my father. The nod he gave me, the expression in his eyes, were the most beautiful things I had ever seen, except the tears in Godfrey's eyes. Except —was it possible that at last I was putting some one else before my father? It was possible. It was more than possible; it was certain. For Godfrey himself was speaking now, and nothing else had given me the thrill that came at the sound of the quiet voice so close to my ear.

"May," he whispered. "Dear May, I'm so glad!"

That was all, but it was gloriously complete. And now the second act was on, with the rollicking comedy of which I felt so sure. Around us the audience rocked and laughed, breaking out frequently into little whirlwinds of applause. The strain of rehearsals had had its effect on my feeling for various members of the company, but to-night as I watched them it seemed to me that I loved them all, for beyond doubt each was giving all that was in him toward the winning of the success that now seemed assured.

"Your hand is cold even through your glove," whispered Godfrey. "That's the only sign you show of nervousness."

In the darkness he was holding it close.

"It's wonderful to be going through this with you," he whispered.

"It was wonderful of you to come back for it," I said.

He laughed, a little laugh of warm content.

"Do you think I could have kept away?" he asked.

I could not answer. The night was giving me too much. The curtain was coming down, only to rise again and again and again as the house let itself loose in the joyful tumult of friendly hearts that can at last let friendly impulse have its way. Again and again the golden head of Stella Merrick bent before the storm of applause that greeted her repeated appearance. Again and again the members of the company responded, singly and together. Again and again the light flashed up, only to be lowered as the uproar continued.

And now they were calling for the author in an insistent, steady call, from

gallery, balcony, and orchestra—a call that tolerated no failure to respond. My knees shook under me as I rose. To walk the length of the house and out on that empty, waiting stage seemed impossible, but perhaps I could say something here, standing in my place. For a second I stood undiscovered; then, as if on a concerted signal, every head in the house turned toward me. There was a whirl of greeting, of applause, which my loyal friends led and prolonged.

"Speech! Speech! Speech!" The word came at me from every corner of the theater. My knees steadied. My voice, as I began, sounded natural, even casual. It seemed all at once the simplest matter in the world to say a few words to this wonderful audience, so receptive, so enthusiastic, so friendly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began. "I shall not try to make a speech. No author should attempt that on a first night. Many are called, and some get up, but very few get over."

I had to stop. These charming people thought that remark was amusing, too, and joyfully applauded it.

"But I am glad of this opportunity," I continued, "to express my deep obligation to our manager, to Miss Merrick, and to the members of the company for all they have done for my play. And in their behalf first, and then in my own, I thank you for the wonderful reception you have given us."

That was all. There was more applause. The lights flashed up, and from every part of the theater the men and women I knew came to me for a few friendly words. The reception took in my little family party and Mr. Morris, whose presence among us seemed to interest but not to surprise the big delegation from the *Searchlight*.

"Now," I whispered to him, as the curtain rose on the third act, "if only everything goes well for half an hour more! But the least little thing can wreck an act. If some one sneezes—"

"If any one sneezes during this act," whispered Godfrey, firmly, "he'll never sneeze again."

"Perhaps a cat will run across the stage," I whispered, "or some one in the audience will see a mouse."

Godfrey shook his head.

"This isn't that kind of an evening," he declared. "The gods are giving their personal attention to it."

It seemed, indeed, that they were. The act went on as smoothly as silk thread running through a shuttle. We had a few additional moments of celebration at the end of it, when the curtain fell on an audience that wiped its eyes over the penultimate line even while it laughed over the last line. I went "behind" for a word of appreciation to Miss Merrick and the company before I left the theater. The great bulk of "T. B.," our manager, loomed huge in the star's dressing-room.

"Hello, Miss Iverson!" was his jocund greeting. "You can't always go by the enthusiasm of a first-night audience, but I guess we've got a play here that will run a year or two."

He shook hands, said something to Miss Merrick about photographs in the morning, and swung away. Miss Merrick, emotional, almost hysterical, fell upon my neck and kissed me with lips that left round red spots on my cheeks. Every one was happy. At the front entrance some of my friends were waiting. There was still one thing I wanted, had to have, indeed, and I got it after I had torn open half a dozen of my telegrams.

> Our love, dear May, and our prayers for your success.
>
> SISTER IRMINGARDE.

I handed the message to Maudie and Kittie, who were with me. They had both been crying; their eyes moistened again.

"Who would have thought all this could happen, when we were school-girls at St. Catharine's!" whispered Maudie. "Do you remember your first play, May—the one we girls put on?" I remembered. I could laugh at that tragedy now.

I heard Godfrey's voice speaking with a sudden masterfulness.

"If you don't mind," he was saying to my father, "I'll send you home in my car and take May for a little spin in the Park in a taxi-cab. I think she needs half an hour of quiet and fresh air."

My father smiled at him.

"I think she does," he agreed.

There were more congratulations, more hand-shaking, before I could get away.

Then I found myself with Godfrey in a taxi-cab which was making its purring way up Fifth Avenue. It was strangely restful to be alone with him after the strain and excitement of the past three hours. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the cushions, my mind at first a whirling kaleidoscope in which the scenes of the evening repeated themselves over and over. Then, in the darkness and the silence, they began to disappear. Suddenly there seemed nothing in the world but Godfrey and me. He had leaned forward and taken my hand. We had entered the Park and were slipping along an avenue of awake and watchful trees.

"Well, May," he said, gently.

My heart slipped a beat. There was a new quality in the voice which throbbed and shook a little. "I've waited almost five years," he went on. "Isn't that long enough? Won't you come to me now?"

He held out his arms in the dark cab, and I entered them. From their wonderful shelter I heard his next words.

"Marrying me," he said, "won't mean that you're giving up anything you have. You are only adding me to it. I shall be as much interested in your books and your plays as you are yourself. You know that, don't you?"

But I interrupted him. In that moment books and plays seemed like the snows of yesteryear.

"Godfrey," I said, "do you imagine that I'm thinking of books and plays now? Let's talk about the real things."

The taxi-cab sang on its way. The trees that lined the broad drive of the Park raced beside us, keeping us company. Far above them a tiny new moon smiled down. My professional life, like the lights of the Avenue, lay behind me. Little in it seemed to count in the new world I was entering. Until to-night I had been merely a player waiting in the wings. Now, out in front, I heard the orchestra playing. The curtain of life was going up, and I had my cue in Godfrey's voice.

THE END

End of Project Gutenberg's May Iverson's Career, by Elizabeth Jordan

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