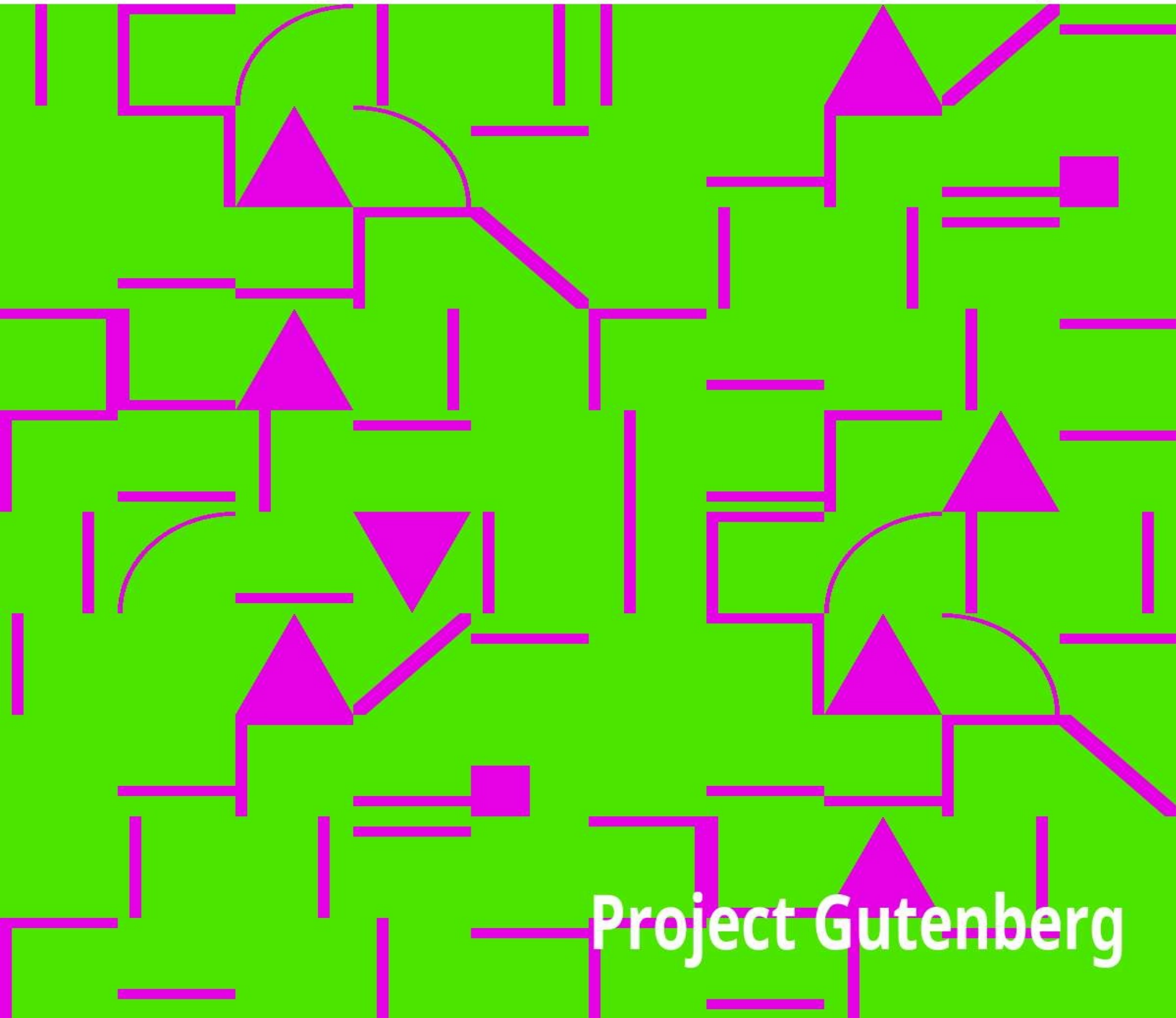
Bought and Paid For; From the Play of George Broadhurst

George Howells Broadhurst and Arthur



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Bought And Paid For

A Story of To-day

From the Play of George Broadhurst

by Arthur Hornblow

Illustrations From Scenes In The Play

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Without Further Argument, He Seized Hold Of Her.

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Contents

Chapter I

"How is he now, doctor? Don't—don't tell me there is no hope!"

The wife, a tall, aristocratic looking woman who, despite her advanced years, her snow-white hair, her eyes now red and swollen from weeping, and pallid face seamed with careworn lines from constant vigils, still showed traces of former beauty, scanned the physician fearfully, trying to read in the expression of his countenance what the friend and man of science, out of sheer compassion, was doing his utmost to conceal. He had just emerged from the sick chamber; the trained nurse, methodical and quick, and singularly attractive looking in her neat uniform, had closed the door noiselessly behind him. Two young girls, one about eighteen and the other some four years her junior, both possessing more than average good looks, stood timidly in the background anxiously awaiting, together with their grief-stricken mother, to hear the dreaded verdict.

The physician paid no attention to them, but paced up and down the room, his manner stern and forbidding, his head inclined in deep thought, as if bent under the weight of tremendous responsibilities. A noted specialist in pulmonary troubles, Dr. Wilston Everett was well past middle age, and his tall, erect figure, massive frame and fine, leonine head, crowned by a mass of stubborn, iron-gray hair, made him a conspicuous figure everywhere. His expression, stern in repose, was that of a profound student; it was a face where lofty thoughts, humane feeling and every other noble attribute had left its indelible impress.

Mrs. Blaine watched him fearfully, afraid to intrude on his reflections. Finally, summoning up courage, she stammered weakly:

"How do you find him—not worse, is he?"

The doctor made no reply, but for a few moments stood looking at the three women in silence. He felt sorry for them—so sorry that it was only by the exercise of the greatest self-control that he kept his eyes from filling with tell-tale tears. Who, better than he, could realize the full extent of the misfortune which had suddenly befallen these poor people? It was almost the same as if it had happened to himself. Was he not, indeed, one of the family? Had he not been

present at poor Blaine's wedding, brought each of these girls into the world and played with them on his knees? Now they had grown up to be young women, they looked upon him as their second father.

Blaine, poor fellow, little thought that the end was so near! That's what he had got for giving up his life to the most exciting and ungrateful profession in the world. He had worked himself to death for a pittance, until, giving way under the strain, his constitution completely undermined, he proved an easy victim for pneumonia. If he had been less scrupulous, more of a grafter, if he had seen in his profession only the money to be made out of it, he might have been a rich man by this time. But he was honest, honorable to a fault. No amount of money could induce him to take tainted money. No matter what legal white washing he was promised, he would have nothing to do with thieves and perjurers. What was the result? After twenty years of legal practice he was still a poor man and here on his deathbed, suddenly struck down in the prime of life before he had time to properly provide for his dear ones.

Probably there was no insurance. In fact, everyone knew that there was not. Blaine had admitted as much to him some time ago. He had said then that he had only $2,000 worth, but intended getting more. Now it was too late. Only a few paltry dollars—barely enough to bury him.

The comfortably furnished room with its piano, books and pictures and other scattered evidence of culture and refinement, showed the manner in which the Blaines liked to live. Through the open window, affording a fine view of Central Park, with its rolling lawns, winding paths and masses of green foliage, came the distant sounds of busy traffic on the Avenue, ten stories below. Of course, they would have to give up all this. There was not the slightest hope for the patient. He was past human aid. It was only a question of a few hours, perhaps only minutes, when the end would come. Yet how could he break the terrible truth to this poor woman, to these children who now stood watching him, their lips not daring to give utterance to the dread question he could plainly read in their tired, red eyes?

There was an unnatural silence. When anyone spoke it was in an almost inaudible whisper. Each seemed to feel that Death, grim and awful of aspect, was stalking invisible through the room. From behind the closed door where the father and husband lay dying there came no sound. Only an occasional sob from the wife, and the movements of the two girls as they endeavored to console her,

relieved the oppressive stillness. Suddenly the doctor's eye encountered Mrs. Blaine's searching, questioning gaze. Averting his head, he said:

"We must wait and hope for the best. You must be brave. He may rally. I don't like the heart action. That's what bothers me. If there's another sinking spell—"

Mrs. Blaine laid her cold, trembling hand on his. Quickly she said:

"You won't go away?"

He shook his head.

"Of course not. I'll stay until the crisis is past."

The bedchamber door opened softly and the nurse appeared, with a worried look on her face.

"What is it, nurse," demanded the physician quickly.

"May I see you a minute, doctor?"

Dr. Everett went towards the bedroom. Mrs. Blaine was about to follow when he turned and barred the way.

"Let me see him, doctor. Please let me go in," she pleaded.

The physician shook his head. Kindly but firmly he said:

"Not now. We may have to administer oxygen. You'd only be in the way. You are better in here taking care of your daughters. If you are needed I'll call you."

He disappeared into the inner room, and Mrs. Blaine, feeling faint from anxiety and suspense, sank exhausted into a chair. The two girls, nervous and ill at ease, too young to grasp the full significance of the calamity that had befallen them, approached timidly. Fanny, the elder girl, stood still, alarm and consternation written plainly on her face. Her younger sister, bursting into a paroxysm of weeping, threw her arms round her mother's neck.

"Oh, mother!" she sobbed. "Surely God won't let papa be taken from us! I wouldn't believe in Him any more if He couldn't prevent that!"

Mrs. Blaine raised one hand reprovingly as with the other she caressed her daughter's beautiful, long, dark hair.

"Hush! Virginia, dear. It's wicked to talk like that. God does everything for the best. If it is His will, we must be resigned."

Clasping her sobbing child to her breast, Mrs. Blaine sat in silence, her heart throbbing wildly, straining her ears to hear what was being done in the inner room, momentarily expecting to be summoned. As she sat there, enduring mental torture, each moment seeming like an hour, she rapidly thought over the situation. In spite of her grief, her helplessness, her brain worked lucidly enough. She realized that her husband was dying. Her life's companion, the father of her children, was going away from her—forever. Like a lightning flash, her whole life passed suddenly in review: She saw herself a young girl again, about Virginia's age, and with the same fondness for gaiety and companionship. She, too, had been fond of music, art and literature, and she was filled with ambition to make a name for herself. One day she met John Blaine, then a young law student. It was a case of love at first sight. They did not stop to consider ways and means. They got married, and to-day, after thirty years of loving companionship, her only regret was that she could not die before him. John had been a loyal friend, a faithful companion, both in fair weather and foul, and now their life's journey together had come to an abrupt end. It was too dreadful to think of. It seemed to her that all these happenings of the last few days—this sudden sickness, the coming of the trained nurse, Dr. Everett's grave demeanor—was a hideous dream from which she would soon awake.

Their situation was, indeed, desperate. It had taken practically all John's income to live respectably. Living expenses were high and rents exorbitant. What made matters worse, there was practically no life insurance. John had intended taking out more, but it had been neglected. After the funeral and other expenses what would be left of the paltry $2,000? They would have to find a cheaper apartment. The girls—she herself—would have to find work of some kind. It would be terribly hard on the girls. Not only they lost a loving, devoted father, but at an age when a nice home, and comfortable surroundings meant everything in ensuring their future, they would find themselves penniless and forced to go out into a cold, unsympathetic world to earn their living. Fanny, she knew, would not mind. She was fond of work and had no artistic aspirations; but the blow would fall heavily on poor Virginia, who had set her heart on going to high school.

"Why are you so silent, mother dear?" asked Virginia suddenly. "Of what are you thinking?"

"Just thinking—that's all," sighed Mrs. Blaine.

Virginia, not to be put off so easily, was about to insist on an answer less vague, when suddenly the bedroom door opened and Dr. Everett appeared. He advanced quickly into the room, his coat rumpled, his manner strangely agitated. It was so unusual to see the physician otherwise than calm and dignified that it seemed incredible that anything, no matter how important, could ruffle him. Mrs. Blaine's instinct told her the reason. Startled, she sprang to her feet.

"My God!" she exclaimed. "He's not—"

The doctor shook his head.

"No; a weak spell—that's all. You'd better come in. The children can remain here."

The next instant the two sisters were alone.

For a few moments the girls, their arms clasped round each other's waists, stood still, as if spellbound, staring at the door which mercifully veiled from their view the tragedy of life then being enacted in the adjoining room. Terror-stricken, too frightened even to cry, they sat down and waited, straining their ears to hear what was going on. Why had Doctor Everett summoned their mother? If Dad was worse, if the crisis had come, why were they, too, not permitted to see him? Instinctively they felt that their fears were only too well founded. They shuddered, and it seemed to them that they felt a chill in the air as if the Angel of Death had already entered the apartment and was hovering near them. Virginia, nervous and hysterical, began to cry. Fanny, endeavoring to appear brave, but inwardly as nervous, took the girl in her arms and spoke consolingly and sensibly to her as became an elder sister.

But Virginia obstinately refused to be comforted. Burying her face on her sister's shoulder, she gave free vent to the storm of tears which had been gathering in her girlish bosom all day. Devoted to her father even more than to her mother, the mere thought of losing him was intolerable. He was her comrade, her adviser, her mentor. All she had undertaken or was about to undertake was to please him. If she had excelled in her studies and advanced more rapidly than other girls in

her class, he was the cause. She needed his praise, his censure to spur her on in her work. With him gone, it seemed to her that her own life, too, had come to an end, not realizing, in her youthful inexperience, that it had not yet commenced.

She was a singularly attractive girl and gave every promise of developing into a remarkably handsome woman. Slight and somewhat delicate in build, she was of brunette type, with a face oval in shape, small features and large, lustrous eyes shaded by unusually long lashes. The nose was aristocratic, and when she spoke her mouth, beautifully curved, revealed perfect teeth. Her hands were white and shapely, and the mass of dark, silky hair which fell luxuriantly over her shoulders was the despair of every other girl of her acquaintance.

But it was not the possession of these mere externals that made people look twice at Virginia Blaine. If she had had only beauty there would have been nothing to particularly distinguish her from the many millions of girls to whom Nature has been kind. Beauty *per se* has no permanent power to attract. One soon tires of admiring an inanimate piece of sculpture, no matter how perfectly chiselled. If a woman lacks intelligence, *esprit*, temperament, men soon grow weary of her society, even though she have the beauty of a Venus de Medici; whereas, even a plain woman, by sheer force of soul and wit, can attract friends and make the world forget her ugliness. What made John Blaine's younger daughter an especial favorite was that in her case good looks were allied with brains. She made friends by her natural charm, her vivacity, her keen intelligence and uncommon strength of character, which, despite her youth, she had exhibited on more than one occasion. She was a merry-hearted, spirited, independent kind of a girl with decided views of her own regarding right and wrong and with the courage to express them. As the poet wrote:

> Her glossy hair was clustered o'er her brow
> Bright with intelligence and fair and smooth;
> Her eyebrow's shape was the aerial bow,
> Her cheek all purple with the beam of youth
> Mounting, at times, to a transparent glow,
> As if her veins ran lightning.

Two sisters more unlike in character and tastes it would be almost impossible to discover. Fanny, the elder, lacked not only Virginia's good looks, and also her brains. Yet she was good-natured and easy-going, and, as long as she had her own way, managed to get along with everybody. She went through the lower

grades of public school, but did not shine as a particularly bright pupil, evincing little love for books, and shirking study when possible. Her fondness for amusement and her uncultivated taste also led to her associating habitually with companions beneath her socially. She was a thoroughly good girl. A vulgar allusion would have shocked her, an impertinence she would have quickly resented; yet she seemed of a coarser fibre than the rest of the family, the reason for which, seeing that both girls had equal advantages and opportunities, only an expert psychologist could explain. She had gone through school mechanically as an unpleasant task to be gotten over with as soon as possible, taking no interest in her work, and when she came out her brain was a sluggish and unresponsive as one might expect. Well aware of her shortcomings, she made light of them, insisting laughingly that she was the dunce of the family and Virginia its genius. She would do the drudgery of housekeeping while her sister went to college.

There was no bitterness, no jealousy in this apparent rivalry. Fanny was devoted to her little sister and proud of her cleverness. She declared that one day Virginia would make a brilliant marriage and then she could pay it all back. That Virginia should ultimately go to college had been fully determined on. Everything attracted her to a liberal education. She was ambitious; she craved knowledge and showed talent in almost everything—in music, composition, painting. To her a liberal education would mean everything—the widening of her mental horizon, the initiation into keen, intellectual delights. No matter what sacrifice was to be made, to college the girl should go. So declared the parents.

Now all was changed. This blow which robbed her of her father also shattered her hopes for the future. All this flashed through Virginia's mind as they sat there, waiting. Turning to her sister, she said through her tears:

"If the worst happened—Fan—if Dad died—we couldn't go on living here, could we?"

Fanny shook her head. Sagely she replied:

"No, I'm afraid not. Father's got no insurance. Mother says we've lived up to everything. I guess I'll have to go to work—"

"So will I," said Virginia quickly.

"What nonsense you talk, Virgie!" interrupted her sister almost angrily. "As if you were intended for work! Nature intended you to be a lady, and a lady you'll

be if I have to work all the flesh off my bones. Don't you suppose mother and I haven't talked it over already." With mock contempt she went on: "You work! What at, I'd like to know. Giving music lessons or writing articles for the ten-cent magazines! It's different with 'yours truly.' I'm not a highbrow. I never cared for books or culture and all that sort of thing. But I guess as a saleslady in some store I'll make a hit. Anyway, I'll make enough to keep things going—so there'll be enough for you and mother. Now—there isn't any use arguing. It's college for yours, Virgie, and when you graduate you'll marry a millionaire and we'll all be happy and comfy."

Virginia was about to protest when suddenly there was a commotion behind them. The bedroom door was abruptly opened and Dr. Everett came in, supporting Mrs. Blaine, who was weeping bitterly. The two girls sprang to their feet with a startled cry.

"How's father?" they exclaimed.

Staggering to a chair, Mrs. Blaine clasped both her children to her breast.

"Your father is in Heaven!" she murmured.

Then she fell prostrate on the sofa, her whole being shaken by convulsive sobs. Virginia, panic-stricken, darted forward, but the Doctor held out a restraining hand.

"Don't, child—let her cry. It will do her good."

Chapter II

"Fanny! Where are my scissors? Did you take my scissors?"

Seated in the centre of the small parlor, before a round table fairly well lighted by an electrolier suspended from the middle of the ceiling and littered with chiffons and laces, Mrs. Blaine stopped sewing and began a laborious search all over the board for the missing article. Finally the scissors were found hidden in the folds of what some day would be a graduation dress, but no sooner were they in use than something else was missing. Impatiently, the widow called out:

"Fanny! I do wish you'd come here. I'll never get this dress done. Did you see the roll of satin ribbon?"

But Fanny, busy just then with a customer in the outer shop, paid no attention to the summons. Virginia's new dress could wait—it was a whole month to graduation day anyhow—but business was not so good that one could afford to neglect a possible purchaser.

Four summers had gone by since John Blaine's death yet in that comparatively brief space of time, his widow appeared to have aged ten years or more. Now bent, infirm, a chronic invalid, she did not look as if she would long survive him. The world goes on just the same no matter whose heart is breaking, and time flies so quickly that the happenings of a decade seem only of yesterday. But John Blaine was not forgotten. The flowers that each week decorated his grave, placed there by loving hands, served to keep fresh the father's memory.

As far as was possible, the bereaved wife tried to keep to herself the sorrow that had slowly but surely undermined her health and made her an old woman before her hour. In her heart she knew that she would not long remain after the dear departed one; all she asked was that she should live long enough to see her girls happily married and taken care of. At first it had seemed as if existence without him was impossible, yet the regular routine of life must go on. Besides it was not fair to the girls. Her own life was irretrievably wrecked, but theirs had barely begun. It would be selfish to allow her grief to cast a permanent shadow over their young lives. They loved their father very dearly; his death had been a great

shock to them. But they were young. They had a thousand outside interests to distract their attention. And youth, with its gaze still turned upward to the stars, soon forgets.

When everything was settled, the widow found herself with a little less than $3,000, all she possessed in the world. To attempt to live on the interest alone of such a slender capital was obviously an impossibility, so it was decided that they would move uptown, where they would not be known, and open a little millinery shop. This was a bright idea that had occurred to Fanny. She had always been clever at trimming hats. Why not put her skill to commercial profit? She and her mother could very well attend to such a business, while Virginia continued in school. If they were only fairly successful, the income would pay expenses, carry them along and help keep their capital intact. Dr. Everett heartily approved the plan, not only because it might prove a source of steady income, but also because it would be distraction for the widow and help her to forget. Mrs. Blaine somewhat reluctantly consented, and the girls set out enthusiastically to look for a shop.

After no end of running here and there all over New York, they found just what they wanted in one of the cheaper and more recently developed districts of Harlem. It was a narrow little store, with a fair-sized show window on Broadway, and with living rooms in the rear. Fanny declared it was just too cute for anything, and as she was the prime mover in the enterprise, a lease was signed without further delay, and the Blaine family took immediate possession.

At first the girls were as delighted with their new home as are children with a new toy. It being Summer time, there was no school for Virginia, so she was free to assist in the store. She dressed the window and waited on the customers, and after a very busy day, which kept her on her feet from morning till night, thought she had never had so much fun in her life. For the nonce, books and music were forgotten. She was a smart little saleslady, succeeding in selling one after the other, for ten dollars, hats which had cost Fanny not more than two. But her coöperation was not to be for long. It was quite decided that in the Fall she was to go to High School. This was her mother's wish, and it had also been insisted upon by Fanny as a condition of their taking the store. Virginia, at heart, was glad enough to acquiesce. As they were too poor to keep a maid, she would willingly have stayed at home and shouldered her share of the daily toil, but an education meant a great deal to her, more than to most girls, and she would have relinquished her schooling only with bitter regret.

Autumn came with its cooler weather and longer evenings, and when High School opened Virginia was sent to resume her studies, while her sister and mother, busy in the store, exerted every effort to keep the little household going. The younger girl felt keenly the sacrifice they were making for her, and determined to prove worthy of it. She began to apply herself more energetically than ever. A clever, brainy girl, she was highly sensitive to every surrounding influence, with ideas and ideals of her own, in full sympathy with the social side of life, yet independent and self-reliant, and just beginning to choose her own path in the bewildering maze of the world's devious thoroughfare. In High School she made astonishing progress. Her fine mentality enabled her to grasp quickly the most obtuse scientific and economic problems, and her natural taste for *belles lettres* making languages and general literature comparatively easy, she soon distinguished herself above the other girls of her class. Especial talent she showed for public speaking, having a good command of English, with forcible delivery and sound logic. So successful, indeed, was she in this respect, that in her final year, as graduation day drew near, she was picked out from among three hundred and fifty girls to deliver the class oration at the graduating exercises.

Mrs. Blaine, overjoyed at this fulfillment of her fondest hopes, at once said she would make the graduation dress. Fanny and Virginia, knowing well the labor it would involve, demurred. It was too much of an undertaking. Their mother was far from strong; the sewing would tire her eyes. Besides, they could not spare the time from the store. It would be cheaper and quicker to buy the dress ready made. Even Dr. Everett, when consulted, shook his head and tried to discourage the widow from a task which he was afraid might prove beyond her strength. But Mrs. Blaine was not to be put off so easily. Since their father's death, she had let the girls have much their own way, but this time she was determined. It would be a labor of love, she insisted. Daddie, himself, would have wished it. And so, without further ado, work on the beloved graduation dress was commenced.

And such work as it entailed! Running down town each instant, to buy satin and ribbon and laces and lining, unable to find what was wanted, or else purchasing something that did not suit and having to take it back and exchange it for something else. The girls literally wore their shoes to pieces, but they did not mind. They knew that making this graduation dress was the one great joy that had come into their mother's life since their father's death, and they were amply rewarded when, after a long and arduous shopping tour they returned home with the required article and handed it to her as she bent low over her work at the

board she would look up with a smile and exclaim:

"Oh, isn't it beautiful? That's just what I wanted! Now I can get on with Virginia's dress."

Thus, between working and studying, the days passed pleasantly enough. The little shop prospered, and all three were happy, each in her own way, Fanny in looking after the customers, Virginia in doing her lessons, Mrs. Blaine in working on her beloved graduation dress.

It was about this time that a romance came into Fanny's heretofore prosaic existence. So far the poor girl had not enjoyed much of life. Her time spent between four walls, there was a very narrow horizon to her outlook on things. She rarely went out, took no part in the pleasures and gaieties of other young women of her age. When not waiting on customers, she was cooking. Yet she was always good-natured about it. Laughingly she called herself Cinderella, because, while her more favored sister might be dressing up to go to recitals, lectures or concerts, she would be in the kitchen washing up the dishes. She took it amiably, yet there were times when she had a quiet cry all to herself, when she thought that her mother, instead of being so much engrossed in making a fine graduation dress for sister, might remember that she, too, needed something pretty to wear.

When, therefore, one evening at a neighbor's party, she happened to meet a young man who went considerably out of his way to pay her attention, she was greatly flattered and gratified. The very novelty of it startled her. Until now none of the eligible young men had so much as looked at her. Virginia, quite innocently, of course, had always monopolized their society. But this particular young man, whose name was James Gillie, seemed not in the least attracted to Virginia. In fact, he rather avoided her, appearing to be somewhat intimidated by her well-bred manners and cultured conversation. He made no secret of his preference for the homelier virtues of the elder sister, whose irrepressible propensity for picturesque, up-to-date slang and free-and-easy style put them on a more equal social footing. So began an acquaintance which resulted in the young man becoming a frequent and intimate visitor at the Blaine home.

Mr. James Gillie was an original in more ways than one, and it was some time before either Mrs. Blaine or Virginia could bring themselves to approve Fanny's liking for a young man with ways so uncouth and vulgar and whose antecedents

were obviously so plebeian. Of Irish parentage, but American born, James Gillie was a product of the newest America, the typical *gamin* of New York's streets, fresh and slangy in speech, keen to the main chance, not over scrupulous, shrewd and calculating. Fair and slight in build, he was about twenty-six years old and his upper lip was adorned with a few thinly scattered hairs, which he proudly termed a moustache. Otherwise he was unintelligent and ordinary looking, one of the many thousands of New York young men who, graduates of the slums, have been left to shift for themselves, and whose chief intellectual pastime has been standing on street corners reading baseball returns. Not only had he no education, but he was rather proud of the fact, affecting to despise bookish people as prigs and "high-brows." Incompetent and lazy, without any real ability, he worked only because he had to, and his standing grievance was that he was misunderstood, unappreciated and underpaid. The one good side to his nature, and the one which, perhaps, appealed most to Fanny, was the unconscious possession of a rich fund of humor. He was funny without intending to be, and this not only made him a diverting companion but ensured him a welcome everywhere. With the straightest of faces, he would say funny things in so ludicrous a manner that a roomful of people would go into convulsions. He laughed with them, not realizing they were laughing at him, but ever preening himself on being a very witty and clever person indeed. His greatest fault was inordinate vanity. He had the highest opinion of his own capacity, and he could never understand why capitalists generally did not tumble over each other to secure his services. At the present time he was earning the magnificent salary of ten dollars a week as shipping clerk, but this, he explained, was only a nominal stipend, as a starter. Before very long he would be president of the company. His hobby was inventing things. So far he had not made enough by his brain to purchase a collar button, but ideas were coming thick and fast, and he was convinced that the day was not far distant when he would make a great fortune. That is why, all things considered, he believed himself, despite his obscure origin and lack of education, a desirable match for the proudest girl in the land.

"Fanny! Where's my tape measure? I can't find my tape measure."

Once more Mrs. Blaine laid down her work and began to rummage among the mass of chiffons and laces piled up before her. In the shop outside she could hear her daughter laughing and talking. Impatiently the widow called out:

"Can't you come and help me, Fanny? Who are you talking to?"

"It's Mr. Gillie, mother," came the answer. "He's helping me close the store."

A look of anxiety crossed Mrs. Blaine's face. It went against the grain to entertain a person like Mr. Gillie, but for her child's sake she said nothing, and when he called, as he had done very frequently recently, she had tried to receive him as cordially as possible. But to-night she was very tired. At times she felt dizzy and faint. His interminable chatter and boasting would only weary her more. So, hoping the visitor would take the hint, she called out again:

"Isn't Virginia home yet? It's getting very late."

"She couldn't be here yet," called out Fanny. "The concert's not over till ten. We've all closed up now. I'm coming right in."

A moment later the young girl appeared, followed more leisurely by Mr. Gillie.

The shipping clerk entered jauntily, a lighted cigar in his mouth, full of self-assurance. He wore a check suit much too small for him, a pink tie, and patent-leather shoes. Fanny's face was red and her manner somewhat flustered, but this the mother, bent low over her work, did not notice.

"Good evening, m'm," said Mr. Gillie, coolly seating himself without waiting to be asked. Sitting back, crossing his legs and carelessly flecking his cigar ash on the floor, he added in patronizing tones: "How's the world using you?"

"Good evening, Mr. Gillie," returned the widow graciously. "How are you?"

"Oh, fairly well to middlin'." Glancing at the littered table, he said: "Still busy on the graduation dress, I see."

Mrs. Blaine sighed wearily.

"Yes—it's taking me longer than I bargained for. Sometimes I feel very tired. I wish Virginia was here to try it on."

Fanny glanced at the clock. With a quick, significant look at Mr. Gillie, she said quickly:

"She'll be here any moment now. The concert is usually out by this time." There was an awkward pause and then she stammered: "Mr. Gillie has something to

say to you, mother."

Mrs. Blaine laid down her work and looked up in surprise.

"Something to say to me?" she echoed in amazement, looking inquiringly from her daughter to the visitor.

But Fanny, her face crimson, had already bolted into the kitchen, while Mr. Gillie, his chair tilted backward, a picture of magnificent unconcern, coolly blew smoke rings into the air.

"Something to say to me?" repeated Mrs. Blaine.

"Asch—ooah!"

His chair suddenly returning to the floor level with a thud that shook the house, Mr. Gillie sneezed violently, a physiological phenomenon which curiously enough never failed to present itself when any extraordinary pressure was put upon his brain cells. Wiping his watery eyes with a pink-bordered handkerchief —a color he rather affected—he began eloquently:

"Mrs. Blaine, you're a sensible woman. I feel I can talk to you plain. There comes a time in every man's life when he feels lonesome—when it looks good to him to have someone round all the time, looking after things—his dinner, his clothes, and so on. Why, sometimes I go around for weeks with my suspenders only half fastened, just because I've got no one to sew a button on. It gets on a feller's nerves—yes, it does—until at last he says to himself: 'Jimmie, my boy, you've knocked about alone long enough. You want to hitch up with some girl and take it easy a bit.'" He stopped a moment to gauge the effect of his words, but as Mrs. Blaine gave no sign that she understood what he was driving at, he proceeded: "I'm not much good at speechifying. With the frills all cut and to come to the point, this is what it is: Fanny seems the kind of girl I'm looking for, and I don't see I could do any better. I've just asked her, and now it's kinder up to you—"

The widow took off her spectacles and gasped. Could she have heard aright? He was actually asking for Fanny. She was amazed not so much at his monumental selfishness and impudence as that Fanny herself could have given him the slightest encouragement. She fully realized that times had changed since the days when they lifted their heads proudly in the world, but to sink as low as this

seemed too terrible, too humiliating. Yet, after all, could she blame her daughter? What was her present life, what would be her future, without education, without money—unless she had someone who could take care of her? Dissembling her indignation as much as possible, she inquired suavely:

"This takes me very much by surprise, Mr. Gillie. You will, of course, allow me leisure to talk it over with my daughter. May I ask if your means permit you to provide a comfortable home for Fanny—the kind of home to which she has been accustomed?"

The muscles of Mr. Gillie's nostrils contracted and for a moment it looked as if his slight frame were again about to be shaken convulsively by a mighty sneeze, but the spasm passed. He merely coughed loudly to clear his throat. Then, glancing round the room in which he was sitting, he said:

"Oh, I guess we'll be able to put on as good a front as this, all right, all right." Tilting his chair back until it seemed physically impossible that he could maintain his balance, he went on between puffs of his cigar:

"You see, m'm, I'm not the kind of man that's satisfied to go on working all his life for only just enough to keep body and soul together. That's all right maybe for pikers—poor devils that have no spunk—but not for 'yours truly.' I'm a pusher, a climber, I am, and, what's more, I'm a man with ideas. No one can keep me down in the world. One of these days I'll be driving my own automobile and Fanny will be riding in it with me. It's no 'guff' I'm giving you. I'm the real 'goods.'"

"You are a shipping clerk, I believe," said Mrs. Blaine when she could get in a word sideways.

"Yes, m'm," he snapped, "a shipping clerk—what of it?"

"Is that a very—lucrative position?"

He laughed derisively as if it was absurd to imagine he was going to remain a shipping clerk all his life.

"Oh, I'm only a clerk now, but I'll be boss some day—see if I don't."

"Might I ask what your present income is?" inquired the widow blandly.

For the first time Mr. Gillie seemed at a loss for an answer. Awkwardly shifting his cigar to the other corner of his mouth, he stammered:

"I'm not getting much now—ten a week—that's all." Hastily he continued: "But it won't be for long. The big men down town know me—they know what I'm worth to them. They're just watching me. Any day they may make me an offer that would land me in Easy Street. Besides, sooner or later I'll astonish people with one of my inventions. I'm full of new ideas. Some of them are bound to make money. It's a cinch!"

How long he would have continued in this strain there is no telling, for, although not talkative usually, he always became extraordinarily loquacious when encouraged to speak of his own affairs. Utterly exhausted by his chatter and feeling dreadfully tired, Mrs. Blaine began to wish that her unwelcome visitor would go. The room was full of tobacco smoke and his free-and-easy manner irritated her extremely. Of course, his proposal was ridiculous, an impertinence. It was Fanny's fault for having encouraged him. But it was best to say nothing—to just drop him gently. An awkward pause followed during which the widow, fatigued as she was, plied her needle more industriously than ever, while the would-be Benedict, nicely balanced on his chair, amused himself sending rings of smoke up to the ceiling. Happily, at this juncture, Fanny returned from the kitchen. She had noticed the strained silence and feared it boded ill. A glance at her mother's face was enough. Quickly she exclaimed:

"Now, mother, you must go to bed. Mr. Gillie will excuse you, I'm sure. It's getting real late."

Taking the hint, the shipping clerk rose to his feet. With a grin he said:

"That's right, m'm—all work and no play don't agree with nobody. That's my maxim. Well, good night, ladies!" As he shuffled off, accompanied to the door by Fanny, he said in an undertone: "It's O.K., Fan—I put it to her good and hard—it's you for mine, all right!"

As they passed along the dark passage he profited by the opportunity to snatch a kiss, and as they bade each other good-bye he said:

"You'd better get after mother. She was for handing me a nice, juicy lemon, but I gave her a line of talk that fetched her. Good night, sweetheart!"

Just as he was going out at the front door, Virginia came up.

"Good evening, Mr. Gillie," she said politely.

He laughed as he chucked her playfully under the chin.

"Mr. Gillie?" he echoed. "What's the matter with James or Jimmie? Good night, little sis!"

With a boisterous laugh he went out into the street and shut the door. Virginia, astounded, looked at her sister and laughed.

"What's the matter with him to-night?" she exclaimed. "Is he crazy?" Without waiting for an answer, she added quickly: "How's mother?"

Fanny averted her face. She dreaded taking Virginia into her confidence; somehow she could not tell her. Briefly she said:

"She's very tired—been working until now. We expected you home earlier. She wanted to try on the dress."

Quickly removing her hat and coat which she threw on a convenient chair, Virginia answered:

"The concert was out later than usual. Dr. Everett was there. He brought me to the corner. How long has Mr. Gillie been here?"

"All evening," replied Fanny. Then suddenly the elder sister flung her arms round Virginia's neck.

"Virgie!" she exclaimed, "what do you think? Mr. Gillie has asked me to marry him."

Chapter III

Each day brought graduation day nearer, and Mrs. Blaine, becoming more and more nervous as the great event approached, made strenuous efforts to get the dress finished in time. There were vexatious delays without number. It was difficult to find the right material or else something went wrong with the measurements and all had to be done over again. From morning till night, day after day, the old lady sat in doors, at the table piled high with dressmaker's litter, deeply engrossed in her self-appointed labor of love.

In vain Virginia and Fanny protested. Their mother refused to listen to them. This dress, she insisted, was her one joy in life. It would be cruel to deprive her of anything which afforded her so much pleasure. They said no more, but they noticed with alarm that each day their mother seemed to age a year. Her cheeks became more hollow, her face more chalky white. She complained continually of pains in the region of the heart, and it was plainly discernible that she was rapidly growing more feeble.

One day when Dr. Everett was paying them one of his regular weekly visits Virginia took him aside and told him of her anxiety. He seemed to know already what she had to say. Taking both her hands in his, in that big-hearted, paternal manner so characteristic of him, he said impressively:

"Dear child—you must be brave. You cannot expect to have your mother always with you. She is tired and world-weary. She has earned that beautiful, eternal sleep which alone brings perfect peace. An organic disease of the heart, which remained latent up to the time of your father's death, has now become very pronounced. Trouble and sorrow have aggravated the condition. Your mother may live for years; then again she may pass away from us any time. One never can tell what will happen when the heart is in that state."

A long spell of weeping followed this confidential chat with the doctor, and for days Virginia went about only a shadow of her former self.

How cruel was life! she mused. First to lose her father, and now her best, her only friend! What would she do when her mother was gone? Fanny was hardly a

companion. She was so different; her tastes and pursuits were not the same. There was not the same bond of sympathy between them. If anything happened, they would, of course, go on living together as usual, but how different their life would be!

Nothing further had been said regarding Mr. Gillie's proposal. Fanny had not mentioned it again, and both Virginia and Mrs. Blaine were silent. Instinctively Fanny knew that her mother and sister disapproved of the match and inwardly she resented it. Why should they interfere with her happiness? She had a right to look after her own interests. What better offer could she expect? Suppose James was a rough diamond; he might still make a better husband than some other man better educated. He had had no advantages, but he was respectable and clever. Everyone admitted that he was smart. His ideas were simply wonderful. One of these days he would make a lot of money with his brains, and then she would be proud to be his wife. Thus she reasoned and, once she made up her mind, nothing could alter it. Mr. Gillie continued his visits and made himself quite at home until, at last, they all called him by his first name and it became quite natural to see him there. There was no more talk of marriage, but both Mrs. Blaine and Virginia soon arrived at the conclusion that he and Fanny were tacitly engaged.

Virginia sometimes wondered if she herself would ever marry, and, if so, what kind of man she would choose for a husband. What she knew and heard of marriage had not filled her with any keen anxiety to enter the married state, or with any profound respect for matrimony as a social institution. In theory it was beautiful; in practice it left much to be desired. Like any thoughtful girl having a broad, sane outlook on life, she fully appreciated the dangers and unhappiness that may attend unions entered into lightly and carelessly, without such safeguards as regards morals and health, as a paternal State should properly control.

Although a girl of high moral principles, she was not innocent. Are there any such? Innocence is, of necessity, the sister of ignorance. The conditions of modern existence render it impossible for any girl, once she has attained the age of fifteen, to continue unacquainted with the main facts of life, and some are initiated at an even tenderer age. How is it possible for any maiden to remain unenlightened in this regard these days when sensational, muck-raking prints throw the searchlight of publicity into every boudoir and spicy details of society's philandering fill column after column in the breakfast table newspaper?

No matter how little curiosity a healthy-minded girl may have, by reason of a natural coldness of temperament, to acquire such knowledge, it becomes, in spite of her, part of her daily surroundings and she cannot escape its contaminating, demoralizing influence.

Virginia was no fool. Now nearly nineteen, she knew everything about life which an intelligent girl should know. What puzzled her most was to determine her own mental attitude towards marriage. Not yet having met a man for whom she could feel any especial regard, the idea of forming with any man as close an association as marriage would mean was repellent to her. The intimate relation the marital tie pre-supposes frightened and appalled her as it has done many times before thousands of passionless, strongly intellectual women who, bringing cold analysis to bear on the sexual instinct, rebel at the subordinate, humiliating role which the weaker sex is called upon to play in Nature's vast and wonderfully complex scheme.

Not that she was passionless or lacking in temperament. The girl in "whose veins ran lightning" could hardly be accused of indifference to the opposite sex. She liked several young men, but there was not one of them whom she could bring herself to think of in the light of a husband. Girls often married for other than sentimental reasons. Of that she was well aware. Self-interest was at the bottom of most marriages. Cupid, guileless as he seems, is often a shrewd, calculating little gnome in disguise. If a girl has no means, no friends, no way of earning a living, what is going to become of her unless she seeks refuge in marriage? Her first instinct is to find a husband, a man sufficiently well off to support both. There was, of course, only one word with which to brand that sort of thing. It was a legalized form of prostitution, an approved system of cohabitation which must be horrible and detestable to any girl of decent instincts, no matter which way she looked at it, and yet it was a state of white slavery which society fully condoned and ever approved. Hundreds of virtuous girls thus sold themselves—to the highest bidder. The slums had no monopoly of the white slave traffic; it flourished equally well on fashionable Fifth Avenue, where its countless victims, for the honor of the system, managed to conceal their tears from the world. What did bridge-playing mothers care about their daughters' happiness so long as they were able to procure for them rich men who could give them fine houses, servants, and automobiles? It was all hideous and ghastly, when viewed thus sanely, and Virginia shuddered as she thought of it. To such degradation as this she would never sink. Never would she marry a man whom she did not truly love. If it came to the worst she would go as domestic servant or even starve

rather than surrender her self-respect.

Graduation day was almost at hand, but the dress was still unfinished. There was considerable work yet to be done on it. The nearer came the important event, the more nervous and exhausted Mrs. Blaine showed herself. She had already had several fainting spells and on one occasion the girls were so alarmed that they thought the end had come, peacefully and suddenly. But the widow rallied and, in spite of her daughter's protests, insisted on continuing with her work. Marvelling at her determination, touched by this pathetic exhibition of maternal devotion, Virginia would sit silently for hours, her eyes filled with tears, watching the dear, tired fingers swiftly and skillfully plying the needle.

One evening the little family was assembled in the stuffy parlor back of the store. Mrs. Blaine, tired after a long day's toil, had sunk back in her armchair, dozing. Her head had fallen forward on her breast, a piece of hemming on her knee. In order not to disturb her, the girls conversed in low tones. Virginia was reading, her favorite occupation, while her elder sister, engaged perhaps more usefully, was darning stockings.

Suddenly the front door bell rang. With an anxious glance at her mother to make sure that the noise had not disturbed her, Fanny tip-toed out of the room and presently returned, followed by James Gillie. The shipping clerk entered clumsily, in his characteristic, noisy style. Jocularly he cried out:

"Good evening, everybody!"

Virginia quickly held up a protesting finger, while Fanny exclaimed angrily:

"Don't you see that mother's asleep?"

Throwing his hat and coat on a sofa, the newcomer sat down gingerly on a chair. With a glance at the old lady, he demanded:

"What's she sleepin' here for? Why don't she go to bed?"

Virginia, always irritated by his *gaucheries,* pretended not to hear and went on with her book, but Fanny answered him. In a whisper she said:

"She's tired out." Anxiously she, added: "I don't like the way she looks to-day. I think it's the heart. I'll telephone the doctor to-morrow—"

Jimmie gave a snort of disapproval.

"Pshaw! What's the good?" he exclaimed contemptuously. "Those doctors can't do nothing; they're the worst kind of fakers. All they do is to look wise, scribble on a bit of paper some words no one can read—not even the druggist—and charge you a two-spot. It's to laugh!"

"Dr. Everett doesn't charge us anything—so you're wrong for once," interrupted Virginia, glad of the opportunity to give him a dig.

"I ain't talkin' about any particular doctor," went on the shipping clerk, unabashed. "I'm agin all doctors. They're a bunch of crooks, I tell you. It's you women with your imaginary ailments who keep 'em going. If doctors had to depend on men for a living, they'd have to take to shovelling snow."

"Hardly in summer time," said Virginia dryly.

"No," he retorted as quickly; "then they could run ice cream parlors."

Fanny, who had resumed darning her socks, smiled. She enjoyed these little encounters between her sister and her fiancé. Virginia was no mean antagonist when it came to an argument, but she was no match for Jimmie. However, thinking the sparring had gone far enough, she adroitly changed the conversation.

"Well, how's business to-day, Jim?"

"Oh, on the blink—as usual. Nothing doing; I'm sick of the whole outfit. But say, girls—!"

"What?" exclaimed Fanny.

"You won't tell anyone if I tell you something?"

Virginia looked up from her book. Even she was interested.

"No," said Fanny, "we won't tell. What is it?"

Jimmie sat up and cleared his throat as if preparing to make some highly important communication. Then, leaning forward, he said in an impressive tone:

"I've got the greatest idea—"

"Really?" exclaimed Virginia sceptically.

Too full of egotism and self-importance to note her sarcasm, the young man beamed with self-satisfaction as he proceeded enthusiastically:

"Greatest thing you ever heard of! There's millions in it. My name will ring round the world. If only I can get the backing, my fortune is made—"

Fanny's face flushed with pleasure as she bent eagerly forward to hear every detail of this scheme which would some day make her a rich woman. Even if the dream never came true, the mere hope that it might was enough to give her a thrill. Virginia remained cold. She was more cynical, having already heard many speeches of the same kind and from the same quarter—all dealing with wonderful projects that invariably met with a sudden death. This announcement of a new idea, therefore, did not even make her look up.

Expanding his chest, Jimmie proceeded with dignity.

"This idea of mine will revolutionize railroad travel in this country—do you know that? It will bring Chicago far nearer New York than it is now. How? By cutting down the running time of the fastest trains. When the railroad men hear of it—and see how simple it is—they'll hail me as a public benefactor—"

"But what is it?" interrupted Fanny eagerly. "You haven't told us what it is."

Beaming with self-importance, he tilted forward on his chair. Fanny, tense with the excitement of suspense, strained her ears. Even Virginia deigned to stop reading and pay attention. Clearing his throat he began:

"You must first understand that the chief difficulty railroads meet with in maintaining a fast schedule is the vexatious delays caused by stops at way-stations. My idea does away with all stops. I eliminate them entirely, and yet I pick up all the passengers who wish to travel by that particular train—"

He stopped and looked at them as if he expected exclamations of wonder and demands for further explanation. Virginia looked puzzled. Fanny, quite excited, beamed with enthusiasm.

"How do you do it?" exclaimed the elder sister admiringly. Assuredly she had made no mistake when she had selected so gifted a life partner.

"Yes," demanded Virginia. "How do you pick them up?"

The young man laughed outright. Confidently he went on:

"Pick 'em up? It's so easy that I can't understand why no one ever thought of it before. Did you ever see the way the fast expresses pick up mail bags? Near the track there is an upright post, from which extends an arm. On this arm is suspended the mail bag. The onrushing train, which is travelling perhaps at a speed of a mile a minute, is fitted on the outside with a sort of hook which catches the mail bag and jerks it into the car. Well, that same idea can just as well be applied to waiting passengers as to waiting mail bags. The passengers would all be gathered together in a car which would wait on a siding for the arrival of the express. By some mechanical contrivance—exactly what it would be I haven't yet figured out—this waiting car would be instantly switched on to the rapidly-moving express—would become, so to speak, the rear car. The passengers would go forward through the vestibule to take their seats in the train proper and the emptied waiting car would then be unswitched and go back to the station to begin the performance all over again—all this while the train was going at top speed. Isn't that some idea? Isn't it a dandy?"

Fanny was silent. Virginia, hardly able to control her merriment, took up her book again. Jim was about to enter into further details when suddenly there was a noise behind them. Fanny started up with a cry.

"Virginia! Look!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Blaine had half fallen out of her chair. In her sleep she had lost her balance and slipped down sideways. With the clerk's assistance the two girls sat her up again. Apparently she was not hurt, but her eyes were closed. She was strangely silent, and her hands were very cold. When they laid her head gently back on the back of the armchair they noticed that she was very white.

"She's fainted!" cried Fanny excitedly.

Virginia, greatly alarmed, exclaimed anxiously:

"Mother, dear, what's the matter? Speak to me."

Still no answer. The girls, now thoroughly frightened, ran for restoratives. Virginia poured out some brandy. Even Jimmie was frightened out of his usual levity and self-possession. Quickly taking her hand, which hung over the chair limp and lifeless, he put his finger on her pulse.

"Please telephone for the doctor, Jim!" cried Virginia, distracted, almost in tears.

The young man looked at both girls, his face serious and white. For once he controlled the situation. Soberly he said:

"It's too late."

Chapter IV

In a luxuriously furnished suite on an upper floor of one of New York's biggest and most expensive hotels two men sat carelessly scanning the morning newspapers before a table still covered with breakfast dishes. It was nearly ten o'clock, long past the hour when most people begin the day's work, and there was nothing, either in the men's dress or manner, to suggest that they belonged to the effete and useless idle class. On the contrary, in appearance they were typical business men—energy, prosperity, masterfulness, showing in their every word and gesture, in every line of their clean-cut, strong-featured faces. On this particular morning they were not looking their best, and the reason, as well as the explanation of their late rising might possibly be found in the disorder which a cursory glance around the room revealed. Dress coats, white ties, patent leather pumps and other paraphernalia of evening wear were scattered here and there, just as each article had been thrown down when they had returned home the night before, while on a side table were a couple of champagne bottles—empty.

They were both comparatively young men. The elder of the two, a big, athletic fellow with smooth face and strong jaw, did not appear to be much over thirty-five. His companion was about the same age. Both had the *blasé* air of men who had lived and lived hard. All of life's fiercer joys they had known to excess, which explained, perhaps, why they were tired and disillusionized long before they had attained their prime. With a gesture of disgust, the elder man threw down his paper, and, snatching up a glass of ice-water, swallowed the refreshing contents at a gulp.

"It's no use, Fred!" he exclaimed. "I'm no good for that late bumming. I guess I'm getting old. Those midnight orgies never did agree with me. Hot birds and cold wine are a barbaric mixture, anyhow. I'm going to cut it out—do you understand?—cut it out. So don't ask me again—it's no use. I've got a fearful headache this morning—and I'm so sleepy that I'd like to go to bed for a week. It's idiotic for a man to make such an infernal ass of himself. It knocks one out and renders one unfit for business. How can I go down town and understand what I'm doing when I've got such a head on as this? There's a directors' meeting to-day, too—very important. What time was it when we got home?"

"About three o'clock, I should say," rejoined his *vis-à-vis* laconically, without looking up from his newspaper.

In the fifteen years that they had been intimate friends Fred Hadley had grown so accustomed to these periodical outbursts from his old chum Bob Stafford that he seldom paid the slightest heed to his protests. Both self-made men, each had started practically in the gutter and by sheer dint of grit and energy forged his way to the front, the one as a captain of industry, the other as a promoter in railroading and finance. Men of exceptional capacity, success had come easily to them, and with success had come money and power. Hadley was now vice-president of one of the biggest steel concerns in the country, and Stafford had been even more successful. Attracted to railroading he had found employment with a western road, and soon displayed such a positive genius for organization that he quickly excited the attention of eastern railroad men. Quick promotion followed, until, at the end of ten years, he became himself a power in the railroad world. Shrewd deals in Wall Street had already brought him wealth, and the age of thirty-eight found him in control of half a dozen systems, his fortune already estimated at several millions, and his name in the railroad world one to conjure with, not only in Wall Street, but from New York to Frisco.

Irritated at his companion's silence, Stafford repeated more loudly:

"Do you hear? I'm going to cut it out!"

At last Hadley, his ire roused, looked up.

"Look here, Bob," he exclaimed impatiently, "you make me tired. You're a game sport, I don't think. It wasn't Maude's little party that knocked you out." Pointing significantly to the empty bottles of champagne on the side tables, he went on: "That's what did you up. Why did you soak yourself with champagne when you got home? Do you know you got away with two quarts of the stuff?"

Stafford passed a hand over his burning brow.

"The deuce I did! I don't remember. I must have been drunk when I got home. I took the 'fizz' to sober up on. Why did you let me?"

"Let you?" echoed Hadley scornfully. "Is there any man alive capable of keeping you from the bottle when you've got a thirst on?"

"Yes," admitted Stafford contritely, "I recall that I was d—d thirsty."

"And instead of drinking ice water, you rang for champagne. You're a nice kind of fellow to moralize—you are!"

Rising from the table, Hadley yawned, stretched himself, and, sauntering over to a window, stood looking out upon the busy city below. From that elevation the bird's-eye view was wonderful. The broad avenues below, teeming with life, the surging, confused mass of pedestrians and vehicles, the close network of side-streets filled with busy traffic, the silvery Hudson with sailing vessels and steamships departing for every port in the world—all this was a scene of which the eye never tired. The young man gazed at it for a moment, and then, retracing his steps, threw himself into an arm-chair. Lighting a cigar, he said:

"These are bully rooms, all right. The view is splendid. But I don't see why you need to come to a hotel when you have your apartment on Riverside—and such an apartment!—a veritable palace, filled with everything one's artistic taste cares for and furnished and decorated to suit yourself."

"That's just why," answered his companion dryly.

The railroad man had left the breakfast table, and, seated at a desk on the other side of the room, was busy glancing over a huge batch of letters which had come with the morning's mail.

"What do you mean by 'that's just why'?" demanded Hadley, puzzled.

Stafford looked up and smiled.

"Why—it's just as you said. My own place is so attractive that I can't do any work there. The paintings, statuary, bric-à-brac and what-not, distract my attention too much. If I have an important letter to draft, I can't think of what I want to say because my eyes are fascinated by the Peachblow vases on top of the bookcase. You haven't seen the vases, have you, Fred? They're 'peaches,' all right. I gave $3,000 for the pair. That's going some for a bit of breakable bric-à-brac. Come up to dinner some night and see them. I'll tell Oku you're coming, and he'll get up something good—one of his swell Japanese dishes."

"Not on your life," interrupted the other with a grimace. "Japs and Chinks eat all kinds of freak things—nightingale tongues and such stuff. No—thanks. Your

Oku's a decent little sort, as Jap butlers go, but when it comes to cooking, give me Christian food and a French *chef* every time."

Stafford laughed heartily.

"Fred—my boy—you're shockingly provincial and bourgeois. I'm afraid I'll never make a cosmopolite out of you. Well, as I said, there is too much art about the place. It seems sacrilege to even think business there, so when I'm putting through any big deal, I just slip away and come to this hotel for a few days. At home I'm an art lover, revelling in the treasures I have succeeded in collecting; here I am a vulgar business person, occupied in the undignified task of making money. Only last week, when I was home, I got thinking out a plan one night in the library for a merger with a road which is cutting pretty badly into our business. I had thought out a plan, the details were working out nicely in my mind, when suddenly my gaze fell on the Corot hung just above my desk. You know the picture. Did you ever see more exquisite coloring, a more wonderful composition? Is it surprising that the plan for the merger quite slipped out of my head?"

"Talking of exquisite coloring," interrupted Hadley irrelevantly, "did you notice how well Maude looked last night? If she's a day, that woman is forty, yet no one would take her for more than five and twenty. She's a marvel. No wonder Stanton is crazy about her."

Stafford shrugged his shoulders.

"Cosmetics and a clever hairdresser can work miracles," he said dryly.

"She's a wonder, just the same—especially when you consider the life she's led. You know her history—a morphine fiend with the face of an angel. She knocked about for years before Stanton fell into her clutches. He's dippy about her—pays for that apartment and gives her a handsome allowance, bought her an automobile, pays her chauffeur, and all the rest of it. Did you notice that string of pearls she was wearing? It cost him a cool $10,000 in Paris last summer."

"Why doesn't he marry her, if he's got it as bad as all that?"

Hadley looked at his friend in amazement.

"You're not in earnest, are you?" he demanded. "Marry a woman of that kind?"

"Why not?" answered Stafford doggedly. "If the man thinks enough of her to waste so much time and money upon her let him try and reform her by throwing around her a cloak of respectability. Why is the woman what she is? Because pleasure-loving blackguards of Stanton's type have degraded her and made it impossible for her to hold up her head again among decent people."

Hadley laughed outright.

"Say, old man," he exclaimed, "it's easy to see you are out of sorts this morning. When did Bob Stafford start in to be a social reformer? Who ever expected such advice from the man who could always get away with more booze at a sitting than any man I ever knew, and who has been the hero of a hundred *affaires de coeur*, not all as respectable as that of Stanton and Maude?"

The railroad man took it good-naturedly.

"That's all right, Fred—rub it in all you like. It's because I've been an ass myself that I can see more plainly than any one, perhaps, what cursed folly it is. We spend our time and substance on some wretched wanton, who never gives us a thought save how much money she can squeeze out of us, and what have we in return? Nothing. The years slip quickly by; we find ourselves getting old, and there's no one round who really cares a jot whether we live or die—except, possibly our relatives, who look forward to the latter. Genuine affection is absolutely foreign to our existence. We have no one to bestow it on; no one to bestow it on us. To be quite frank, that is another reason why I don't care to spend too much time in my Riverside home. I feel lonesome there. The place is quiet; it lacks the life and bustle of a hotel, and Oku, decent little Jap as he is, hardly makes an ideal companion—"

Sending a cloud of tobacco smoke up to the ceiling, Hadley gave vent to a low, expressive whistle.

"So—that's where the land lays, eh? You are lonesome. In other words, you want a wife to share with you the artistic treasures of your Riverside home. You are tired of being a bachelor—"

Stafford laughed—a resounding, wholesome laugh, that fairly shook the room.

"You've guessed it, Fred, you've guessed it. You're a mind-reader. I confess I'm tired of bumming. You and Stanton and the rest of the boys are a jolly crowd.

You've given me many a good time, but, I tell you, old man, I'm tired of it all. I want to cut away and settle down. If the right girl comes along, I'll marry her—"

Hadley was silent for a few moments, and, sitting lazily back in the comfortable, deep-seated armchair, contented himself with puffing his cigar vigorously and emitting a prodigious quantity of smoke. Finally he said:

"All right, Bob—you know best what you want. Try matrimony, if you've a mind to, but remember this—don't forget I gave you good warning. Marriage isn't what it's cracked up to be, by a long shot. The girl you're courting will seem to you a very different person after marriage. She'll be an old-man-of-the-sea hanging around your neck whom you can't shake off. Your trouble will only begin when you take to yourself a wife." Rising and picking up his hat and gloves, he added: "Now I must be going. I have an appointment at the office at 11:30. What are you going to do? Coming down town with me?"

Stafford pointed to the mass of papers and letters piled up on his desk. Shaking his head he replied:

"No—I can't go out yet. I must answer all these letters." Helplessly he added: "I don't know how I'm going to tackle them. I've an awful headache."

"Why not get a stenographer?"

"A stenographer? That's not a bad idea. Where can I get one?"

"Why, downstairs. There are two attached to the hotel. They attend to the telephone switchboard and do typewriting as well. One is a girl with red hair and a squint; the other is dark and rather pretty—"

"Very well," smiled Stafford. "Send me up the pretty one. I couldn't stand the red-haired girl just now. I've got an important deal on hand. She might queer my luck. Do that for me, old chap. Tell her as you go out, and don't forget—the pretty one."

"Right you are!" laughed Hadley. "I'll see you to-night at dinner. Ta ta!" He was going out when he turned round at the door. "Say—don't forget your virtuous resolution. Don't make love to the pretty typewriter."

The door slammed and Stafford was alone.

For some time after his friend disappeared, the railroad man sat idly turning over the mass of papers accumulating on the desk. There was a busy day before him—a directors' meeting at 2 o'clock, people to see at his office. But just now his thoughts were not on his work. He was cogitating on what he had just admitted to Hadley. Yes, that was it. The truth was out now. He had never acknowledged it before, even to himself. He was tired of his bachelor life. He wanted a wife.

What had all his success been to him? An empty kind of satisfaction, after all. He had made money, more money than he knew what to do with, but it had not brought him real happiness. How could he be happy, when there was no one to share his happiness, his success? His parents were dead; he had no brothers or sisters. He was all alone in the world, and the older he got the more he was beginning to realize how isolated his life was. He had hosts of so-called friends—jolly good fellows of both sexes, who were ready enough to help him spend his money; but what was such friendship as that worth?

Yet Fred might be right, after all. He had himself known men, confirmed bachelors like himself, who had got married and regretted it ever since. Their lives had become a burden to them. They were outrageously henpecked, made to dance attendance until all hours of the morning upon silly, bridge-loving wives. True, but they were poor, weak-minded simpletons, just the kind of men to be dominated, bullied by a woman. He would like to see the girl who could coerce him into doing anything he did not wish to do. If he ever married, he would rule his own household; no woman would venture to dictate to him. He would insist on his absolute independence, do as he chose, go where he liked. He would be the master. If the husband had not the right to command, who had? When a pair of horses was sold, did they not belong to the purchaser? A wife was, in a sense, a purchase. The average society girl who gets married nowadays practically sells herself. She wants a man with money—a man who will give her jewels and clothes and an establishment that will make every other girl of her acquaintance green with envy. She gets him—for a consideration. That, no doubt, was the kind of girl he would one day get. She would offer herself, and if he liked the look of her he would buy her, and, having bought her, she would learn soon enough that there was only one master in the Stafford household. It was not necessary that they love each other. They would be good friends, chums, and all that, but he would never let go of the check-rein. Certainly he would always be the master.

He was thus engrossed in his reflections, when there came a gentle rap at the door. Instantly galvanized into action, he called out in stentorian tones:

"Come in!"

The door was pushed open, and Virginia Blaine entered, notebook in hand. Her face was slightly flushed, and she stood hesitatingly on the threshold, as if fearing to enter. She was attired in deep mourning, and the simple black dress, relieved only by a little white lace collar round the neck, enhanced the natural rich coloring of her face. Starting hastily from his seat, Stafford advanced towards her. Timidly she said:

"You asked for a stenographer?"

Impressed, as well as surprised by her beauty, at a loss for a moment what to say, the railroad promoter stammered confusedly:

"No—that is—yes—by all means—won't you sit down?"

She took a seat near the desk, and opening her notebook, got ready to take dictation. Stafford looked fixedly at her. He remembered now having seen her at the telephone switchboard downstairs in the hotel lobby. Smilingly he said:

"What is your name?"

"Miss Blaine," she replied coldly.

"We've met before, haven't we?" he went on.

She colored under his close scrutiny. Why did he stare so? It made her very uncomfortable. If he did not cease looking at her, she would close her book and walk out. It was much against her will that she had come up, alone, to a man's apartment. But she could not afford to lose an opportunity of earning a little extra money. Answering his question, she said rather curtly:

"I believe I got a long distance for you the other day. I'm on the telephone desk, you know. Stenography is only a side issue."

He still gazed at her admiringly, quick to note her well-bred manner, her quiet aloofness, unusual in girls of her occupation.

"I remember," he nodded. "We had quite some difficulty in getting in touch with Washington."

"Yes—there was trouble on the wires."

"But we got it at last, didn't we?" he smiled, making an effort to break the ice and be friendly.

But Virginia intended to stick strictly to business. She must make it plain that hers was not a social call. Quickly changing the topic, she asked:

"Is the dictation ready?"

Stafford would have liked to continue the personal conversation. After all, there was no immediate necessity of getting to work; the correspondence could wait. But there was an icy haughtiness in the girl's demeanor that discouraged any further attempt at getting acquainted. Proceeding therefore to business, he picked up a paper from the desk and commenced to dictate a letter.

Chapter V

The loss of her mother, following so soon after the death of her father, had come as a terrible shock to Virginia. She felt it more keenly even than Fanny, not only because her nature was more sensitive and impressionable, but also because she realized that she had been suddenly robbed of a constant and devoted companion. Fanny, who was now officially engaged to Mr. Gillie, was nearly always in his company, with the result that Virginia, more particular and more exacting in the choice of acquaintances than her sister, found the world emptier and more lonely than ever.

Graduation day had come and gone and the dress which her poor mother had not lived to finish, had to be completed by other hands. At the end of her school days and now practically alone, with no one to look to for support, Virginia began to think seriously of the future. She must get something to do, that was very certain. Fanny would soon have Jimmie to look after her, but she herself must depend on her own exertion. She was a long time making up her mind what she would do. Her education fitted her for a teacher, but she shrank from the idea. Never would she have the patience. Then she thought of trying to write for the papers or magazines. That, also, was rejected. It was too precarious; she had had no experience. There was the stage. No—that would not do. She did not like the environments. There remained only the alternative of being a saleswoman in a department store or a stenographer. Having taken a course in shorthand, and being fairly proficient, she chose the latter, and, thanks to the influence and good offices of Dr. Everett, at last succeeded in securing a fairly remunerative position.

The first few days of business employment proved a novel and trying experience. To a young girl accustomed to the quiet and exclusiveness of private life, the noise and promiscuousness of a public hotel corridor were singularly distasteful. The men ogled her; the women guests tried her patience. A pretty girl, it was only natural that she should attract attention from the men, but the persistent manner in which they stared, and tried to make acquaintance, annoyed her beyond measure. When they spoke to her in the ordinary course of business they were courteous enough, but their eyes were bold, and sometimes they said

things in an undertone which made her face flush scarlet. She complained to her associates, but she got no sympathy. The other girls—sorry they were not attractive themselves—only laughed at her for being so particular. They said that the men meant no harm, and that she should consider it a compliment to her good looks if they took the trouble to address her at all.

Otherwise the work was congenial enough and the hours were not long. She still lived with her sister in the same house where their mother died. The millinery business had grown sufficiently large to take all Fanny's time, and it brought in enough to keep the little household going. When her sister married Jimmie, she would, of course, be compelled to give the shop up, but meantime it helped defray expenses and gave Fanny an occupation.

After that first morning of dictation in Robert Stafford's rooms, Virginia saw a good deal of the handsome railroad man. The first business interview had been followed by others, and when there was no regular correspondence to be answered he would stop at the desk downstairs on all sorts of pretexts. Usually it was to telephone; sometimes to write a note, and for some reason or other both of these operations took up considerably more time than was absolutely necessary. On one occasion he was sitting near her desk nearly all afternoon. He had asked her to get Chicago on the long distance. There was trouble on the wires, as had happened once before with Washington, and it was two hours before he got his number. Strangely enough, the delay did not seem to annoy him. He sat leisurely near her desk and chatted with her about theatres, music, books and art, finding her well read and conversant with every topic, especially with art, which was his hobby. He seemed sorry when at last he had no longer an excuse to stay. All that time he had watched her, quietly noting and admiring the calm, skilful way she went about her work.

The girl interested him. Not so much because she was good looking as that she was quite different from other women. Her cold, distant air, her spirit of self-reliance and independence pleased him. Most women he had known had offered themselves shamelessly; this girl had kept him at a distance. This in itself would be enough to attract most men. The very novelty of it appealed to him. She was exceedingly pretty, too, yet hers was not the banal, conventional beauty of every day, but something fresher, more fascinating, more lovable, an indefinable, elusive charm that kept him guessing, yet always accompanied by a quiet dignity that compelled respect. Instead of flirting with him or giving him any encouragement, as girls of her class often did, she studiously avoided his gaze,

seeming not to know he was there, serenely indifferent as to whether he came or went. Accustomed as he—the wealthy bachelor—was to see girls literally throw themselves at him, it was a new experience to find himself apparently of so little account, and this, perhaps as much as anything else, made him all the more determined to force himself upon her attention.

Apart from this, Virginia aroused the man's sensuality, excited his imagination. It seemed to him that a girl of her impressionable nature, artistic temperament, intellectual aloofness, once her ardor was awakened would love more passionately than a woman of commoner clay; her caresses, it seemed to him, would have greater zest than those of a woman more obviously carnal. Never, in the years during which he had sown his wild oats, having learned how to control his appetites, nor in his career as a rich man about town, learned to respect woman or see in her anything else but an instrument of pleasure, it was not surprising that he looked at Virginia with eyes of lust. Apart from her spirituality which interested him, she also appealed to him physically and with the craving of an epicure, ever seeking some gastronomic novelty wherewith to gratify his jaded palate, he determined to awaken her virginal emotions and find out in what way they differed from those of other women.

He set to work to win her, taking the same keen pleasure in the pastime as does a sportsman at the hunt. He realized that it would not be easy, and vaguely he foresaw failure, but the difficulties of the task only served to spur him on to make the attempt. He began the campaign of fascination tactfully, diplomatically, careful not to offend, avoiding anything likely to excite her resentment or arouse her fears. He lent her books, gave her tickets for concerts and picture exhibitions, tried in every way to break down the barrier of haughty reserve with which she had surrounded herself and gain her confidence.

Virginia appreciated these attentions, and the well-bred ease with which she accepted them only made the would-be lover's campaign the more difficult. In fact, her very frankness and candor made it impossible, and finally disarmed him altogether, leaving him feeling very much ashamed of himself. Stafford was not a scoundrel at heart. He had gone into the game just for the sport, as many men of his class and opportunities had done before him, carelessly, thoughtlessly, and without fully realizing that he was committing a crime. And now that she had gone through the fire unscathed, he was more in love with her than ever. What a fool, what an unspeakable cad he had been to even think of her in that way!

Then another thought occurred to him. The girl whom he could never have won for a mistress might well be worth making his wife. Why not marry her? The idea had never entered his head, but it was not so preposterous as it at first seemed. He had jested with Hadley about looking for a wife, and at times had even thought seriously about getting married. Yet it was not a thing to be undertaken lightly. As head of a big railroad system, he had a certain position to keep up. This girl was poor—an obscure stenographer. There was no telling what objectionable relatives she might have. When a man marries, he marries his wife's family! How society would laugh! Well, what if it did? He had boasted to Hadley that he defied the conventions. What did he care for society? There was many a woman in society who, if the walls of alcoves could talk and it came to a show-down on conduct, would not dare hold up her head in presence of Virginia Blaine. He certainly liked the girl well enough to marry her. He could hardly say that he loved her. One does not love at first sight, no matter what the dime novelists say—and what, perhaps, was more important, he respected her. Could every man say as much of the woman he married? Love would come later, he had no doubt of that, and after all, he thought to himself, it was not so much a question of "should he marry her?" as of "would she marry him?"

Once he made up his mind, Robert Stafford was not the kind of man to let the grass grow under his feet. He started on a new campaign—an honorable campaign, this time, on which he was willing to stake his happiness. He was puzzled, at first, how to go about it. A clever way, he thought, would be to get her more interested in himself, in his home. He would ask her to visit his Riverside house and see his art treasures, his pictures. Of course, it was not likely that she would consent to go alone. He would tell her to bring her sister. If he invited the sister she could hardly refuse.

One afternoon Virginia was at work on some typewriting in his rooms at the hotel. A number of letters had accumulated and they had put in the whole afternoon at dictation. Stafford had paid little attention to her, being wholly absorbed in business detail, but about four o'clock he declared he was tired, even if she were not, and, despite her protests, insisted on telephoning downstairs and ordering tea to be sent up. When it was brought in, daintily served with cake on a silver salver, and the waiter had withdrawn, he courteously drew up a chair and asked her to serve. She must be hostess, he said laughingly.

Now the business on hand was over, his manner underwent a complete change; in place of the employer, she saw a polished man of the world entertaining a

social equal. Virginia accepted his hospitality and politeness graciously, without awkwardness or false modesty, and before long found herself laughing and chatting with him on terms of delightful intimacy.

"Had any trouble with long distance lately?" he inquired, as he passed her a biscuit.

"Not more than usual," she smiled.

"Not even with Chicago?"

"No—not even Chicago. It seems to me that I have trouble only when you want the wire."

He laughed, a loud, boyish laugh, that shook the room.

"We had a hard struggle the first time we tried it, didn't we?"

"Rather," she replied.

He looked at her for a few moments without speaking, admiring her large black eyes, the finely arched eyebrows, the delicately chiselled mouth. Then he said:

"You were very patient about it."

"I couldn't do the work if I wasn't patient," she replied quietly.

"But you were exceptionally nice about it," he insisted. "It wasn't the usual external, duty-patience, but the real patience that comes from within. You know what I mean."

She nodded.

"Yes. My mother was the best example of that kind of patience I have ever known. She radiated it."

He knew that she had lost her mother, but from feelings of delicacy had never asked for particulars. But now circumstances seemed to invite confidences. Sympathetically he asked:

"How long has she been—gone?"

"Six years," she replied slowly, looking away past him out of the window, through which she could see the roofs of the big, careless city. Her eyes filled with tears, as she went on: "My father was a lawyer, but he didn't have a large practice, and when he died he left nothing but his insurance. It was very little—not enough to live on, and mother, with us two girls to look after, had to do something practical, so she opened a small millinery store."

"The right spirit," he said approvingly.

"It was a grim, hard struggle, particularly at first," she went on. "My sister Fanny had left school, and was able to help her, and then it wasn't quite so trying. You see, Fanny didn't care for school."

"But you did?"

"Yes," she said with enthusiasm, "I always loved it. Mother knew it, and insisted that I should go through High School. I was delighted, for I didn't realize then what struggles and sacrifices it meant for her, and here is the irony—the tragedy—of it all. I was selected as the class orator at our graduating exercises, and mother was very happy over it. She looked forward to it as one of the days of her life, and started to make my graduating dress—but never finished it!" Very softly she murmured: "Poor mother!"

Never had she looked so pretty as at this moment when, her face pale and thoughtful, her eyes dimmed with tears, she called up memories of the past. Stafford, his gaze intent on her, said gently:

"You have her memory."

"Yes," she murmured, "it is more to me than anything in the world—except Fanny."

"You love your sister, I know," he said.

"Of course I do," she replied quickly. "She took mother's place—as much as any one could—and, except on our vacations, we have never been separated."

"You soon will be though, won't you?"

She looked up at him in surprise, not understanding.

"How?" she demanded.

"Didn't you tell me that your sister was going to be married?"

Virginia laughed, a low, musical laugh, which charmed him.

"Yes," she said, "that's true. They are to be married next month." Sadly she added: "I shall miss her very much. Yet I shan't mind that kind of separation—if she's happy."

Stafford smiled. Quietly he said:

"That's the trouble with matrimony—that great, big little word—if."

"Oh," she interrupted quickly. "I feel sure they'll be happy. Theirs is a marriage for love."

Looking closely at her, he asked: "Do you believe in love?"

"Of course," she answered, raising her cup to her face to hide her embarrassment.

"What kind of love?" he persisted.

"Real love."

"What do you call real love?"

She opened her eyes wide, as if greatly astonished.

"Why—why," she stammered, "don't you think there is such a thing as real love?"

"Certainly I do," he laughed, amused at her ingenuousness. "But I don't think it's what the sentimental schoolgirl feels for the college football player. As for love at first sight, I consider that simply absurd. To my way of thinking, love isn't a spontaneous combustion. It's a slow, steady growth and the soil in which it grows best is—respect."

"Perhaps you are right," she said hesitatingly.

"I know that I am," he replied positively.

There was a short silence, when suddenly Stafford said:

"Who is this man that your sister is marrying?"

Virginia laid down her cup of tea and burst out laughing.

"Oh, he's so funny! I'm sure he would amuse you. Such an original! His name is James Gillie."

He liked to encourage her to speak of herself and her family. It seemed to bring them closer together. Pleasantly he asked:

"What does he do, this Mr. Gillie—doctor—lawyer—business man?"

Amused at his curiosity, Virginia shook her head. Laughingly she said:

"Nothing so substantial, I assure you. He's only a shipping clerk—getting about $14 a week—"

Stafford stared in amazement. With an incredulous smile, he exclaimed:

"Only earning $14 a week and he has the impudence to ask your sister to marry him?"

Virginia nodded.

"Oh, but you don't know Mr. Gillie," she went on. "He's sure he's worth far more than that, and he has won sister over to the same opinion. I have some doubts myself, but they are both quite convinced that before long he will be a multi-millionaire. You see, he has ideas. He invents things. He told us about one of his inventions the other day. It was something that would help the railroads, and make them and him fabulously rich—"

"An inventor, eh?" exclaimed Stafford, his business instinct quickly aroused at the mention of railroads.

An idea suddenly occurred to him. Here, perhaps, was the opportunity he had been seeking, the excuse he had been looking for. Under pretence of wishing to

meet the inventor, he might be able to induce her to bring her prospective brother-in-law to the house, and since Mr. Gillie could hardly accept the invitation alone, she would, of course, be compelled to accompany him. He said nothing for a moment, and then, turning and looking at his companion intently, said with great earnestness:

"Miss Blaine, I wonder if you would do me a great favor."

Surprised at the request, and rather startled, Virginia looked up, wondering what favor she, poor little stenographer, could possibly render the millionaire. Quickly she replied:

"Certainly—anything in my power."

He bowed and went on:

"As you know, I am in the railroad business. As head of an important transcontinental system, it is part of my work to investigate and look into anything that may prove of value in improving our equipment. If this Mr. Gillie has invented something really valuable, I'd like to know what it is. If there is anything in it, I might be able to render him a good service in bringing his invention promptly to the attention of the right people. You can see yourself how important it is that I should meet Mr. Gillie—"

Virginia flushed with mingled pleasure and embarrassment. She was delighted at the thought that she might be able to advance Fanny's interests, but Jimmie was such an impossible person! How could she introduce him to a man of Mr. Stafford's polish and distinction? Yet for Fanny's sake she ought not to let any opportunity slip by. Seeing her hesitate, Stafford went on:

"Why couldn't you and your sister come and dine with me at Riverside Drive next Saturday evening at seven o'clock? And bring Mr. Gillie with you. I shall be delighted to meet your sister and her fiancé. It will also be a good opportunity for you to look over some of my art treasures—quite an interesting collection, I assure you, picked up here and there, all over the world. Do come. Don't say no. I'll have Oku, my Japanese butler, prepare a little dinner. We'll be merry as crickets. Besides I think I can do your future brother-in-law a good turn. You will come, won't you?"

He leaned forward, his eyes ardently fixed on hers. There was something in his

look, in his manner, which brought the color to her cheeks, yet it was nothing at which she could take offence. On the contrary, she had every reason to feel flattered and pleased. In her heart she knew that this sudden anxiety to meet Jimmie was but a pretext, and that it was she alone whom he really wanted to go and admire the works of art in his beautiful Riverside home. Something told her that this man loved her, and the very thought of it, with all the possibilities it conjured up, sent through her a thrill of mingled pleasure and alarm.

"Won't you?" he said again, in earnest, pleading tones.

There was a brief silence. Then, looking up, she said with a frank smile:

"It is very good of you. Yes—we shall be very pleased. Saturday evening, at seven."

Chapter VI

No.—Riverside Drive, an imposing apartment house of Spanish style of architecture, situated in the most select and attractive section of that aristocratic thoroughfare, was justly renowned in the neighborhood for the size and magnificence of its suites and the ultra *chic* quality of its exclusive, wealthy patrons. No one ever heard of rooms being vacant; people had been on the waiting list for years and they were still waiting. Tenants never dreamed of leaving, once they had been fortunate enough to secure a lease. It would be surprising if they did, for in all New York there were no apartments more desirable and comfortable.

Mr. Robert Stafford lived on the eighth floor, his rooms facing the Hudson and commanding a superb view of the stately river below, which, broad and turbulent, rushed by on its way to the sea, its surface dotted with all kinds of steam and sailing craft. To the north, away past Grant's Tomb, were the highlands of New Jersey and the precipitous cliffs of the historic Palisades, which, as far as the eye could reach, stretched away in a mist of purplish haze.

The decorations and appointments of the apartment would have brought joy into the gloomy heart of the most blasé connoisseur. Entering a spacious foyer with a lofty, elaborately decorated ceiling and walls of white marble hung all round with tapestries, trophies and oil paintings, the visitor passed through a number of wide halls, treading on thick Oriental rugs until he reached the salon, a magnificent room decorated in blue and gold with heavy gilt furniture to match, which, in turn, opened on to the dining room, both looking on the Avenue and commanding a fine view of the river. At the far end of the salon was a large fireplace with a splendid mantel of beautifully carved marble, a rare piece of decorative art from the north of Italy. The dining room, panelled with rare woods, and hung with red, with panelled ceiling, was separated from the salon by a folding door. The walls of both rooms were covered with paintings, water colors and engravings, while all about was a picturesque confusion of *objets d'art* of every description—Japanese ivories, rare porcelains, old English china, Indian bronzes, antique watches, snuff boxes and bonbonnières, curiously wrought brass and iron work, Peach Blow vases, Mexican pottery, Satsuma

ware, richly mounted weapons of the middle ages, Japanese armor, long daggers from Toledo, delicate lattice work from Venice, Florentine carvings, valuable Gobelins tapestries from Paris, etc., etc.—a collection such as an Oriental potentate might envy. The fame of the Stafford collection had gone far and wide, and the railroad promoter had been criticized more than once because he did not open his house more frequently for society's enjoyment. Ambitious mothers saw in the wealthy bachelor a great catch for their daughters, but it was in vain that they baited their matrimonial nets. Stafford declined all invitations and lived himself the life of a hermit. He was very seldom at home, the blinds were nearly always drawn, and the place looked deserted. The only sign of life was an occasional glimpse of faithful Oku, the Japanese butler, who, with downcast eyes and stealthy tread, sometimes made a *sortie* in search of food or other household necessity.

A pure-blooded subject of the Mikado, Oku had come to America years ago to make his fortunes; but, falling into the hands of the Philistines directly he landed, found himself stranded in San Francisco. Stafford had run across him there, took a fancy to him and attached him to his person as a body servant. He had never regretted it. Oku was one of those ideal retainers who, once they have found an attachment, would rather die than betray their trust. His command of the vernacular was only limited, but he was the very soul of courtesy and politeness, and when not otherwise able to make himself understood, would content himself by a number of low salaams, accompanied by most apologetic exclamations of: "Excuse, please—excuse, please," which original form of salutation, together with his Far-Eastern air, was well in harmony with the oriental, exotic surroundings of the place.

But this evening things were astir in the Stafford abode. Lights were burning recklessly in every room and Oku had been running excitedly about since early dawn. Had not his lord and master told him that visitors were coming and to prepare dinner for five? Ah, now Oku was indeed in his element! Instantly spurred to action, he had run here and there, in and out of the shops, in search of the most toothsome dainties. He had bought the choicest meats, the finest birds, big mushrooms just picked, asparagus such as might make a king's mouth water. Then there was the wine. The champagne must go on ice early. His master liked it very cold—almost frozen. Then there were the cocktails to get ready, and the cigars and the floral decorations, with bouquets for the ladies and *boutonnières* for the men. Altogether, Oku had a busy day.

But he was repaid when at half past six that evening he stood in the salon and cast a last glance over the banquet table to make sure that nothing had been forgotten. Viewed through the folding doors and literally groaning under the load of handsome silver, fine crystal, snowy linen, and cut flowers, the table presented a picture calculated to fill the heart of any host with pride.

Oku glanced anxiously at the clock. He devoutly prayed that his dear master would soon come. It was a terrible responsibility for him to bear alone. Another half hour and the company would arrive, and his master had still to dress! The minutes sped by and no sign of Mr. Stafford. Where could he be? The butler was beginning to worry in earnest when the telephone bell suddenly rang. The butler feverishly picked up the receiver just in time to hear his master say:

"Is that you, Oku?"

"Yes—Sir—Excuse—please—Sir!"

"Oku," came Stafford's voice, "I've been held downtown at my club. I'm just starting for home. If Miss Blaine and her friends come, make them comfortable until I arrive. Understand?"

"Yes—Sir—Excuse—please—Sir!"

The speaker rang off and Oku, more nervous and excited than ever now that he was called upon to act as host as well as caterer, danced about the apartment like a man possessed. Seven o'clock struck and the echoes of the last stroke had barely died away when there came a discreet ring at the front door bell. Quickly Oku pulled himself together and summoning up his most dignified manner, threw the door wide open. On the threshold stood Mr. James Gillie, accompanied by Virginia and Fanny.

"Is this Mr. Stafford's apartment?" inquired Jimmie in his grandest manner.

"Yes, sir," said Oku with a deep salaam. "Excuse, please, and come in! Excuse, please!"

None of the visitors were in evening dress. The girls wore shirt waists and Jimmie's chief claims to distinction were a clean shave and freshly-pressed pants. At the last moment Virginia had wished not to come at all for this reason. She had no evening frock and could not afford to get one for a single occasion,

and Fanny was in the same straits. There had been a long argument over the matter and not a few tears, until finally Fanny made it impossible for Virginia to hold out any longer by declaring flatly that her whole future—hers and Jimmies—was at stake. So Virginia surrendered with as good grace as she could pretend—hoping inwardly that Mr. Stafford looked upon it only as an informal affair and would be neither dressed himself nor expect them to be.

Jimmie handed his coat and hat to the butler with as important an air as he was able to assume, and, speaking for the ladies, who until now had stood motionless in the background, said loftily:

"Tell Mr. Stafford the people he was expecting have come."

Oku salaamed profoundly, but did not budge.

"Excuse! But Mr. Stafford—he is not here," he said.

Jimmie looked blankly at the girls. With a grin at Virginia he snickered:

"I told you being late was the proper thing."

Virginia turned to the butler. Anxiously she said:

"Isn't there some mistake?"

Oku shook his head, and throwing open the door of the salon, motioned to them to enter.

"Excuse, please, but there is no mistake," he grinned. "Mr. Stafford he say to me over telephone he is very sorry, but there is big meeting and he not get away. He be here in half an hour."

The girls looked at each other in dismay. Jimmie made a grimace.

"Half an hour! Jumping Jupiter!" he exclaimed.

"He say he is very sorry," went on Oku apologetically, "but will hurry quick as can. He say for you to wait till he come and he tell me to say many time, 'Excuse, please! Excuse!'"

Virginia smiled. With quiet dignity she said:

"Very well—we understand—we will wait."

Oku put out his hand for their hats and coats.

"Give me hats, please—excuse, please."

While the girls divested themselves of their outer garments the little butler chatted on in his quaint pigeon English:

"Mr. Stafford—he say to ask if you will have cocktail."

Jimmie had carelessly strolled over to a table and picked up a book. On hearing the invitation to liquid refreshments he closed the volume with a bang and turned round like a flash:

"I will," he exclaimed quickly.

A ludicrous expression of renewed interest suddenly replaced the shipping clerk's rather disgusted expression. Anything was welcome which promised to relieve the monotony of this society stunt, as he had termed Mr. Stafford's invitation. It was against his will that he had come at all. Why should he do this millionaire the honor of dining with him? What was he to him? Because he was rich? Well, he guessed not. If he had consented at Fanny's urgent pleadings, it was because his fiancée had told him it would help Virginia. Mr. Stafford, Fanny said, was simply crazy about her and might propose to her any day. After all, it could do no harm to have a millionaire in the family. Besides, he was a big railroad man. He might help him to do something with his "no stop" idea. But he must be on his guard and not allow sentiment to interfere with business. This Stafford must not think that because he invited him to dinner and might one day become his brother-in-law that he was going to get the "no-stop" invention cheap. No, siree—no one should get the best of him!

Oku had approached Virginia, who, having crossed the room, was gazing through the casement windows at the splendid view. Salaaming low, he said:

"Miss—will take cocktail?"

"No—thank you," she answered with a smile.

The butler turned to Fanny, who looked significantly at Jimmie as if desirous of consulting his wishes in so important a matter.

"Sure!" he said in an aside not intended to reach the butler's ears.

But Oku was nothing if not discreet. He never allowed himself to hear anything. When Fanny nodded he merely inquired politely:

"What kind—please?"

Jimmie grinned and licked his lips. Turning to his future wife he asked:

"What do you like?"

"What kind do you?" she laughed, anxious to keep him in good humor.

"Martini suits me all right."

Oku bowed to the ground.

"Yes, miss. Two Martini cocktails. Excuse, please! Excuse!"

With another profound salaam and retreating backwards towards the door as if in the presence of royalty, the Japanese butler made an impressive exit.

Jimmie had watched Oku's every movement with the greatest amusement. When he was out of earshot he remarked with a chuckle:

"Great little chink, that!"

Fanny laughed. Teasingly she said:

"He's not a Chinaman, Jim. Don't you know a Japanese when you see one?"

"They all look alike to me," he grinned.

Profiting by the butler's absence, the shipping clerk started on a tour of critical inspection of the salon. Looking around, he exclaimed with enthusiasm:

"Say—this is some room, eh?"

Virginia had left the window and was admiring some water-colors on the walls. Overhearing the exclamation, she looked up, her glance taking in the whole room.

"Yes—it is beautiful," she said ecstatically.

Fanny, who had been diligently rubbing the back of her magnificent gilt chair to see if it was real gold leaf, broke in:

"While this place was being built I read in the paper that Mr. Stafford was to pay $15,000 a year for his rooms."

Jimmie opened wide his eyes in amazement.

"Fifteen thousand a year—just for his rooms!" he exclaimed incredulously.

He looked at Virginia as if expecting her to confirm the statement.

"Yes," insisted Fanny, "$15,000 a year."

The shipping clerk gave a low whistle.

"Why, that's nearly $300 a week!" he cried.

Fanny gave an affirmative nod, and her fiancé, putting on an injured air as if Mr. Stafford's expenses had to come out of his own pocket, went on:

"Three hundred dollars—just for his rooms, while I slave a whole week, from eight in the morning till six at night for a measly fourteen." With a disgusted shrug of his shoulders he added: "I tell you there's something rotten in this country."

Virginia looked around apprehensively. She was afraid the butler might have heard the ejaculation, which, considering he was Mr. Stafford's guest, was certainly inexecrable taste. Not that she was surprised. By this time she had learned not to look to her prospective brother-in-law for Chesterfieldian manners. Quickly she said:

"Mr. Stafford didn't get more than fourteen when he was your age. He was poor, too."

"Yes," chimed in Fanny with a toss of her head, "and when they raised you from twelve at Christmas you thought you were doing great. I remember how chesty you were about it."

Jimmie grinned. In tones meant to be tender he replied:

"Only because I figured that I might be gettin' eighteen pretty soon and then we could get married." Eying her sheepishly, he went on: "Do we still have to wait till I get eighteen, Fanny?"

"We certainly do," she retorted promptly. "A couple simply can't live on less than eighteen."

The shipping clerk thrust his hands in his pockets and began to stride up and down the room. Peevishly he exclaimed:

"I know it. That's what makes me so sore when I read about millionaires like Stafford having luxurious private yachts, giving fifty thousand for a picture and things like that. They have so much money they don't know what to do with it, and yet all that stands between me and happiness is four dollars a week *and I can't get it*."

Virginia, who was sitting on the sofa, having become interested in a cabinet full of curios close by, looked up with a smile. Encouragingly she said:

"Don't worry, Jimmie, your chance will come just as Mr. Stafford's did."

"Fine chance I've got," he growled; "third assistant shipping clerk in a wholesale grocery. Why, the manager of the department only gets thirty and he's been with the house twenty-six years."

"That's a sweet outlook for me, I must say," cried Fanny in dismay. "If it takes a man twenty-six years to work up to thirty, I suppose you'll be getting eighteen eleven years from the third of next January."

Jimmie looked closely at both girls. He was not quite sure if they were making fun of him. Apparently satisfied that, on the contrary, they were in full sympathy with his troubles, he said:

"I'm doing my best and no fellow can do more! That's what makes me so sore, I

tell you. Here I am slaving away for fourteen a week and he spends three hundred just for his rooms. I wonder how many rooms he gets for that?"

"I think it's twelve and four baths," said Fanny.

"Four baths!" he gasped. "What in God's name can a bachelor do with four baths?"

"Is there any reason he shouldn't have them if he can pay for them?" demanded Fanny quietly.

"But what good are they to him," insisted her fiancé. "No matter how much money he has, he can't be in more than one tub at a time. I suppose he uses 'em Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday—and keeps the favorite for the special splash on Sunday."

Virginia looked at him scornfully.

"Do you realize," she exclaimed, "that Mr. Stafford has servants and that he has friends come to stay with him occasionally?"

Abashed, the young man put his hands in his pockets and began to whistle. He stood in considerable awe of Virginia.

"Oh, I hadn't thought o' that," he said mildly.

Flushing with vexation at his making such remarks, Fanny said to him in a quick undertone:

"Take my advice and do think—once in a while. And get rid of that temper, too. For the first time in our lives we're invited to dine with a rich man and I, for one, want to enjoy it."

Jimmie opened his mouth as if to make some retort, when suddenly Oku re-appeared carrying a tray in which was a tempting spread of cocktails, cigarettes and cigars.

Chapter VII

While the butler was serving the cocktails, Virginia roamed through the splendid suite of rooms, taking keen delight in examining at closer range one and all of the art treasures they contained. She went into silent ecstasies before a Da Vinci, a Rembrandt and other fine examples of the old masters, and was held spellbound by the beautiful modelling of a piece of modern French sculpture. She was not enough of a connoisseur to be able to estimate each picture, each curio at its true value, but she knew enough to realize that it was a very valuable collection and one which very few persons were privileged to view. The books with their fine bindings were likewise a source of particular delight.

How happy, she mused, the possessor of such a paradise ought to be! She wondered if he spent much time at home or if he preferred to answer the call of the gay metropolis. He looked like a man who enjoyed life. Why had he taken all this trouble for such obscure persons as themselves? Why had he looked at her in that persistent, admiring way? Could it be possible that he was really attracted to her and had begun to think of her as a man does of the woman he wants to marry? Was it conceivable that she could ever be the mistress of such a beautiful home as this? What folly to even dream of such a possibility! Possibly, he was attracted to her and liked her company, but there was a vast difference between a fleeting whim and wishing to make her his wife. And when her glance fell on Jimmie and Fanny squabbling in the distance it was with some bitterness that she realized the difference in their station, the width of the social chasm between her and the set to which their host belonged.

"Excuse—please—excuse," spluttered the polite little Jap as he gracefully presented the salver to each guest.

Fanny took a glass, followed in turn by Jimmie, who, extending his clumsy hand, snatched one of the dainty glasses and put it to his lips. The butler, all smiles and civility, placed the tray on a table and again bowed low. Pointing to the tray, he said:

"Cigarettes and cigars! Is there anything else?"

"Not for me," replied Jimmie, making himself comfortable in a chair on the other side of the table.

"Nor for me," smiled Fanny, graciously.

"No, thank you," added Virginia quickly. "We need nothing else."

"Then excuse, please. Excuse—"

The butler salaamed and withdrew, leaving Jimmie and Fanny sipping their cocktails, while Virginia, still interested in the hundred and one curios scattered about the rooms, strolled around alone.

"Some cocktail, eh?" grinned Jimmie, smacking his lips.

"Fine!" exclaimed his fiancée, emptying her glass and putting it down on the table.

Suddenly the clerk's eyes, wandering idly around the room, alighted on the tray filled with cigar and cigarette boxes which the butler had left behind. Rising and going to the table, he stood staring greedily at some expensive perfectos. Finally, unable any longer to withhold his itching palm, he put out his hand and selected one. He lit it and for a few moments puffed away with evident satisfaction. The more he puffed and inhaled the weed's fragrant aroma, the more sorry he was that he had none of the same brand at home. Acting on a sudden impulse, he went back to the table and took half a dozen cigars out of the box. He was about to stuff them into his pocket when Virginia, stepping quickly forward, interfered:

"Jimmie!" she exclaimed indignantly.

He stayed his hand and rather shamefacedly placed the cigars back in the box. Looking up, he demanded:

"Why not? He wouldn't mind."

"Just the same, it isn't a gentlemanly thing to do," she said severely.

"If it comes to that," he retorted sharply, "I ain't a gentleman—I'm a shipping clerk."

"Then, of course, there's nothing more to say," she answered, turning her back. Picking up a book, she dropped into a chair and, ignoring him, relapsed into a dignified silence.

But Jimmie was not to be suppressed by a mere rebuff. After a long, sulky silence, during which he puffed viciously at his cigar, he followed his prospective sister-in-law across the room. After staring at her for some time, he inquired:

"How did you first come to know Mr. Stafford?"

At first the girl made no answer, pretending to be absorbed in what she was reading. He repeated the question so pointedly that she would not ignore it any longer. Looking up, she said rather impatiently:

"How many more times must I tell you? I was at my desk in the hotel about three months ago and he came and wanted long distance—I think it was Washington. There was some trouble getting his party and, as people will, we got into conversation about it. I had no idea who he was—"

Fanny, who had come up, listened intently to the conversation, and, to encourage her little sister to become confidential, arranged some pillows behind her back in motherly fashion. Long before this the elder sister had come to conclusions of her own concerning Virginia's acquaintance with the millionaire. When a man of his wealth and position took the trouble to pay a girl of Virginia's station such marked attention, capping the climax with this present invitation to dine at his house, either his intentions were not avowable or else he was very much in love and wanted to marry her, which last hypothesis sent a thrill down the good sister's back. Virgie the wife of a millionaire! It seemed incredible—too good to be true. It would be the making of all of them. She was glad Jimmie had brought up the subject.

"Did you know then who he was?" she asked.

Virginia laughed as if the question amused her.

"No," she replied, "to tell you the truth, I didn't much care. A girl who handles a telephone desk at our hotel hasn't got much time to bother about anything else."

"When *did* you find out?" inquired Jimmie, suddenly taking a lively interest in

the conversation.

"About a month later—that day he sent downstairs for a stenographer. I told you all about it at the time. I asked at the desk if it was all right to go to his rooms. They told me who he was and explained that he often transacted a lot of business there. That's how we got acquainted. Since then, as you know, I have seen a great deal of him, telephoning and doing copying for him. He has been very kind, indeed. One day he asked me to go to dinner with him—"

"Did you?" demanded Jimmie.

"Certainly not," replied the girl emphatically. "Then he used to come nearly every day. One time I—I think he had been—drinking."

"He was—drunk?" exclaimed Fanny in surprise.

"Oh, no! Not that," said Virginia quickly, "but I could see he had been drinking."

"Just lit up a bit to show that he's human, eh?" said Jimmie with a grin.

Paying no attention to the interruption, Virginia went on:

"I didn't like him quite so much after that. He asked me again—"

"And you wouldn't?" interrupted Fanny.

"Of course not!"

Jimmie chuckled. Crossing his legs and striking the ashes from his cigar, he said:

"Say, but that was foxy!"

"What was?" demanded Virginia quickly.

"Making him think that he having money made no difference."

"It didn't."

"Sure it didn't," he laughed. "That was the way to play it."

"What do you mean?" cried the girl indignantly. "I wasn't 'playing' anything or

anybody."

Paying no heed to the frantic signs which Fanny was making for him to keep silent, the shipping clerk went on:

"Why not? It's all in the game."

Ignoring him, Virginia continued:

"He finally asked me to dine with him here and to bring you and Jim. I had told him about your being engaged."

The young man nodded approvingly. With a patronizing air he said:

"I'm beginning to think this fellow Stafford's on the level. He might even want to marry you."

Virginia flushed scarlet. Confusedly she exclaimed:

"Don't be absurd!"

"But if he did," insisted Fanny, "*would* you marry him?"

Jimmie laughed loudly:

"*Would* she!" he chuckled. "Say, Fanny, are you crazy?"

Virginia shook her head. Slowly she said:

"I don't know that I would."

"What!" exclaimed the clerk, half starting from his chair. "Do you mean to say that if any man as rich as Stafford was to ask you on the level to be his wife that you wouldn't jump at the chance?"

Quite unmoved by his indignant outburst, the girl replied calmly:

"I've seen men who are twice as rich as Mr. Stafford that I wouldn't marry if they gave me half their money as a wedding present."

The shipping clerk made a grimace, but reluctantly nodded approval. Carelessly

he said:

"In a way I can't say that I blame you. I've seen pictures of a lot of these financiers and, believe me, they are the rummiest looking bunch I ever set eyes on! But I didn't think Stafford was that kind."

"I thought he was rather distinguished looking," interrupted Fanny.

"He is," said Virginia quickly. "What's more—he's a gentleman."

Jimmie rose and walking over to where Virginia was sitting, stood looking at her, his hands in his pockets. Almost sarcastically he asked:

"Then see here, if—this—Mr. Stafford is distinguished looking and a gentleman, as well as rich, will you please tell me what kind of a man you want?"

The girl made no reply, but with a thoughtful expression on her face, gazed through the window. It was now quite dark outside and the river below was dotted here and there with the lights of steamboats and sailing boats as they made their way up and down the broad stream. Jim's chance remark had set her thinking. Others beside herself were speculating as to the purport of Mr. Stafford's attentions? That they were honorable she had not the slightest doubt, although at one time she had been a little afraid of him. Those invitations to dinner and his manner on one or two occasions she had rather resented, but for some time past now he had quite changed. He was more respectful, more sincere. Supposing the impossible were to happen—supposing he were to ask her to be his wife? For all she knew, the proposal might come that very evening. It might be part of the plan of this sudden impromptu dinner. What would she say to him? Did she love him? Frankly she did not—yet. Could she ever love him? The answer to that was in the future. Ought a girl to marry a man whom she knew in her heart she did not love? He was rich, the marriage was in every way desirable. She would have every comfort, but could real happiness come of a marriage which on both sides would be, after all, only a mockery, a hollow sham?

Jimmie, impatient, repeated his question.

"Will you kindly tell us what kind of a man you want?"

Virginia looked up. Calmly she answered:

"I—I want a man I can love."

The clerk gave a low whistle. Sarcastically he said:

"If you can't love a man as rich as Mr. Stafford, take my advice and go see a heart specialist."

"A girl can't love a man just because she wants to," replied Virginia with dignity. "Love doesn't go where it's sent; it goes where it pleases."

"That's right," interrupted Fanny. Turning to her fiancé she said: "You don't suppose I loved a fourteen-dollar-a-week shipping clerk because I wanted to, do you?"

Jimmie squirmed in his chair.

"What?" he exclaimed.

Quickly Fanny mended matters. With a conciliatory smile she added:

"I loved him just because I had to."

Immediately placated, the young man rose and, approaching his fiancée in a manner intended to suggest the tenderest sentiment, he stuttered:

"Same here. The first time I ever set eyes on you, Fanny, something inside o' me said: 'Me for her!'"

The girl laughed. Placing her hand over her heart, she said mockingly:

"And something here said, 'Him for me!'"

He stooped and kissed her and, taking her hand, they sat side by side on the sofa together in the manner of all conventional lovers. Virginia, who had watched them with amusement, shook her head. Sadly she said:

"My heart never said anything like *that* to *me*."

"Then perhaps it won't be that way with you," said Jimmie. "Perhaps you'll learn to care for him by degrees like you would—say, for Mr. Stafford."

"Don't talk nonsense," cried Virginia.

"He's interested in you, and if you play your cards right—"

"I'm not *going* to play any cards."

"Let me tell you one thing," he said, rising and going to the table, "a chance like this don't come to one girl in a million."

"Please!—" exclaimed Virginia, putting up her hand to stop his talk.

But Jimmie was not so easily suppressed. Earnestly he went on:

"It's a chance of a life time. It means a lot to me and Fanny too."

"Yes, that's true," chimed in his fiancée.

Virginia turned and looked at her sister.

"How?" she demanded.

Jimmie, as usual, replied for his slower-witted partner:

"Do you think," he said, "I want to be a shipping clerk all my life? Well, I don't. I've got ambitions. Yes, and I've got the ability. All I need is a chance and I'd be one of 'em, too."

"One of what?"

"A captain of industry, a magnate, a financier."

"You!"

"Me."

"He could do it," exclaimed Fanny admiringly.

"You bet I could," he said positively. Turning to Virginia, he went on: "And if you married Mr. Stafford and he gave me a chance, which as his brother-in-law he certainly would—well, if I ever got a flying start I'd show 'em a few things. I've got ability, I have."

"Why don't you prove it by getting eighteen dollars a week?" retorted Virginia sarcastically.

Turning her back on him, she walked away and took a seat near the window, where she could look out on the street. But he followed her:

"I thought you'd say something like that," he said. "It just shows how much you know."

"Explain it to her, Jimmy," exclaimed Fanny.

"What's the good?" he replied scornfully. "She wouldn't understand. But I will say this: If I had an opportunity to show some rich man just what I could do, I'd be worth perhaps a million dollars in ten or twelve years, and that would mean a swell house for you and me, and servants, and automobiles and everything like that. I'd show 'em!"

Overcome by the vivid picture he had drawn, Fanny took his hands. Enthusiastically she cried:

"Oh, Jimmy, wouldn't it be lovely? And perhaps we could get into real society, too—perhaps we might meet the social leaders from Harlem and Brooklyn whose pictures are in the papers every Sunday!"

"There'd be nobody we couldn't meet," he cried proudly.

"And fancy!" exclaimed Fanny—"fancy going to the dressmaker's, picking out half a dozen dresses, having them sent home without even asking the price, and letting them charge just as much as they like! Wouldn't that be heavenly?"

"You can have all that and more," he cried exultingly.

Virginia shrugged her shoulders. The topic was becoming distasteful to her. Impatiently she exclaimed:

"It's perfectly ridiculous!"

Going over to her sister, Fanny put her arm around her neck:

"All I want is for you to be happy, sis."

"I know it, dear," replied Virginia. "That's the way you've been always."

"You're different to me," went on the elder sister.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You'd do any man credit."

"Oh, Fanny!"

"But I'd hate to see you try to keep house on eighteen per. That means doing your own work, including the cooking—yes, and the washing—and you weren't made for that."

"Don't worry about me—I'll be all right."

"I hope so," sighed Fanny.

"I will, don't fear," smiled Virginia.

Not yet discouraged the shipping clerk returned to the attack. Folding his arms in authoritative fashion and addressing his future sister-in-law he said severely:

"Will you give me a straight answer to a plain question? If Mr. Stafford does ask you to marry him, will you? Come on, now, will you?"

"I won't talk about such things," retorted the girl.

Her face flushed up. It was easy to see that she was getting angry. Shrugging his shoulders, the young man walked away, but sarcastically he said:

"Well, if he does and you don't accept him, you'll be the biggest fool that ever lived!"

"That's just what I say," laughed Fanny. "Ha! I wish he'd ask me!"

Quickly Virginia turned to her sister.

"Would you accept him?" she asked.

"Would I?" laughed Fanny. "Oh, would I?"

"And throw Jimmie over?"

"I'd throw Jimmie so far and so hard he'd think he was struck by a cyclone."

"And I wouldn't blame her," said the young man, scratching his head.

Virginia looked in amazement from one to the other.

"I can't understand either of you," she exclaimed.

Never at a loss for an answer the clerk proceeded to explain:

"Why should I expect any girl to stick to me and fourteen per when she can have a place like this? Look at this swell furniture, these rugs, and them ornaments—" Going, over to the mantelpiece, he picked up one of the costly Peach Blow vases, examined it critically for a moment and turned to the girls: "I suppose this is one of them peach—peach—something or other—vases I've read about."

"Peach Blow," corrected Virginia.

"That's it," he grinned. "I suppose it's worth six or seven thousand dollars—"

"Be careful!" exclaimed Virginia warningly, "or you'll drop it."

The words were hardly uttered when Jimmie's foot caught in the rug and he stumbled, dropping the vase, which broke into two pieces. Bewildered, horrified, he stood still, surveying with dismay the fragments at his feet.

"Now you've done it!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"I have?" exclaimed Virginia indignantly.

"Yes—I shouldn't have dropped it if you hadn't shouted at me."

Picking up the pieces, he tried to fit them together.

Fanny, frightened out of her wits, was speechless.

"I think we'd better go home!" she gasped.

Virginia alone remained cool.

"Don't be foolish," she said.

"Wait a bit! Wait a bit!" cried Jimmie; picking up the pieces and putting them together. "Look here. How's that for luck? They fit perfectly. No one will know the difference." Replacing the mended vase where he had found it, he added: "We'll leave it just like that and he'll think the Jap did it."

"Fine!" cried Fanny thoughtlessly, grasping at any excuse which promised to exonerate them.

But Virginia would not permit it.

"We'll do nothing of the kind," she exclaimed indignantly.

"If we don't, he'll think we've done it," said Jimmie apprehensively.

The girl gave him a look that made him quail.

"He's not only got to think it," she said severely—"he has got to know it."

"But if he does—"

As he spoke the front door bell rang in the outer hall. Quickly he added: "I'll bet that's him! Shall you tell him?"

"I certainly shall if you don't," replied Virginia firmly.

Oku passed hurriedly through the room on his way to open the front door.

"Excuse, please, excuse—"

Nervous at meeting her host, Fanny began to mop her face desperately.

"I'm so nervous!" she said. "Do I shake hands with him when I'm introduced or just say 'pleased to meet you?'"

Virginia laughed heartily.

"Behave as you would with anyone else," she said.

"How do you feel, Jimmie?" inquired Fanny.

There was an expression of comical consternation on the shipping clerk's face as he pointed to the broken vase.

"I'm not worrying about meeting him," he said ruefully. "I'm worrying about that __"

The next instant the door leading to the hall opened and Robert Stafford entered.

Chapter VIII

Their host advanced, hand extended, his frank, boyish face lit up with a cordial smile.

It was hard to realize that this youthful looking man with black hair not yet tinged by a suspicion of gray, and whose erect, athletic figure suggested the football field rather than the counting room, was one of the most influential railroad men in the country, the master of a large fortune amassed by his own painstaking efforts, his own energy, initiative and ability.

Attired himself in a plain business suit, a quick glance at his visitors' dress had already told him that he could dispense with the formality of changing for dinner. Shaking hands with Virginia, he said in his usual hearty fashion:

"Well, how are you? I'm so sorry I am late. Oku explained, didn't he?"

"Perfectly," smiled Virginia. "He took good care of us."

Turning to Fanny, he said:

"This, I presume, is your sister—"

Virginia hastened to make introductions:

"Fanny," she said, "let me introduce Mr. Stafford."

The host bowed and smiled pleasantly, while Fanny, embarrassed, not knowing whether to offer her hand, felt awkward and ill at ease, as do most people who, going seldom into society, are not in constant practice with its civilities.

"I'm very pleased, indeed, to meet you, Miss Blaine," said Stafford, bowing.

"And this," went on Virginia, turning to her brother-in-law elect, who stood gaping in the background, "is Mr. Gillie—just 'Jimmie' we call him, don't we, Fanny?"

"Yes—Jimmie—of course," stammered Fanny, blushing furiously.

Stafford held out his hand and gave the shipping clerk a grip that made him wince.

"How do you do, Mr. Gillie?"

"How are you?" returned Jimmie with an indifferent nod as he nursed his crushed fingers behind his back.

Stafford beamed good-naturedly on all three. He looked genuinely glad to see them, and this immediately set his guests at their ease. He may not have really felt the cordial welcome he gave them, but he looked as if they were just the people whose society he enjoyed most, a happy knack which some men possess of adapting themselves to their environments, and which had always been the secret of his popularity with men and women both. His manner was so natural, so free from restraint and pose, that even Fanny, timid and nervous as she was, felt reassured.

But while he was affable with all, he had eyes only for Virginia. The others he would willingly have dispensed with, especially the shipping clerk, whom he had sized up with one quick glance. He winced as he took note of the man's cheap, ready-made clothes and boorish manners. Decidedly he was quite impossible, but for the pleasure of a few moment's *tête-à-tête* with Virginia, he was ready to make any sacrifice—even to meet on equal social terms a Mr. Gillie.

"Are you quite sure," he went on apologetically, "that I am forgiven for keeping you waiting? Believe me, it was absolutely unavoidable or it wouldn't have happened."

"Oh, yes," rejoined Virginia quickly, "we're quite sure of that."

The host turned to the Japanese butler, who was busy at the table, placing the empty cocktail glasses on the tray.

"Did you explain thoroughly, Oku?" he asked.

The man looked up.

"Yes, sir. I tell you have big meeting and say 'very much excuse, please.'"

"That was right," rejoined his master, with a laugh. "Now get me the menu."

Oku picked up the tray and made for the door.

"Yes—excuse, please. Excuse."

When his butler had disappeared, Stafford turned to his guests with a smile:

"Queer little chap, isn't he? He is very devoted, and I find him very useful. You see, being a bachelor, I don't keep house, but if I have a little party like this, I generally leave the selection of the dinner to Oku and have it served in there—" He pointed to the dining-room, the folding doors of which the butler had closed. With a good-natured laugh, he added: "He has shut the doors so we can't see the spread. I hope the little beggar has something good."

Jim, who, until now, had remained in the background, trying to summon up enough courage to take an aggressive part in the conversation, spoke up boldly:

"Nice little place you have here, Mr. Stafford."

There was an amused expression, which did not escape Virginia's notice, hovering around the corners of the millionaire's mouth, as he replied:

"Glad you like it. Have you seen the other rooms?"

"No," replied the clerk carelessly, as he flecked the ashes from his cigar on to the fine Turkish rug. "I'm judging by this one—"

At that moment Oku re-entered the room, bearing in his hand a menu, which he handed to his master. Stafford glanced over it and nodded approvingly, then, taking out a pencil, he made one correction. This done, he handed it back.

"I think that will do nicely. Have dinner served when ready."

"Yes—sir—excuse, please."

The butler was about to leave the room, when his master called him back.

"Oku—just a moment." Turning apologetically to the others, he said:

"Will you excuse me?" In an undertone to the butler, he said: "I shan't dress to-night—"

Oku salaamed.

"Anything else, sir?"

"No—you can go."

"Then excuse—please. Excuse—"

The butler disappeared and the host rejoined his guests. Addressing the shipping clerk amiably, he said:

"I'm glad you like this room, Mr. Gillie."

There was no sarcasm in his voice, nor did he intend any. The railroad promoter was in good humor that evening, and he wanted his guests to feel perfectly at home, but Jimmie, in his ignorant egotism thought that his host was really flattered by his praise. Patronizingly, he said:

"I do, for a fact. I think it's all right."

Pointing to the library beyond, the millionaire said carelessly:

"My best things are in that room. But there are some here that are rather good, I think. Did you notice this?" He picked up from a table a piece of carved ivory and held it so that all might see. "It was carved by a Japanese master nearly eight hundred years ago."

"Did he get much for it?" asked Jimmie, opening wide his eyes.

"Who," smiled Stafford, "the carver?"

"Yes."

"Probably a few cents a day."

"A few cents a day?" gaped the clerk.

"Yes."

Jimmie whistled and walked away. Contemptuously he said:

"He ought to have joined the Carvers' Union."

Stafford laughed.

"There was none in those days," he said. "Even if there had been he wouldn't have joined. He was an artist; he worked for the joy of working."

Jimmie snickered. Sneeringly he said:

"He knew his own business best, I suppose, but I've never seen a man who could raise a family on that."

Replacing the ivory back in the cabinet where it belonged, Stafford turned to the mantel and pointed to the Peach Blow vase, which only a few moments before had met with disaster. But the damage was not visible from a distance, and with the natural pride of a collector showing one of his most valued possessions, the railroad man said:

"I have one or two Peach Blows that I think are rather good. There is one up there which I am particularly fond of."

Jimmie more and more nervous gave his fiancée a nudge. In a frightened undertone he whispered to her:

"It's coming! It's coming!"

To hide her confusion, Fanny pretended to be very busy with her handkerchief. Stafford, meantime, had gone up to the bookcase. Reaching up his hand so he could take hold of the vase by its neck, the millionaire went on:

"This vase is said to be—"

His hand touched the vase, but, instead of lifting it, he simply lifted up the piece which had been broken off. For a moment he stared at the fragment in amazement, while the others looked on in silent consternation. There was an ominous pause. Jimmie, turning pale, could feel his heart thumping violently against his ribs.

"Why, it's broken!" exclaimed their host.

"Yes—" said Jimmie quickly.

"Why—so it is!" gasped Fanny, on the theory that an expression of bewilderment on her part would exonerate her from suspicion.

Stafford stood still, trying to fix the two pieces together. He was quite cool and to all appearances the least concerned of the four. There was not even a note of impatience in his voice as he said:

"Oku must be more careful. I never knew him to do a thing like this before."

Virginia approached her future brother-in-law. In a quick undertone she said:

"Tell him."

"Not on your life," he answered in the same tragic whisper. "He doesn't suspect us. We can get away with it."

Utterly disgusted, Virginia moved toward her host.

"Mr. Stafford!" she said loudly and firmly.

He looked up, surprised at her manner and tone.

"Yes?" he smiled.

"Oku didn't break it."

Stafford stared at her in amazement.

"Didn't he?"

"No."

"Really?"

"No—it wasn't Oku." She hesitated a moment; as if still unwilling to disclose the real culprit, Finally she said: "We—we did—it."

An expression of amused surprise came over his face, as he echoed:

"Did we?"

He looked from one to the other, his glance finally failing on Fanny. Alarmed at his scrutiny, she hurriedly pointed to her sister and her fiancé:

"Not me! Them!" she exclaimed.

Stafford smiled. Although it meant a serious loss, to say nothing of the blow to his pride as a collector he was too much the man of the world to betray annoyance or to permit a little accident of that kind to spoil the evening's enjoyment. Courteously he said:

"It doesn't matter in the least."

Ashamed to hide behind a woman's skirts any longer, Jimmie now came forward. In a halfhearted fashion, he said:

"I was looking at it when Virginia suddenly addressed me and I dropped it." With airy self-assurance, he added: "Of course I'll pay for it."

Stafford shrugged his shoulders. Carelessly he said:

"Please don't give it another thought, any of you."

Leaving her companions, Virginia approached her host. Looking up at him earnestly, she said in an undertone:

"I can't tell you how sorry I am."

He was so tall that, standing close by she had to look up at him. As he stood there, so big and strong, smiling down at her, taking good-naturedly what might well have irritated any man, she thought to herself how handsome and nice he was. Looking into her eyes with the same ardent expression she had so often noticed in his glance, he said softly:

"The only thing that I could possibly regret is the fact that the incident might throw a little cloud over what I hope will be a very pleasant evening. If you want to be really good to me, you will promise me you won't even think of it again. Is

it a promise?"

"I'll do my best," she murmured.

"Thank you." Turning to Fanny, he said: "And you?"

"Of course," she replied confusedly; "it wasn't any of my affair—but—"

"Then it can't bother you," he laughed.

"No," she smiled.

The host turned to the shipping clerk.

"Mr. Gillie?"

Jimmie assumed a ludicrous expression. Hesitatingly he said:

"I feel as though I ought to pay for it."

"Oh, no, no!" laughed Stafford.

"Yes," exclaimed the clerk, as if fully prepared to pay out $3,000 at a moment's notice, "that's the way I feel, but if you insist—"

"And I certainly do," said his host decidedly.

"Then," rejoined the clerk reluctantly, "I suppose I shall have to let the matter drop."

Stafford smiled.

"Then it is settled. Good!" Turning to Virginia, he said: "I think you told me that your sister and Mr. Gillie are engaged."

"Yes."

Going up to Fanny and her betrothed, he extended a hand to both:

"Congratulations! I hope you'll both be very, very happy."

"Thank you," said Fanny, with a little courtesy.

"Oh, I guess we'll be all right," said Jimmie airily.

Dropping into the easy chair near the table, the clerk helped himself uninvited to another cigar. Stafford took another seat near him, while Virginia and her sister continued to find pleasure in examining some of the art treasures scattered all about them.

"May I ask when the wedding takes place?" inquired the host after a pause.

Withdrawing the perfecto from his lips. Jimmie threw back his head and blew a ring of smoke up to the ceiling.

"That depends," he replied carelessly, "on how—a—a—business venture of mine turns out."

Now at close range, Stafford scrutinized his guest more narrowly. Quickly he took note of his ill-fitting clothes, cheap tie, frayed linen and shabby shoes. He hardly looked the kind of man likely to be burdened with heavy business responsibilities. Nodding sympathetically, so as to encourage confidence, he said:

"I see. What business are you in, Mr. Gillie?"

"I'm a shipping clerk."

"Then you are not in business for yourself?"

"No—that is, not now—though I hope to be some day. You see, I have ambitions."

The millionaire nodded approvingly.

"That's right. Every young man should be ambitious."

"I want to do something big," went on his *vis-à-vis* confidently. "I have the ability. All I need is the chance to prove it."

"H'm," said Stafford, with a slight tinge of scepticism in his voice. "In what

direction do you think your talents lie, Mr. Gillie?"

"Finance! Organization!" exclaimed the clerk enthusiastically. "I've got ideas, too! For instance, Mr. Stafford, did you ever stop to think of the money there would be in a Chewing Gum Trust?"

"No, I must confess I never did," laughed his host.

"Well—there's big money in it," said Jimmie confidently. "I've figured it all out. I'd like to tell you about another scheme of mine, which is going to revolutionize railroading in this country—cut down train time one-half. I told the girls about it; they think it's great!"

Stafford nodded.

"Yes—Miss Virginia mentioned it to me. You must tell me what it is some day."

Inflating his chest, Jimmie sat back in his chair and puffed more vigorously at his cigar. Decidedly he was getting on. Here he was discussing business opportunities with one of the biggest men in New York. Carelessly he added: "I've got lots of other good ideas, too, but I suppose I'll never be able to work 'em out. What chance has a shipping clerk got?"

Stafford looked at his interlocutor for a moment without speaking. Then suddenly and emphatically, he said:

"Mr. Gillie, the business world is actually hunting to-day for men big enough to hold big positions. I don't mean mere fifty-thousand-dollar men. I mean hundred-thousand-dollar men. There is a better chance now for the really big man than there ever was."

"But how is a fellow going to prove he is a big man?" inquired the clerk, removing the cigar from his mouth.

"By doing whatever work in which he is engaged in a big way. The man who says to himself 'I'm too good for this job,' but only says it, will probably have it for the rest of his life. But the man who says 'I'll show my boss that I'm too good for it,' and does his work in a way that proves it—the feet of such a man are on the road that leads to the City of Big Things!"

Virginia, who had come near enough to overhear the last few words, stood listening, fascinated.

"The City of Big Things!" she echoed.

Stafford laughed. Rising and turning to Virginia, He said courteously:

"But we didn't come here to talk business and such subjects as that." Changing the topic, he asked: "Have you read any of the new books, Miss Blaine?"

"I'm afraid not," she smiled.

"Virgie hasn't had much time to read lately," interrupted Fanny.

"Busy?" demanded their host.

"Well, it's this way," explained the elder sister, "we've had a lot of sewing to do, and three times in the last two weeks she's taken me to the art galleries to look at the pictures."

"Really!" exclaimed Stafford.

"Yes," broke in Jimmie, with a grin, "one time they took me. Some of the pictures were great, but I couldn't stand for those milk chocolate Dutch women with the Mellen's Food babies. I like pictures with something doing in them for mine—such as battles and sea pictures."

The millionaire pointed towards the room beyond the salon. He said:

"If you are fond of paintings of battle scenes, I have two Meissoniers, which I think rather good. They are in the library there—"

"Can I see them?" demanded the clerk, anxious to pass for a connoisseur.

"Certainly," replied his host. Turning to Fanny, he added: "There's also a collection of fans. I think it would interest you, too."

"I am sure they will," she smiled. "Will you excuse us?"

"Certainly—"

She went towards the library and at the threshold turned and called to her fiancé, who was lingering behind.

"Coming, Jimmie?"

"Surest thing you know," he grinned, rising to go and join her. Stafford accompanied them as far as the library door. Pointing all around, he said:

"The books and the engravings will interest you. You needn't hurry. Oku will let you know when dinner is served."

"Very well," smiled Fanny. "You and Virginia please excuse us. Jimmie and I will just browse in here for a while."

Chapter IX

Glad of the opportunity which allowed him a few minutes alone with the girl whose personality had taken so strong a hold upon him, Stafford gently closed the door, and, returning quickly, took a seat near Virginia.

"Well—Miss Blaine?" he smiled.

"Well—Mr. Stafford?"

"Here we are all alone," he said, looking at her admiringly.

There was a strange look in his eyes, a longing, appealing look, as if he had something on his mind to which he did not dare give expression. For a moment the girl regretted that she had not followed her sister. It was embarrassing under the peculiar circumstances to be alone there with him. There was a long pause, during which neither spoke. At last Virginia said:

"Why didn't you let me see the pictures too? You know that I'm interested in books and pictures."

She made a movement, as if about to follow the others, but instantly he put out his hand to detain her.

"Not yet, please. I have so many things I want to talk to you about."

In spite of herself, Virginia smiled at his boyish earnestness of manner.

"What, for instance?"

"Among them is—myself."

"I know a great deal about you already," she said. "The newspapers and magazines have been full of the history of the man who, starting with nothing, has become a power in the railroad and financial world. It only needed one thing to make it fit for the model young man's story-book—it neglected to say—'our hero neither drinks nor smokes.'"

"It couldn't," he laughed. "I do both."

"Another public idol shattered!" she exclaimed merrily.

He joined in the fun with her, in his frank, boyish way.

"Behave, now!" he laughed.

Virginia grew more serious. Thoughtfully she continued:

"In the last interview which the newspapers had with you—"

"Probably faked—" he interrupted.

"You neglected to say, 'making my first thousand dollars was the hardest task of all.' All successful men do that; why not you?"

He looked at her for a moment in an amused kind of way. Then carelessly he answered:

"Making the first thousand was about the easiest for me. I got hold of some information about a certain stock, borrowed a hundred from a friend, put it up as margin in a bucket shop, and by pressing my luck, made and got my first thousand without any trouble whatever."

Virginia looked straight at him, admiration as much for his personality as for his achievements showing plainly in the expression of her large, black eyes. Slowly she said:

"And it was that, I suppose, which started you on the way to the City of Big Things. I like that phrase—The City of Big Things.'"

He nodded as he answered: "It's a great city—the only one worth living in."

"And you are one of the most prominent inhabitants."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," he laughed in an embarrassed sort of way. "Still, every one in the city knows I'm living there."

The girl made no reply, but absent-mindedly looked away in the direction of the library, where Fanny and her intended were heard chattering. For a few moments

she sat still, as if engrossed in thought. Then suddenly she turned toward him. Impulsively she said:

"I wonder how it must feel to be a man—and successful!"

He laughed lightly, as he answered:

"It feels great! To know that you've done something; to know that you've made a name and a place for yourself; to realize that no one dare try to walk over you; to feel that your bitterest enemy respects you and your rights because if he doesn't it means a fight to the finish—that makes a man feel good—"

"I should think it would!" she exclaimed.

"And then," he went on, "success means money, and money means power, and luxury and every comfort that the world can give. If a successful man wishes to travel by land, he has his private car, if he wishes to travel by sea, he has his own yacht, and so it goes."

"It must be wonderful to be like you, and have everything that you could wish for."

He smiled at her enthusiasm, and then his manner suddenly became more serious. In a tone which had peculiar emphasis, he said:

"I didn't say that I had everything I could wish for."

"Well, haven't you?" she demanded, as if surprised that a man so wealthy, so successful, could possibly lack anything he really desired.

"No," he replied slowly, "I haven't a home."

Still she appeared not to understand. Looking around at the magnificence all about her, she exclaimed:

"Why, all this is so beautiful—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"This?" he echoed. "This isn't a home. It's merely the place in which I live—

sometimes."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, light beginning to dawn upon her.

He went on:

"Furniture, pictures, tapestries, books—they don't make a home. Only a woman can do that—"

He stopped short and looked fixedly at her, a deep, searching look, as if he would read her very soul. Their eyes met, and instinctively she divined what his words implied and at whom they were directed. The moment she had dreaded had come at last. This man was about to ask her to marry him. Instead of exulting at this triumph, this conquest which would make her the envied wife of a millionaire, she was suddenly seized by a nervous dread. With pale face and trembling lips, she waited for him to speak, her heart throbbing so furiously that she could almost hear the beats. The time had come when she must make up her mind. She liked him, but she did not love him. She must either refuse this millionaire and voluntarily forego the life of independence and luxury such a marriage would mean, or she must be false to her most sacred convictions and marry a man she did not love. Most girls would not hesitate. It was an opportunity such as rarely presented itself. They would marry him first and find out if they cared for him afterwards. But she was not that kind of a girl. She believed in being true to her principles. She did not love him. She admired his strength, his masterful energy; she respected his success and achievements in life, but between such regard and real affection for the man himself there was a wide gulf. If she was to be true to the opinions she had always held concerning the marital relationship, she must be candid and honest with herself and with him, no matter what material advantages were to be gained by such a union. No happiness could come of a marriage that was not based on material regard or affection. They had known each other too short a time. He might think now that he cared for her very much, yet it might not be love which he felt for her at all, but only a horrible counterfeit, which goes by the same name and which, like a fierce flame, flares up suddenly and then dies down again. She was sufficiently sophisticated and world-wise to gauge at its true worth the violent attraction for the opposite sex which passion engenders in some men—an irresistible, uncontrollable desire, which must be satisfied at any cost, even at the price of their own happiness. Afterwards, when the novelty had worn off, he might be sorry and she would be very, very unhappy. Was it worth the sacrifice?

Stafford, bending over the arm of the chair on which she was seated, came so near that he almost touched her. She could feel his warm breath on her cheek. His eyes ardently fixed on hers, he whispered:

"Virginia—will you make a home for me? Will you be my wife?"

"Virginia—Will You Make A Home For Me?

"Virginia—Will You Make A Home For Me?"

Startled, the girl drew back as if she had been stung. She had expected the proposal, yet when it came she was taken completely by surprise.

"Your wife!" she faltered.

"Yes—my wife."

She turned and looked straight at him. Agitated as she was within, her manner did not betray it. Calmly she said:

"You take me by surprise. I am greatly flattered, but—is it not rather sudden? We know so little of each other—"

Impulsively he seized her hand, and held it tight in his. She did not attempt to withdraw it. He was so moved that he could scarcely control his voice:

"I do not have to know you long to be convinced that you are the only woman with whom I could be happy."

"But are you convinced?" she persisted. "Do you really love me?"

Abruptly he released her hand and sat up. In his eyes flashed the same ardor as before, but somehow the expression of his face had changed. He was no longer the eager unsophisticated lover, ready to do anything, say anything, in order to gain his end, but the resourceful, masterly man, accustomed to direct and control his own affairs, the man who will brook no interference with his will, even from the woman who may bear his name. Slowly, almost coldly, he replied:

"You wish for the truth?"

"Yes."

He drew himself up and looked her squarely in the face. There was nothing of the lover in his manner now. An observer would have thought he was discussing with her some matter of business. And to him it was a matter of business—a matter to be discussed from every point of view and, above all, honestly. There must be no misunderstanding from the start. In this, he thought as she did. Their opinions on this one point were in curious harmony. He would not lie to her. He would make her his wife, give her all the money, all the furbelows, all the luxuries her heart desired, but he would not pretend something that was not. He would play cards upon the table. Guardedly he said:

"I feel always that I want to be near you, to be tender to you, to look after and guard you, shield you from all trouble and harm—if that is love, then I love you."

"And if I don't consider that—love?" she demanded, with a little nervous laugh.

The millionaire shook his head.

"Then I am afraid that I shall never love any one," he said. "You see, life with me has been one long fight. As a boy, I fought for bread; as a youth, I fought for an education, as a man, I fought for success. Everything I possess to-day I have wrested from the world, and while getting it I have been too busy for romance and love-making. But I think this will prove what regard I have for you. I have been attracted to many women, but you are the only woman I have ever asked to marry me. I await your answer. Will you be my wife?"

The girl looked up at him, gazing earnestly Into his eyes, as if trying to read there if he was the kind of a man to whom a girl might entrust her happiness. Slowly she said:

"You don't even trouble to ask if I love you?"

"I don't expect you to—yet," he answered, with a smile.

"And you would have me marry you, knowing that I do not love you?"

"But I think you like me—a little. Don't you?"

"Do you wish for the truth?"

"Yes."

"I do like you—more than like you—but I don't love you—yet."

"Do you love any other man?"

"No."

"Do you like any other man more than you like me?"

"No."

Once more he bent forward. Eagerly he said:

"Then give me a chance—marry me, and I'll make you love me."

"You'll—make me—" she echoed.

"Yes," he murmured ardently. "I'll make you! And when once I have your love, I'll hold it against the world! Be my wife! I'll be a loyal and faithful husband. You shan't have a single care. You shall have every luxury that money can buy. Virginia—will you marry me?"

His words, vibrating as they were with passion, sounded to her ears like music. Was this, then, the love call which nearly every woman heard some time in her life? And even if it was not love, would she not be a fool to let slip an opportunity such as came only to a few? At least he was as honest as herself. He admitted it was not love he felt for her, but in time love would come to bless their union, there was no doubt of that. Did any newly married couple really love each other at first? It was impossible, yet no one had the courage to admit it. She must decide and quickly. Her future was at stake—Fanny's future, too—for her own prosperity would naturally help her sister. Then, besides, he was such a nice, kind man. There was no reason she should not be happy. As she looked at him sideways, and noted his strong profile, his big, muscular frame, his air of energy and power, and thought of his success, his prominent position, his good reputation, she wondered to herself what more any girl could ask in a husband.

Suddenly she felt his hand close upon hers. Gently but firmly he drew her to

him. She did not resist, but closed her eyes, feeling a delicious thrill at the sensation of this big, strong man taking possession of her in spite of her will. Her head fell back, and he leaned forward until his lips nearly touched hers. But they went no further. He held himself in control, as if holding back until his lips had the right to seal their troth. Softly he murmured:

"Tell me—tell me, Virginia—will you marry me?"

Like a little frightened bird, helplessly fluttering its wings in the captor's strong hands, she trembled under his caress.

"I don't know what to say," she murmured. "Give me time."

"Say yes," he murmured amorously.

Suddenly some one behind them coughed discreetly. Virginia, startled, sat up in confusion. She and Stafford had been so completely engrossed that they had not heard the entrance of Oku, who had come in to announce that dinner was ready.

"Excuse, please! Dinner, it is served!"

His master motioned him to go into the next room.

"Go and tell Miss Blaine and Mr. Gillie," he said in a slightly annoyed tone.

The servant disappeared, and Stafford, inwardly cursing Oku for the interruption, returned to the attack.

"Won't you say yes?" he pleaded.

But the spell was broken—for the time at least. Virginia had risen, and was busy rearranging her rumpled dress.

Glad of the interruption, she shook her head. It was too serious a matter to be settled so quickly. She must have time to think.

"Not now," she murmured.

"Yes," he persisted, again approaching her.

Her very resistance spurred him on. Like most men, he valued most what he

could not have. Had she yielded readily, he would have thought less of her. She drew back, as if avoiding his embrace.

"You must give me time to consider," she whispered.

Stafford was about to insist, when suddenly the folding doors behind them were thrown open, disclosing the elaborately laid dining table. At the same instant Fanny and her fiancé reappeared from the library. Giving Virginia a quick glance, as if anxious to know what had occurred during their absence, the elder sister said:

"Those pictures are lovely, aren't they, Jim?"

"Fine," he exclaimed.

Stafford bowed in acknowledgment.

"I'm glad you liked them," he smiled. Turning to the younger sister, he added: "Shall we go in to dinner?"

Virginia, who had been standing with her back to the dining room, her face clouded in deep thought, turned round. An exclamation of surprise and delight escaped her lips when she caught sight of the elaborate spread made in her honor.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful!" she exclaimed rapturously.

The table, with its corbeils of fruit, beautiful silver, floral pieces, snowy linen, fine crystal, the whole dominated by a superb electrolier, which cast color over all, was indeed a spectacle to delight and fascinate the eye. Jimmie was so overcome by the sight, that he nearly fell over the chair which the accommodating Oku held out for him. At last all were seated, Virginia at the right hand of the host, Fanny at the left, the shipping clerk at the other end of the table.

"Wine, Oku, the wine!" cried Stafford, while his guests began to nibble the dainty appetizers which preceded the more substantial dishes.

The little butler, quick as lightning, filled the glasses with foaming, hissing champagne. The host, his eyes fixed on Virginia, rose to his feet, glass in hand,

while Jimmie, unaccustomed to such fine surroundings, and feeling rather out of place, looked up and stared. Slowly Stafford raised his glass. Impressively he said:

"Before we begin dinner, I have a toast to propose—"

Fanny and Jimmie looked up.

"A toast!" they cried in surprise.

Stafford, his eyes still on Virginia, went on:

"I have the honor of proposing the happiness of Virginia—my future bride!"

Virginia started and turned pale and red in turn.

Raising His Glass He Said: To Virginia—My Future Bride!

Raising His Glass He Said: "To Virginia—My Future Bride!"

Jimmie, with an audible exclamation of satisfaction, nearly choked over his champagne. Fanny, overjoyed, took her sister's hand, exclaiming:

"Really, Virgie! This is a surprise, and you didn't tell me?"

"It—isn't—definite," stammered Virginia helplessly. "I—haven't— promised."

Stafford laughed—the low, triumphant laugh of a man who knew he held the winning card. Again raising his glass, he said significantly:

"No, dear, but you will. To the future Mrs. Stafford!"

Chapter X

For some time after the merry dinner in Robert Stafford's beautiful apartment Virginia saw but little of her wealthy suitor. In fact, she rather avoided him, preferring not to give the appearance of encouraging him, firstly because she had not yet made up her mind regarding the honor he had done her, secondly because it was not always easy to invent excuses for further delay in arriving at a decision. Yet, situated as she was, it was not possible to hide from him altogether. There were daily duties to be performed; the business routine of every day must go on. When in the hotel or its neighborhood Stafford never neglected an opportunity to see her, or when he was not able to come himself he sent her flowers, books and candy, paying her every delicate attention in the nicest and most considerate way possible.

As soon as was practicable, she resigned her position at the hotel, taking this step not so much to avoid the railroad promoter, but because she did not wish to furnish anyone with the slightest pretext for criticism. The world is quick to censure. People could not help noticing that the millionaire spent a great deal more time at Miss Blaine's desk than was necessary to transact legitimate business, and it would not be long before the gossips got busy to her disparagement. For that reason she preferred to resign. Besides, it would be fairer to him. He had not even hinted at her taking such a course, but if she was to consider his proposal of marriage seriously—and each day the conviction grew stronger that it was her destiny—it was only proper that she should retire at once into private life and give people time to forget what she was before she became Robert Stafford's wife.

But while this judicious step naturally resulted in a serious curtailment of her income, she was not idle. She helped Fanny in the millinery store, and, in order to keep herself in pocket money, gave private lessons to beginners. These tasks kept her fully occupied, and what with her studies and household duties the days went by cheerfully enough.

Stafford was a regular and welcome caller at the Blaine home. He often came to take the sisters out for a spin in his splendid new touring car, a forty-horse-power Mercedes, and sometimes he would telephone from downtown and arrange for a

little theatre party with supper afterwards at one of the fashionable night restaurants of the Great White Way.

Fanny and Jimmie looked upon the couple as if they were engaged and treated Stafford accordingly, addressing him with the easy familiarity of a future brother-in-law, an attitude which he himself tactfully encouraged. He went out of his way to be amiable to Fanny, flattering her and making her presents, and encouraging Jimmie to talk of his wonderful ideas. Moreover, he gave him plainly to understand that, once Virginia and he were married, the shipping clerk's impecunious days would be over and a comfortable berth would be awaiting him in his office at a salary commensurate with his exceptional ability.

This semi-promise was enough for Jimmie. From that moment on he was a changed man and Virginia knew no peace. He insisted that she was treating Stafford unfairly. If she did not want to marry him she should say so, and if she did intend to marry him she should be willing to name the day. As it was, she was standing in the way of her sister's prosperity and happiness. At the same time Fanny also added her powers of persuasion. Between the two Virginia felt that she had not much will of her own left.

Thus the weeks passed, Stafford respectful and devoted, but daily growing more restive and impatient, urging his suit, refusing to be discouraged, waiting eagerly for the day when she would respond to his passionate pleading and throw herself without restraint into his arms.

Meantime Fanny and Jimmie, having arrived at the conclusion that the prospects were bright and that they had been engaged long enough, suddenly decided to get married. Fourteen dollars a week—the weekly income of the bridegroom—did not allow of the setting up of a very elaborate establishment, but, as the clerk explained privately to his bride, it was only a question of time when Virginia would become Mrs. Stafford and then it would be smooth sailing for them all. Stafford had promised him a fat job at a salary worth while, and that could not possibly mean less than fifty dollars a week.

"He wouldn't have the cheek to offer me less than fifty per," said Jimmie confidently.

All of which sounded very hopeful to Fanny, who, however, was shrewd enough to make no mention to her sensitive sister of her intended's sanguine

expectations.

They were married at the little Roman Catholic church in 125th Street, Virginia being the solitary bridesmaid, while Stafford—willing enough to enter into the spirit of the occasion and taking a chance that in such a remote neighborhood no one would recognize him—acted as best man. The bride looked pretty and self-composed, while Jimmie was a picture of masculine magnificence in a new frock coat, patent-leather shoes, white tie, silk hat and a collar so high that he could not turn his head round. After the ceremony, they all dined gaily at Claremont at Stafford's expense and then the newly married couple left for Atlantic City, where the brief honeymoon was to be spent—on slender savings which Fanny had carefully hoarded for some time.

Virginia cried bitterly as her sister drove away. It was the first time that they had been separated; she felt as if she was losing the last friend she had in the world. Stafford, full of kindly sympathy, tried to console her. Gently he whispered:

"Don't cry, dear. Don't you see how happy she is? You wouldn't rob her of that happiness, would you?"

"No, indeed," she sobbed.

He bent down closer and whispered:

"One day—she will be kissing her hand to you as you drive away in your bridal robes."

She made no answer and he pressed for some response.

"Won't she?" he pleaded.

Her eyes still fixed on the cab, now fast disappearing in the distance, she murmured:

"Perhaps."

"When will that be?" he went on eagerly.

She shook her head, irritated at his persistence at such a moment.

"I do not know," she replied coldly.

Thus far, Stafford had succeeded in keeping from his friends any intimation of his matrimonial plans, but it was hardly possible to keep the secret much longer. He and Virginia had been seen together in public places; his many visits to her house were known. Her sudden resignation from the hotel also had excited comment. People began to connect their names in a way unflattering to both. Such slanderous rumors must be stopped at any cost, thought Stafford to himself, and one evening at Delmonico's, while in a jovial, communicative mood, an opportunity came to unbosom himself freely to his friend Hadley. It was the latter's birthday and they were duly celebrating the occasion as three bottles of *Veuve Clicquot*, standing empty on the table, bore mute witness.

Stafford had been drinking freely. His face was flushed and his voice was thick, familiar symptoms when he had imbibed more wine than was good for him. The secret came out suddenly owing to a chance remark dropped by Hadley, who, sober himself and speaking of women in general, argued that girls who were compelled by necessity to earn their own living formed a class by themselves. They could not be classed with the domesticated girl of good family because they were open to temptations and contaminating influences which the latter escaped. Coming in close contact with the busy, feverish world, associating on terms of daily intimacy with all kinds of men, the naturally high moral sense of the virtuous woman must necessarily become blunted in her new business surroundings.

"Once the bloom is off a woman's moral sense," he argued, "it is only a step to the undermining of her virtue. It's inevitable," he went on as he sat back in his chair idly enjoying his cigar. "The home is the young girl's only protection. Take her out of it and you expose her to the manoeuvres of the first scoundrel who comes along. If she's temperamentally cold, she'll resist the seducer successfully; but if she's weak and pleasure-loving, she'll succumb and the devil will have won over another convert. Take, for instance, those stenographers in your hotel. That Miss Blaine—she's as pretty as—"

Crash!

There was a blow of a heavy fist falling on the table. The dishes danced, glasses

fell in splinters on to the floor. Hadley, startled, turned round. Stafford, his handsome face flushed from the champagne, but now tense and angry, was looking at him fiercely:

"Take care, old chap, how you talk of Miss Blaine! She's going to be my wife!"

"Your wife!" exclaimed Hadley, removing his cigar from his mouth in sheer surprise.

"Yes, my wife," repeated Stafford grimly. "What about it?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, my dear fellow," he stammered, looking narrowly at his companion to see if he was sober, "allow me to congratulate you."

There was an awkward pause. Then suddenly Stafford broke into a loud peal of laughter. His momentary ill humor had passed. Unable to account for the sudden change of mood, Hadley came to the conclusion that the railroad man was enjoying a joke at his expense.

"You were guying me, eh?" he laughed.

Stafford hiccoughed and shook his head. With drunken gravity he replied:

"No, siree—sure as your life—she's going to marry me."

Calling the waiter, he motioned to him to open another bottle of wine.

"We'll drink to her health, Hadley, old top. Nicest girl in the world!"

The champagne was uncorked and the railroad promoter poured out the wine with an unsteady hand. Lifting his glass he cried with mock sentimentality:

"To Virginia—my bride!"

The men touched glasses and Stafford, putting his glass to his lips, drained it at one gulp. Hadley stared at him in growing amazement. He saw his friend was drunk, but this was the first time he had suspected him of losing his senses.

"And how long has this been going on?" exclaimed his companion when he had recovered somewhat from his amazement.

Stafford laughed.

"Ever since that day you were in my rooms at the hotel," he hiccoughed. "Didn't I tell you that I contemplated matrimony? Don't you remember?"

"I didn't believe you. I thought you were joking. I never thought you were the marrying sort."

"Why not?" spluttered the railroad man in an injured tone.

Hadley looked his friend straight in the face. He was not the kind of a man to shrink from telling a friend the truth.

"Do you want the truth?" he said slowly. "Well—you're too fond of your pleasures—too selfish! That's frank—but it's the truth. Selfishness keeps most men single. They're afraid to lose their liberty. When you marry you can say good-bye to your freedom."

"Who said so?" exclaimed Stafford, his face redder than ever, his lips tightening.

Hadley carelessly flecked the ash from his cigar. Calmly he replied:

"Your wife will expect it. She'll have a right to expect it."

Stafford smiled as he poured out another glass of wine. Grimly he said:

"You don't know me, Hadley, not after all these years, or you wouldn't talk like that. I'm not the man to be bullied or tyrannized or even lectured by a woman. My wife and I will understand each other perfectly. I shall make that quite plain from the outset. It's only right. I give my wife—my name, my fortune. I expect in return something from my wife. I think I've found just the right kind of girl—unspoiled by society notions, sensible on every point—"

"Even on that of letting you have your own way?" laughed Hadley.

"Precisely. She is ideal in every particular. Clever, amiable, good looking, not too strait-laced—she's just the girl I want. Don't you remember," he hiccoughed, "it was you yourself who recommended her—"

"As a secretary," said Hadley dryly.

Once more Stafford emptied his glass. He had already drunk too much, but he still had his wits about him. Laughing boisterously at his friend's sarcasm, he quickly retorted:

"As a secretary—precisely—and I've engaged her—for life."

Again filling his glass, he went rambling on:

"You and the other fellows at the club may chaff me all you choose. I'm going to marry her and that's all there is to it. I'm my own master, do you understand? I have no family—no inquisitive, meddlesome relatives, thank God! If this marriage is going to cost me what friends I have—all right—let them keep away! Such friends are not worth having, anyway. My mind is made up and you know me. Once I make up my mind, nothing can alter it." Determinedly he added: "I'll marry her even if she refuses me—"

"Refuses you?" smiled Hadley cynically; "surely you don't anticipate anything of that sort. Girls don't refuse millionaires nowadays."

Stafford's face clouded again. With an impatient gesture he cried:

"That's just the kind of rot you fellows talk! You don't know Virginia. She's not the sort of girl to be influenced in that way. If she were, she'd have said 'yes' at once. I understand her perfectly. She's still uncertain if she cares enough for me. I respect her all the more for her reserve. I'd rather that than have a girl throw herself at me merely for my money." Carelessly he added: "Oh, I'm not worrying. We're getting along all right. It's only a question of time now—"

Hadley did not know what to say. Evidently any advice he could have given on the subject was now too late. All he could think of was to mutter:

"Well—congratulations—old sport!"

Stafford, no longer crossed, broke into a smile once more. Leaning tipsily over towards his friend, his face flushed, his eyes sparkling, he hiccoughed:

"Say, Hadley, she's a winner! Those big black eyes of hers are enough to drive any man crazy; and that figure! Can you blame me, Hadley? Can you blame me? Here, drink up!"

"No," said his companion, disgusted and pushing his glass away. "I've had enough and so have you. It's getting late. Let's go."

Stafford made no reply, but, calling the waiter, proceeded to settle for the dinner. While he was thus engaged, Hadley watched him in irritated silence.

"*In vino veritas*!" he mused to himself. Truly the wine had spoken plainly. The cloven hoof was clearly visible. It was not so much the congenial companion, the soul-mate which Robert Stafford saw in Virginia Blaine as it was a lovely young animal for the gratification of his lust, his appetites. What marriage, based on that idea, could be a happy one? He felt sorry for the girl. If he knew her well or cared enough, he would warn her that his friend was not the marrying kind of man. Of course, Stafford would do the honorable thing, go through a marriage ceremony, make a handsome settlement and all that sort of thing; but when it came to leading a quiet, regular, domesticated life, he simply was incapable of it —that's all. He had enjoyed liberty too long to wear the harness now. He was too much of the *viveur*, too fond of his club, his poker parties and little midnight suppers with fair ladies. Once the novelty of marriage had worn off, he would return to the old life and then there would be the devil to pay. The wife would find it out, there would be a row, with court proceedings, alimony and all the rest of it. Or perhaps she would suffer and say nothing, as so many do. Anyway, he was sorry for the girl.

Stafford looked at him and laughed boisterously.

"What's the matter, old top? You're as serious to-day as some bewhiskered old college professor. Stop your philosophizing and let's have some more wine. I'll match you for another bottle. Come, now."

Hadley shook his head and rose.

"No more for me," he said firmly. "You don't want any, either. Let's go."

"Which direction are you going?"

"Up Fifth Avenue. Coming my way?"

"Yesh—I'm with you—only I must stop in Forty-second Street first—at a jeweller's—to get a ring I ordered." Grinning stupidly at Hadley, he went on: "Great idea—diamonds! You can do anything with a woman if you give her all

the jewels she wants! See, my boy?"

A few minutes more and the two men, the taller one of whom walked somewhat unsteadily, were on Fifth Avenue, making their way towards Forty-second Street.

Ten days later there appeared among the society notes of the New York *Herald* this paragraph:

> "Robert Stafford, the well-known railroad promoter, was married yesterday at St. Patrick's Cathedral to Virginia Blaine, second daughter of the late John Blaine, once a well-known lawyer of this city. The ceremony was strictly private, the marriage being known only to a few intimate friends. The young couple sailed yesterday afternoon for Europe on their honeymoon."

Chapter XI

The Stafford wedding was a nine-days' sensation and then people forgot all about it. Society mothers with marriageable daughters said that it was scandalous for a man of wealth and position to throw himself away on a penniless nobody, and malicious tongues freely predicted that before long the railroad man would regret the foolish step he had taken.

But for the present, at least, Stafford gave no indication of regretting anything. On the contrary, he and his young wife had come back from Europe in the highest of spirits, and immediately after their return to New York the millionaire proceeded to convince his critics of their error by throwing open his new house and entertaining on a lavish scale. For some time before his marriage Stafford had realized that his old apartment, comfortable as it was for the bachelor, would be quite inadequate for a married couple; so, getting rid of his lease, he had bought further down the Avenue near Seventy-second street a fine American basement house. It was a large modern residence, exquisitely furnished and supplied with every luxury money could buy. Virginia's private suite was particularly beautiful, being decorated in white and gold, in imitation of Queen Marie Antoinette's apartments at the Little Trianon.

To Virginia this new life of luxury and pleasure was like a chapter from the "Arabian Nights." It seemed unreal, like some fantastic dream from which, sooner or later, there must be an abrupt awakening. For years she had been so accustomed to the gnawing anxieties of poverty that this sudden superfluity of wealth fairly stunned and overwhelmed her. Stafford, apparently more infatuated every day, took the keenest delight in pleasing her. Everything that he thought would add to her happiness was done. He showered her with costly presents, giving her wonderful diamond tiaras, superb pearl necklaces and other gems until her jewels were soon the talk of New York. She had *carte blanche* at Fifth Avenue dressmakers and milliners; she had her French maid, her hairdresser, her automobile and her box at the opera. He forced open for her the doors of society and, once inside the exclusive circle, it was not long before Virginia made friends on her own account. People had expected to see a bold, coarse adventuress; instead, they were charmed by a modest, refined young woman

who, intellectually at least, was their superior. Everybody received her with open arms. The men classed her as pretty and *chic*; the women declared she dressed divinely and gave exquisite dinners. Before long, society arrived at the conclusion that Robert Stafford had not made such a mess of his matrimonial venture, after all.

The months went by so gayly and so quickly that it was the greatest surprise to Virginia when one day she realized that she would soon celebrate the second anniversary of her wedding. She was so taken up with one fashionable function after another that she had no time to think. Sometimes in the midst of her social activities, she stopped to ask herself if she was really happy, if this nerve-racking existence of idleness and pleasure—with its bridge parties, its dinners, its opera and theatre-going—was the kind of life she had dreamed of in her girlhood days. Sometimes she felt a longing, a yearning for a more useful existence, something nobler, higher.

Then, all at once, there came a change. It seemed to her that Robert's manner toward her was not the same. For no apparent cause, he gradually grew more cold and distant. At first she thought she herself might be to blame and she carefully watched her own actions and attitude to see if she was neglectful in any way of wifely duties and devotion. But she had nothing with which to reproach herself. She managed his household and entertained his friends. When they were alone she played and sang for him. But, for some reason that she could not explain, she seemed gradually to lose the power of holding him at home. Under the pretext of urgent business, he stayed away more and more. Usually he telephoned at the last minute, saying he had a business dinner to go to or a directors' meeting to attend. It was seldom that she could count on his company, and it made her life necessarily seem very lonely. It was nice to be rich, but often she wished that they might be poorer, that Robert were less successful so that their life might be more domesticated, more intimate. She felt that even after two years of marriage she did not know her husband any better than when she first met him. There seemed to be between them an indefinable yet very real barrier which, for some unknown reason, she was impotent to tear down. Sometimes, too, she resented him making so little of her. Instead of taking her into his confidence in his business matters, he treated her as a child, whose opinion on serious things was valueless. Instead of coming to her as a comrade to ask advice, he preferred to play the ardent lover, as if that were all he expected of her. Her womanhood rebelled, but she said nothing. There were times, too, when he returned home very late, exhilarated by too much wine, and on such

occasions his boisterous, passionate kisses nauseated her. Often she found herself longing for demonstrations of a more sincere and honest affection, but she always excused him on the ground that it was the fault of his temperament.

Among all her husband's friends Fred Hadley was the one whose society she preferred. She found him sympathetic, kind and yet always respectful. He being very fond of music and having considerable literary taste, they soon found that they had many interests in common. Sometimes he would join them in their box at the opera, or when Stafford brought him home to dinner they sat and chatted on all kinds of congenial topics while the husband, wholly absorbed in the business details of a busy day, paid only scant attention to the conversation.

One evening the subject of divorce happened to come up. They were discussing the notorious case of a well-known woman in society who had submitted to all kinds of cruelties and indignities on the part of her husband rather than shame him by bringing the matter into court. Stafford, for once becoming interested in the argument, declared decisively that the woman was right, that, having entered into a matrimonial compact, she was in honor bound to conceal from prying outsiders any domestic differences they might have. Virginia promptly differed with him and proceeded to give her reasons. Stafford was no match for her when it came to sociology and he could only grunt disapproval as she went on warmly to defend womankind from the ignominy of a degrading marriage, while Hadley, keenly interested, smoked his cigar and listened.

"A woman who will suffer in silence while her brutal husband stands over her with a whip is a disgrace to her sex," she exclaimed hotly. "She is no better than a shackled slave; her position in the man's house is that of a concubine."

"What shall she do?" cried Stafford with a shrug of his shoulders and a cynical laugh.

"Get a divorce," retorted Virginia.

"Divorce!" echoed the railroad man mockingly. "The world is full of divorcées. Everyone looks down on them. They have a bad name. What does she gain by that?"

"Her own self-respect if not that of the world. Divorce is the only weapon a defenceless woman has."

Stafford, badly beaten, relapsed into a sulky silence, while Hadley nodded approval.

"You are quite right, Mrs. Stafford," he said; "the fear of divorce and its attendant publicity makes many a husband behave himself."

Following up her advantage, Virginia picked up a newspaper lying on a table close by.

"Here," she said, "is the opinion of a woman on this very question—a woman evidently who has herself suffered. She says:

"'How many beings live together for long years strangers in mind and body! How many are the slaves of marriage whose relations are hideous with mutual hate! Why, in the name of a religious principle, should one make eternal the hell whose torments are as varied as they are overwhelming? Why should not reason and the right of the individual correct the mistakes of chance, false calculations, and hopes deceived? Why should a woman who does not find in her husband the necessary moral support suffer the tortures of a long agony in which she is defenceless, of a perpetual struggle in which she is miserably conquered; and, on the other hand, why should the husband who does not find in his wife the hoped-for companion or the desired slave, find the road to happiness forever closed to him? Before divorce was established, men and women who lived together in misunderstanding suffered an agony worse than that of the condemned to death, for nothing can be compared to the torture of being tied, body and soul, in hatred or scorn, or even indifference.'"

Hadley nodded approvingly.

"I think she puts the case pretty well," he remarked. "It's a strong argument in favor of the legal separation."

"I beg to differ," said Stafford dryly. Rising with a yawn, he went on: "Half the marital troubles one hears about are the fault of the wife. She is often too exacting, too fond of meddling in her husband's affairs. A man who respects himself bends to no one—not even to his wife." With another yawn he added: "Will you two excuse me for a few minutes? I have a letter to write."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned on his heel and walked into the library, closing the door behind him. Hadley puffed away at his cigar in silence, while

Virginia gazed thoughtfully into the fire. Presently Hadley said:

"Bob's in an argumentative mood to-night."

Virginia sighed as she replied:

"Yes—he has not much patience. He always takes the stand that man is the master, that women should have no will of their own."

Hadley shook his head as he replied:

"Old-fashioned notion that. The quicker he gets rid of it the better."

Virginia looked at him without speaking. There was an inquiring, wistful expression in her face, as if she longed to unbosom herself to someone, and yet had no one close enough, intimate enough in whom she could confide. Presently she said:

"Mr. Hadley, you've known my husband a number of years. Was he always as he is now?"

"In what way do you mean?"

"Was he always as dictatorial, as self-centred and self-willed?"

Hadley laughed.

"Yes, Bob was always inclined that way, and it seems to have grown on him as he has grown older."

There was still another question hovering on the young wife's lips. Dare she ask it? Why not? This friend was so loyal, so considerate, that he would understand. If it worried her at all, it was because her happiness, the future of her unborn children, if she had any, might be at stake. At last, with an effort, she summoned up courage and ventured to give expression to what was on her mind.

"Mr. Hadley, there's something else. I've intended to ask you for a long time—" Hesitating, she said: "I've quite forgotten what it was—"

He looked at her keenly. He had observed for some time that things were not

quite as they should be in his friend's home. Stafford seemed to be more indifferent to his wife, he stayed out more at nights; she, on her side, appeared to be continually on the defensive, as if there was constant friction. But by no outward sign could she have guessed that he gauged the situation. Carelessly he said:

"Is it something about Bob?"

Thus encouraged, she spoke up frankly, just as if she were talking to an elder brother:

"Yes, that's it. Was—was my husband fond of wine as a young man? I can ask you this—you've been so intimate with him." Hastily and with a forced laugh she added: "I don't mean that he drinks to excess now, but I wondered if as a young man he ever took more than was good for him. I don't see how he could have done, for it would have interfered with his career."

Hadley puffed seriously at his cigar. A kindly man by disposition, he really felt sorry for this brave little woman who was trying to make light of a tragedy. Slowly he replied:

"I'm sorry to say that Bob has always had a *penchant* in that direction. It has not interfered with his success, but when he's under the influence of liquor he's not himself. He seems to quite lose self-control." Looking at her closely, he added: "He hasn't been drinking since your marriage, has he?"

Virginia colored.

"Oh, no indeed," she replied hastily. "He wouldn't drink now, I'm sure, if only out of regard for me."

Hadley was about to say more, when suddenly the library door opened and Stafford entered, hat in hand. Addressing his friend and without so much as glancing at his wife, he said curtly:

"Coming over to the club, Hadley? There's a poker game on to-night. I promised to take a hand."

The two men went away together and that night Virginia sobbed herself to sleep.

Another month went by and imperceptibly, almost unnoticed by themselves, the coolness between husband and wife grew. There was no open quarrel, not even a cross word; but Stafford stayed out nearly every night and Virginia, left alone in the great library with only books for companions, wondered if this was the happy married life she had prayed for.

One night the servants were awakened by a commotion at the front door. Their master, returning from the club, had stumbled and fallen down the stoop. Oku picked him up, and Stafford, luckily unhurt, staggered unaided to his room. Half an hour later the stillness of the night was again disturbed—this time by a woman's shrill scream of fright and a man's voice raised in tones of angry command. To the servants it seemed as if the sounds came from their mistress' room.

Thus the months passed, and to the outside world, which obtained only an occasional glimpse into the Stafford household, the railroad man's pretty young wife was one of the most-to-be-envied women in New York. Still, there were some who shook their heads. They pointed to the young Mrs. Stafford's pale face and melancholy manner. In the last few weeks particularly she had lost her good spirits and was only a shadow of the girl who two years before had entered Robert Stafford's home a bride.

Meantime Virginia's sister, now Mrs. Gillie, was as happy and contented in her married life as circumstances would permit. She was not able to live on as grand a scale as her rich sister, but Jimmie's income, thanks to Mr. Stafford's generosity, had been increased to an amount quite beyond their most sanguine expectations. Beginning at a salary of $50 a week, he had been quickly raised to $100, and there was every prospect of even better to come. This enabled them to live very comfortably and even to save a little money. They had a pretty flat in One Hundred and Fortieth Street, where a baby girl had come to bless their union. Jimmie was a considerate enough husband, but indolent, and, still impressed with his own importance, he was always grumbling that his merit was underestimated by the world in general and his present employer in particular. Fanny considered it most ungrateful, and one morning at breakfast she took him to task:

"How can you speak in that way of Mr. Stafford?" she protested. "We owe him

everything."

His mouth full of toast, her husband gulped down his scalding coffee. Disdainfully he replied:

"That's where you women understand nothing about business. Stafford must find me useful or he wouldn't be paying me $100 a week. I'm worth more than any other man he's got, that's the size of it. He pays me less because I'm one of the family. That's the way it always is. I'm no fool. I know what I ought to be getting. He's got to do better by me or I'll quit. I'll show him that I'm no $100-a-week piker."

"You've no right to say that, Jim," interrupted his wife. "Just think how good he is to Virginia. He's always giving her something. Only last week he bought her a diamond necklace which must have cost $5,000 if a cent."

"Pshaw!" he retorted with a sneer, "what good does Virginia's necklace do me? More fool he to throw so much money away on finery. I guess he was drunk when he did it."

Her face red with indignation, Fanny rose from the table.

"How dare you say such a thing of Robert?" she cried angrily. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Really, I've no patience with you! Such base ingratitude after all he has done for us! And so uncalled for! If ever there was a model husband—"

"You don't say so!" he interrupted with a sneer.

There was something peculiar about her husband's manner that made Fanny look at him more closely.

"What do you mean?" she demanded uneasily.

He grinned.

"Who told you that he was a model husband? Did Virginia ever say so?"

Fanny stared at him, not understanding.

"She never said he wasn't," she stammered.

He chuckled.

"Say—but you women are easy marks! Of course she didn't. A girl with Virginia's spirit doesn't like to confess she's made a mess of it. I guess she knows well enough by this time that her model husband is not all that he should be, that he goes on periodical sprees and is apt to come home any night dead drunk. All New York knows it."

Speechless with astonishment and consternation, Fanny stood still, staring at her husband. Could this be true? Was Virginia unhappy, had they made a mistake, after all? Now she came to think of it, she recalled some peculiar remarks dropped by her sister from time to time; there had been days when she was strangely depressed, as if she lived in fear of something or someone. Was it possible that Robert was not the man he seemed? Virginia had never even hinted at such a thing directly, but one day, she remembered, her sister had brought up the subject whether it was a woman's duty to go on living with a husband after she had ceased to respect him.

For some days after Jimmie's revelation at the breakfast table, Fanny went about her little flat listless and discouraged. Her usual high spirits had gone; she felt nervous and ill at ease. If Virginia was unhappy it was she alone who was responsible. She had encouraged the match and really persuaded her sister into it. The very first opportunity she would find out herself if there was any truth in the story.

Chapter XII

The blow had fallen upon Virginia with the unexpectedness and appalling swiftness of a bolt from the blue. From a tranquil state of contentment and comparative happiness she suddenly awoke to the fact that she had made a terrible mistake, and when she realized the full significance of her misfortune, she sank nerveless on to a sofa in her boudoir and gave way to a wild outburst of hysterical tears. What could her life be henceforth? How could she hide from the world her shame, her humiliation, her degradation? To be the wife of a drunkard, a man given up to the vilest passions, who came to her only when, temporarily bereft of his reason, she was no longer able to recognize in him the man she had married!

The first time it happened she thought she would go insane from fright, horror and disgust. He had been out to dinner and returned home very late, and so tipsy that he fell down the front steps. She heard nothing of the commotion, having gone to bed and closed her door. He knocked and asked her to come into the library and chat a little; so, thinking to please him, she slipped on a robe and went in. At first she did not notice his condition. He was in high spirits and insisted on opening a bottle of champagne. Then she observed that his face was flushed, a strange look was in his eyes—a look she had never seen there before—and his breath smelled strong of drink. He became very amorous and clumsily threw his arms around her. She recoiled in disgust, but he seized her, overpowered her by sheer brute strength, leered at her like some gibbering ape, polluted her lips with whiskey-laden kisses, claimed possession of her body with the unreasoning frenzy of a beast in rut.

The next day he avoided her, as if ashamed of his conduct, and for some time he kept out of her way. Then frankly, candidly, he came to her and asked her pardon. It would never happen again, he said, if only she would forgive him. She forgave, and a few weeks later the same disgraceful scene occurred. Again he professed to be filled with remorse. Never again would he touch wine—if only she would again overlook it. A second time was he forgiven, and shortly afterwards she was once more the victim of his lust and violence.

Panic-stricken, not knowing where to turn, in whom to confide, she went almost

insane from anxiety and grief. She could not take strangers into her confidence; she even shrank from telling her own sister. This, then, was the barrier which her unerring instinct had sensed—her husband was a drunkard! He took pleasure in his wife's society only when the champagne aroused his amorous instincts. That was why he had married her. This millionaire had covered her with jewels, given her a luxurious home, but at what a price! He had said he loved her. Love? Such a word was a mockery in the mouth of such a voluptuary. The only feeling he had for her was the blind instinct of the primeval brute. He had no respect for her; he regarded her as something he had a right to force his will upon. She was his plaything, his mistress—not his wife. When, heated with wine, he approached her, a horrible, meaning smile on his face, he seemed to take possession of her as of something he had a right to, something he had bought and paid for and which was his alone to enjoy.

It was impossible to go on living like this. Unless she asserted her womanhood he would gradually degrade her to his own level. She suffered silently, atrociously, feeling her degradation all the more keenly because of her intelligence which rebelled against the injustice and ignominy of it. Her womanhood revolted against this continual, humiliating subjection to the will of the male, of which her sex was the victim. She suffered as thousands of women have done before her, as only a woman can suffer when in spite of herself, against her own inclination and will, she is forced to submit to the unwelcome caresses of a man she no longer loves, a man she can no longer respect. There was only one way out. He must either swear never again to touch a drop of liquor or she would leave him forever. Yes, that was the only way. She would rather suffer any privation than put up with his brutality.

Then, in calmer moments, she hesitated. It would not do to be too hasty. Perhaps he would never again offend in that way. He had broken each promise, it was true, but he seemed so sorry each time, so filled with remorse. Ought she to give him another trial? In her dilemma she decided to ask counsel of her sister. She would not tell Fanny everything, of course; that would be too dreadful, too humiliating. She would merely ask her what she herself would do under similar provocation.

An opportunity soon presented itself. Frequently during the Winter she invited Fanny to go with her to the opera, and sometimes when there were to be several outings, her sister would come and stay at the Stafford home for several days, bringing her baby with her, a suite having been set apart for the Gillies' exclusive

use. The house was so large that Virginia could well spare the room. Besides, she liked to have her sister's companionship.

It was on the last night of one of these protracted visits that Robert Stafford's wife found the long-waited-for chance to unburden her heart. She and Fanny had been to the opera and just returned home. Virginia was in her boudoir, still wearing the magnificent gown and wonderful jewels which made her the cynosure of every eye in the Metropolitan's aristocratic horse-shoe circle. Fanny had gone to her own apartment and Josephine, the French maid, took from her mistress her cloak and opera bag. While the girl disposed of the articles she chattered in French:

"Je pensais que Madame rentrerait un peu plus tard—"

"Yes," replied Virginia languidly, "we returned much earlier than we expected. The opera was stupid—"

Josephine, a born diplomat, stopped short and, going into ecstasies over her mistress's gown, exclaimed rapturously:

"Oh, que Madame est jolie ce soir, vraiement ravissante!"

"I'm glad the gown looks well," replied Virginia with an air of weary indifference as she sank down on a sofa.

"Mais oui—Madame n'a jamais été si jolie."

"Donnez moi mes pantoufles," said her mistress with a yawn. She was very tired and was glad to change her tight opera slippers for more comfortable footwear.

"Oui, Madame!"

Josephine knelt down, took off the dainty slippers, and, going to a closet, brought a pair of easy bedroom slippers and put them on.

"Has Mr. Stafford returned?" inquired Virginia.

"No, Madame."

"Nor 'phoned?"

"No, Madame. Did not Monsieur go to opera with Madame and Madame Gillie?"

"Yes," said her mistress hastily, "but he couldn't stay. He had some business to attend to. You are quite sure he hasn't 'phoned?"

The girl shook her head.

"No message, Madame. I find out." Picking up the receiver from a telephone on the bureau, she spoke downstairs: "Hello! Who is this? Madame want to know if any word has come from Monsieur since he went away! You are quite sure? Merci!" Replacing the receiver, she shook her head and said: "No, Madame."

Virginia looked away. Her hands were tightly clenched and a hard, set expression came into her face. Rising, she said:

"Very well. I'll get into something loose."

"Oui, Madame!"

The girl took off her mistress's jewels and put them away in a drawer of the dressing table. This done, she began to unhook her dress.

Virginia shivered. She did not feel well; her face was flushed and her head ached. She thought that, possibly, she had taken cold. In a tone of mild reproach she said:

"The bath was a little cold this morning, Josephine."

The maid looked distressed. Such a calamity was unheard of—hardly to be believed. Apologetically she exclaimed:

"Je suis vraiment désolée, Madame. It not happen again—I see to that."

Virginia smiled languidly:

"I'm not complaining, Josephine—"

"No, Madame is very good and kind."

"There's no reason why I shouldn't be."

"Merci, Madame," said the girl with a courtesy.

At that moment there was a knock at the door and Fanny entered. She, also, was in evening dress, but less elegantly attired than her sister. Dropping into a chair, while Virginia went on changing her gown, she exclaimed:

"Baby's all right, thank God! She's sleeping just as sound as can be."

"Isn't that nice?" smiled Virginia.

"Yes," went on her sister proudly, "she's a perfect darling."

"She's certainly a dear," murmured Virginia, turning to view herself in the long mirror.

"Did you ever know a child who behaved better?" demanded the proud mother.

"Never. She hasn't been the slightest trouble since you've been here—has she?"

"No!" smiled Fanny. "And she's always that way. It's such a comfort to a mother to know her child has a sweet disposition. I wonder whether she gets it—from me or from Jimmie."

"Jimmie's coming in say good night, isn't he?" asked Virginia.

"You bet!" exclaimed her sister, involuntarily relapsing into slang. "I mean—certainly he is."

"That's right," said Virginia.

"Shall we see you in the morning before we go?"

"Of course."

"I thought perhaps you'd have breakfast in bed."

"And let you and the baby go without saying good-bye? No, indeed."

Virginia had now changed her gown for a loose, clinging robe. With a sigh of relief she exclaimed:

"Oh, how good it is to be unlaced!"

"That's right," replied Fanny; "make yourself comfortable. I could let an inch or so out of mine without doing any violent harm. Oh, I just love to be dressed—décolletée! I got it right that time, didn't I, Josephine?"

"Oui, Madame," replied the maid.

"Fine! And say, Virgie—"

"Yes?"

"I looked them all over at the opera to-night and you take it from me—nobody had anything on us to-night."

"You certainly looked very well," said Virginia with a smile.

Fanny beamed with pleasure.

"You weren't ashamed of your sister, were you?" she said.

"Ashamed! I should say not." "Of course," went on the elder sister proudly, "with my figure I can wear anything! But when it comes to evening dress I flatter myself that I'm in the front of the procession and very near the band!"

"It certainly is becoming to you."

"You were a dream!" went on her sister enthusiastically. "Did you see the look you got from the young woman in the next box—the one with the pushed-in face?"

"No."

"I did. Prussic acid and vinegar."

"Oh, Fanny!"

"I saw it. One drink would have meant death mingled with convulsions."

"You imagined it."

"Not much," retorted her sister. "I saw it, I tell you. So did Jimmie—I mean James. You know I'm trying to break myself of this habit of calling him Jimmie. It's so common."

"Where is Jimmie?" smiled Virginia, still busy at her dressing table.

"Smoking a cigar and admiring the baby."

Virginia remained silent for a moment. Then, thoughtfully, she said:

"Do you know what I'm going to do for her?"

"No—what?" demanded Fanny eagerly.

"I'm going to do all I can for her. She'll never have to fight and struggle as you and mother did. I'm going to buy her clothes for her, see after her education, get a governess when the time comes, send her through Vassar or Wellesley if she wants to go, see that she learns how to ride and drive. In fact, I'm going to do everything for her that money and love can."

Fanny clasped her hands with delight. Enthusiastically and gratefully she exclaimed:

"You're a thoroughbred, Virgie! But what would your husband say?"

"Robert would help me. He's as fond of her as I am. And you know the size of his heart."

"I should say I do," replied Fanny eagerly. "See what he's done for James and me already."

"Anything else, Madame?" inquired Josephine, who had finished her duties.

Her mistress shook her head.

"No, Josephine. You needn't wait for me."

"Shall I call Madame in the morning?"

"No. I'll ring when I want you."

"Oui, Madame." Turning round at the door, she said apologetically: "Quant au bain, je verrai à ce que cela ne se répète plus."

Virginia smiled good naturedly:

"Very well, Josephine—that's all right—"

"Bonne nuit, Madame!"

The girl went out, closing the door behind her. Fanny, laughing, mimicked her:

"'Anything else, Madame?' 'No, Josephine, you needn't wait for me.' 'Shall I call you in the morning, Madame?' 'No, I'll ring when I want you.' Gee! That's classy, all right. It's just like one reads about in the story books."

"What is?" asked Virginia, who, still seated at the dressing table, had begun to arrange her hair for the night.

"You and the way you speak French!"

The younger sister laughed heartily.

"Why shouldn't I? I've studied hard enough in the last year and a half."

"And your music!"

"That, too."

"And your German! And your books on literature and art!"

Taking in the entire room with a sweeping gesture of her hand, she continued:

"And all this—and your autos—and your yacht—and your box at the opera—and everything that money can buy—and just think only two years ago you were an underpaid telephone girl in a hotel!"

"Yes, it is wonderful, isn't it?" sighed Virginia.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the other. "It makes Laura Jean Libbey look like a piker."

"Fanny!" protested her sister.

"What's the matter?"

"Slang!" said Virginia reproachfully.

"Oh, I just have to blow off steam once in a while," replied Fanny carelessly. "And maybe I'm not in it, too. Two years ago I was working in our little millinery store. Enter the rich Mrs. Chuddington. She's fifty if she's a day, weighs a hundred and ninety and has a—a double chin. She sees a hat that would suit a girl just out of school and tries it on. I look at her and say: 'Oh, Mrs. Chuddington, isn't that lovely!' Of course, I know it's awful, but I have to say it because it's business. I point to the customer and Marie says: 'Oh, Mrs. Chuddington, isn't that exquisite!' Then Mrs. Chuddington puts on the hat, leaves the store looking a perfect fright. Marie looks at Fanny; Fanny looks at Marie, and though we don't say a word, we think—oh! how we do think!"

Virginia smiled in spite of herself.

"They try it with me," she laughed.

"But how is it now?" went on Fanny with an attempt at dignity. "Now, I'm Mrs. James Gillie, sister of the rich Mrs. Robert Stafford, with whom I have just spent an evening at the opera and who I am now visiting in her French boudoir! Sometimes I don't believe it's real, and I find myself getting ready to wake up just in time to hear the alarm go off!"

"It is real enough, Fanny," smiled her sister. After a pause, she asked: "And you —you are happy?"

"Of course I am," said the other, dropping into a seat. "Why shouldn't I be? Haven't I got James and the baby and a pretty flat, and a maid to do the work. And isn't James getting a hundred a week from Mr. Stafford? Well, I should say I am happy!"

"I'm so glad," murmured Virginia with a sigh.

Looking up quickly, Fanny asked:

"You're happy, too, aren't you?"

Virginia made no reply for a moment. Then she said hesitatingly

"Yes—"

Fanny looked closely at her. Was there any foundation for the story Jimmie had told her? Was her sister unhappy? Did all this luxury conceal an aching heart?

"If you're not," she said tentatively, "I don't know what you want. Nobody could be a better husband than Robert. He's just the kindest, nicest man; a woman simply couldn't help loving him."

Virginia made no answer and Fanny continued:

"You do love him, don't you?"

"Yes," said Virginia hesitatingly, "most of the time. In fact, nearly all of the time."

"Most of the time—nearly all the time," exclaimed Fanny. "What do you think love is? Off again, on again, Finnigan! You either love a man or you don't; at least, that's the way I understand it."

Virginia shook her head. Gravely she said:

"The trouble is that you don't understand—this."

Fanny put her arm round her sister's neck. Sympathetically she said:

"What is it, dear? Tell me—"

Virginia turned round and faced her sister. First looking round the room to make sure no one was there, she said in a whisper:

"Did Jimmie ever come home—drunk?"

"I should like to see him try it," exclaimed Fanny indignantly. "Just once. I imagine once would be enough."

"Then you can't understand it," said Virginia quickly.

"Does—Robert?" asked Fanny in a low tone.

Virginia nodded and turned her head away.

"Often?" demanded her sister.

Virginia shook her head despondently. Stifling back the sobs that choked her utterance, she answered:

"If it were often, I couldn't bear it. I should have left him long ago. It's bad enough as it is."

Fanny kissed her.

"Poor girl!" she murmured.

Drying her tears, Virginia went on:

"When he's himself there isn't a finer man in the world, but when he's not—"

"Tell me everything," said Fanny, putting her arm sympathetically round her little sister's waist.

Virginia turned away. Confusedly she said:

"I can't—now."

"Oh, yes, you can," said Fanny coaxingly, "me—your sister."

"No—no—"

"Yes, you can, dear. Does he come home in a nasty temper?"

"He's generally in the best of tempers—at first."

"And afterwards? You can tell me! What is it?"

"Afterward," said the young wife in a low tone, as if ashamed to tell the rest: "it isn't love at all—he's just a stranger—inflamed with liquor—who has me in his power!"

Fanny, shocked, clasped her sister the more closely.

"Virgie!" she exclaimed. "Poor little Virgie!"

"Yes, it's horrible," said Virginia, with difficulty keeping back the tears. "Sometimes," she went on, "for days I can hardly look at him! And yet, strange as it may seem, I still love him! I love him to-day better than I ever loved him. Why? I do not know. If it wasn't for just that one thing I could be the happiest woman in the world."

"Poor little girl," murmured Fanny, consolingly.

At that moment there was a sharp rap on the door. The elder sister quickly went to open.

"It's James," she said, "shall I let him in?"

"Certainly," replied Virginia.

Chapter XIII

Mr. James Gillie looked to-day an entirely different person to what he had appeared when he first came courting his wife. He had never lacked a bold front, at any time, but in those early days his salary of $14 per did not permit any great latitude in the important matter of furnishing his wardrobe. Compelled to be satisfied with the cheapest ready-made garments, the knowledge of his sartorial shortcomings had always exercised a certain sobering effect on him, especially when in presence of his superiors. But now conditions had changed. Thanks to his present employer's liberality, he was able to stamp himself with the hall mark of success. As Robert Stafford's right-hand man, drawing $5,000 a year, self-denial was no longer necessary; he could indulge his taste to the limit. Dressed in a fashionably cut evening dress coat, with white tie and waistcoat, patent-leather pumps and silk socks with embroidered trees, anyone might have easily taken him for a gentleman—until they heard him talk. His speech, crude and slangy as ever, seemed to have lagged behind in his climb toward business and social recognition.

Nor could it be said that the young man, so fertile in ideas, had lived up to all the brilliant promises which he had made. After two years rich with opportunities of a kind which fall to the lot of few men, he had accomplished nothing that was at all likely to prove of lasting or even temporary benefit to his fellow man. Much to his astonishment and mortification, his most cherished inventions had been openly derided as little better than the ravings of a lunatic, and he soon discovered that no one in the railroad office—not even the office boy—took him seriously. He was tolerated by the office staff because he happened to be the husband of the boss' sister-in-law, but no one dreamed for an instant of entrusting him with any work involving responsibility. He was given an occupation in which he would do the least harm, and for his services his millionaire employer, anxious to help his sister-in-law in every way possible, humorously invented quite a novel rate of remuneration. He decided to pay Jimmie exactly ten times what he was actually worth. Thus at first when the clerk was actually worth $5 he was given $50; later when he was worth $10 he was raised to $100. Being quite unaware of this carefully graduated scale of wages, made specially in his honor, Jimmy went to the Stafford office every day

wearing the same jaunty self-confident air, convinced that his employer was underpaying him and that he was a very valuable person, indeed.

As he entered Fanny ran up to him and kissed him impulsively. Jimmie looked at her in surprise. Comically he remarked:

"What's that for? A touch?"

She laughed heartily.

"Not this time." Looking admiringly at her husband, she added:

"Well, I guess this was some night for the Gillie family, eh?"

"Yes—wasn't it!" exclaimed Virginia, still occupied in preparing for the night.

Jimmie grinned. Good-humoredly he said:

"You were queens—both of you! The others were only deuces!"

"I'd be sure to think that, anyway!" laughed Fanny.

"So would anybody with good eyes," he went on. "Honest—I never saw so much paint on a bunch of women in my life! When it comes to complexion, they make the crowd at the French Maids' Ball look like a lot of schoolgirls just out of the convent."

"It was pretty bad," assented his wife.

"The funny thing," he continued, "was that the old ones were the worst. There was one old party in particular—the one that wore that long fur coat—what a fur coat!—I'm not sure what kind of fur it was, but it looked to me like unborn plush!"

"James!" exclaimed his wife, scandalized.

"Well," he proceeded, "that dame was so outrageously made up that you could have used her face for a danger signal—on the level you could—and yet I'll bet she was so old it would break a fellow just to buy candles for her birthday cake."

"I know the one you mean," laughed Fanny.

"Why do they do it?" he demanded with an air of superiority. "Do they think folks are blind? Or does each woman imagine that while she can spot it on every other woman a mile off, nobody can see it on her?"

"I think you have guessed it!"

"We were all right, weren't we?" interrupted Virginia with a smile.

"That's what you were!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. Then, surveying his own clothes in the mirror with great satisfaction, he went on: "While we are on the subject, what is the matter with 'yours truly'?"

"Splendid!" cried Virginia, looking him over.

Fanny beamed with pride. Laughingly she exclaimed:

"James got a Tuxedo a year ago, but this is the first time he has worn full evening dress."

"Yes," said her husband ruefully, "I felt all right in it except my hands and feet. My hands are no bigger than any other fellow's; but while I had on the white kids I felt there was nothing to me but the lunch hooks!"

"James!" cried Fanny, shocked at his vulgarity.

"Honest!" he grinned, "they felt so big that every time I put my foot down I thought I was going to step on one of 'em!"

Virginia looked admiringly at his silk hose.

"What beautiful socks!" she exclaimed.

Drawing up his trousers, Jimmie showed more of the hose above the pump. Grumbling, he said:

"Yes, they're all right. But what I object to is the draught that comes through the open windows! I wouldn't be a bit surprised if I had caught a severe cold in the instep! Pretty good looking suit, though, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed Fanny, examining the material more closely.

Her husband pointed with pride to his imitation pearl studs.

"And say—what do you think of my near-pearls?"

"I'll get you some genuine ones," laughed his sister-in-law.

"Don't you do it!" he retorted. "I looked the other fellows over and you couldn't tell 'em from mine! If you have any money to invest on me, put it into something that'll show."

"I will," said Virginia, much amused. "And now tell me, what did you really think of the opera, Jimmie?"

First he looked at his sister-in-law to see if she was seriously consulting his opinion; then solemnly he said:

"I hoped I wouldn't have to mention it."

"Why?" she demanded, laughing.

Making a gesture of protest, he exclaimed:

"Won't you please drop the 'Jimmie' and call me 'James'?"

"Why?"

"I'm going to be a millionaire some day," he explained, "and when I am, 'James Gillie' will be bad enough, but 'Jimmie Gillie'—Jimmy Gillie wouldn't sound as though I had a cent."

Virginia nodded. Smilingly she replied: "I see! Well, from this time on it shall be 'James'."

"Thanks."

"And now, having settled that point, I ask you again—what did you really think of the opera?"

"On the level, or to tell to the neighbors?"

"Is there any difference?"

"You bet there is. To the neighbors I'll say it was 'so delightful' and 'extremely artistic,' but if it's on the level I'll say it was punk."

"What?" cried Virginia.

"Punk?" echoed his wife, puzzled.

"Yes! Fancy paying five a throw to hear a sawed-off Italian let go a few top notes, when you can have the same seat in a vaudeville theatre and get Eva Tanguay and a whole bunch of good acts for a dollar! Five a throw to hear a dago yodel something I don't even understand—not for my money!"

"James!" cried Fanny in despair.

But, once started, Jimmie was not to be curbed. With a grin he went on:

"And the leading lady—a human joke if ever there was one. There they were all telling about this beautiful maiden of eighteen summers, and when she came on—a beautiful maiden? A milk wagon, believe me, a milk wagon!"

Fanny turned to her sister. Apologetically she said:

"You see, dear, James only cares for violin music."

"I don't even care for that," he growled.

"Then why did you take me last week to see that famous violinist?" she demanded.

"A mistake, my dear. I didn't know he was a violinist. You see, he was flourishing his bow and I thought he was a juggler!"

"You're incorrigible!" laughed Virginia.

"Musical comedy and vaudeville for mine," he exclaimed. "I've joined the ranks of the 'tired business men,' like your husband."

Virginia shook her head. "You're wrong there," she said. "Robert is very fond of opera."

"Which accounts for his not going to hear it, I suppose."

"No, that was not it," she replied quickly. "He had to see some of his associates on a very important business matter."

"That's what I'll be saying soon!" grinned her brother-in-law. "I'm already getting a hundred a week. I guess that's not bad for a fellow who two years ago was only getting fourteen!"

"It's just splendid!" exclaimed Fanny.

"And the best thing about it is that I did it all myself!" said Jimmie.

"All?" echoed Virginia.

"Yes, every bit," he answered impudently.

"Didn't Robert help any?"

"Oh, of course, he gave me the chance, but how long do you think I'd have lasted if I hadn't made good?"

His sister-in-law smiled good-naturedly. Quickly she asked:

"What salary were you getting when Robert gave you your chance?"

"That's got nothing to do with it," he retorted.

"You were getting fourteen dollars a week and he started you at fifty. That was some help, wasn't it?"

"Oh, well! what of it?"

"Nothing," she replied. "I mention this only to make you remember that Robert is entitled to at least a part of the credit for your advancement."

Jimmie nodded. Ungraciously he said:

"He gave me my start, I'll admit that. But did he raise me to seventy-five and then to a hundred out of charity? Not much! He did it because I was worth it."

"Of course," she smiled.

"Yes," he went on, "and I'm worth more than a hundred now. I'm going to strike for a raise pretty soon, and if I don't get it—if I don't get it, I'll put on my coat, walk right out and leave him flat."

"James!" exclaimed Fanny, making frantic signs to him to desist.

"And then? What will you do?" asked Virginia quickly.

"Go to work somewhere else!" he snapped.

"As a shipping clerk?"

"I should say not."

"Then what will you do?"

"I'll find something."

"At a salary of over five thousand dollars a year?"

"Yes."

Virginia shrugged her shoulders. Curtly she said:

"Don't be foolish."

Fanny nodded approval.

"I think myself you'd better stick to Robert," she said.

Folding his arms, the young man faced the two women. Indignantly he cried:

"You two talk as though I was getting my salary out of charity—as though Mr. Stafford was handing me something! Well, I tell you he isn't. There's no friendship in business, and if I wasn't worth a hundred I wouldn't get it! I'm a valuable man to your husband. I've put him onto four or five good things in Wall Street already. Did he tell you about 'em?"

"No," said Virginia, shaking her head. "I did, just the same," he went on

exultantly, "and if he followed my advice and played it strong he must have made half a million or so just out of my tips! I'm not conceited—not a bit—but I know what I can do! I know—"

Before he had completed the sentence the telephone rang. Virginia quickly took the receiver. After listening a moment, she said:

"Thank you!" Replacing the instrument, she turned to the others and said quietly:

"Robert has just come in."

Jimmie had still grievances to ventilate. Peevishly he exclaimed:

"There's another thing. Why shouldn't I call him Robert the same as you and Fanny do?"

"Has he objected?" asked Virginia, a slight smile hovering around her mouth.

"No," he answered; "I never tried it! I feel like a fool, though, at the office. Everybody knows he's my brother-in-law, and yet I have to call him 'Mr. Stafford,' just as though he was no relation at all. Do you think he'd mind if I called him Robert?"

"You must be the judge of that," she replied evasively.

Just then there was a rap on the door.

"Come," called out Virginia.

The door opened and Stafford entered.

Chapter XIV

As the millionaire advanced into the room it was easy to see that he was not himself. His face was flushed, his eyes brilliant, his gait awkward and uncertain. The bosom of his full dress shirt was rumpled and his white tie awry. He had every appearance of having just come from some midnight orgy, and, like most roysterers who take their wine joyously, he was in the highest spirits. Making with his right arm a wide sweeping gesture meant to include all present in a general salutation, he hiccoughed:

"Ev'ning, everybody!"

He stood still in the centre of the room, maintaining with difficulty the centre of gravitation and grinning upon each in turn.

"Isn't he jolly to-night?" laughed Fanny.

"Got 'em again," chuckled Jim in an undertone.

Virginia alone was not amused. Her face turned deathly pale. He had broken his word again. She looked at him, and shuddered. She saw his eyes seek her out and she read there the same expression which had always frightened her and which when he was in that condition meant only one thing. She could not go on living like this. It was unbearable, more than she could endure. It was too humiliating, too degrading. As she stood watching him he advanced clumsily towards her. Involuntarily she recoiled, but, in a stride, he was beside her and placed one arm round her waist. Kissing her, he hiccoughed:

"Hello, honey!" With maudlin admiration he exclaimed: "My, but you look sweet to-night!"

Disgusted, nauseated, Virginia turned her head away from his tainted breath, and tried to disengage herself. But he held her as in a vice. Turning to Jimmie, he said jocularly:

"Do you—wonder that—I'm in love with her?"

"I should say not," grinned the clerk.

"She's the prettiest and sweetest girl that ever lived," went on Stafford. He still had one arm round his wife's waist and, struggling to place his mouth on hers, he insisted: "Kiss me, honey!"

In vain Virginia strove to free herself. She was but a child in his strong arms.

"Robert—Robert—please!" she protested angrily.

He laughed boisterously.

"Oh—go on—you know you love me! Kiss me!"

Reluctantly, realizing it was her only way of escape, she touched his cheek with her cold lips.

"That's the girl!" he exclaimed, releasing her.

Deathly white and with a set, determined expression on her face, Virginia broke from his embrace and hurried away to join her sister who, dreading a scene, had discreetly withdrawn into the bedroom. Stafford stood looking after her, a stupid expression on his face as if of mild surprise at her resistance. When she had disappeared, he turned to his employee. For a few moments he did not speak and the younger man was beginning to feel uncomfortable under his close scrutiny when Stafford suddenly blurted out:

"Jimmie!"

"Yes."

"What salary are you getting?"

"A hundred—"

Stafford shook his head. Smiling, he said:

"No, you're not—you're getting a hundred and fifty!"

The clerk stared at his employer, not comprehending. What did he mean? Was this the long expected and hoped for raise in his salary, or was he the victim of a

drunken jest?"

"I'm only getting a hundred," he stammered.

Stafford nodded encouragingly. Amiably he said:

"Now you're getting a hundred and fifty—"

The clerk's face broadened into a grin. At last his ability was receiving tardy acknowledgment. Hadn't he told Fanny months ago that he was worth the money? Well, better late than never! He was about to express his thanks when the millionaire interrupted him with a careless gesture.

"When you're really worth twenty, I'll make it two hundred—"

The young man's expression fell. Had he heard aright? What could the boss mean?

"Twenty?" he echoed, puzzled.

Stafford laughed loudly. Mockingly he said:

"Yes, I have a system about you. I pay you ten times what I think you're worth."

The listener's jaw dropped a few inches more. This did not sound as if his employer appreciated his merit any too much. Instinctively, he glanced around to see if anyone had overheard. It was just as well Fanny was not present. "Oh, you do?" he exclaimed with a crestfallen air.

Stafford seemed to enjoy the young man's discomfiture. Promptly he went on to explain:

"When you first came I figured you were worth five dollars, so I gave you fifty. When I thought you were worth seven dollars and a half, I gave you seventy-five, and when I thought you were really earning ten, I raised it to a hundred!"

Utterly unnerved by this unexpected blow to his pride, completely cowed, the young man stood staring foolishly at the railroad promoter, not daring to raise his voice in protest, completely intimidated by his employer's manner.

"And now," he asked timidly, "you think I'm worth fifteen?"

Stafford broke out into boisterous laughter.

"No, I don't, Jimmie! Oh, no, I don't! I raise you the other fifty because—well—there's a reason!" Coaxingly, he went on: "Jimmie, as a favor—as a favor—promise me you'll never get to be worth twenty-five! The manager of your department gets only two hundred and fifty and I couldn't pay you as much as I pay him, could I?"

"I hoped to be manager of the department some day," spoke up the clerk, regaining some of his self-assurance.

"What's that?"

"I say I hoped to be manager of the department some day—"

Stafford shook his head. With mock solemnity he said:

"Jimmie, for all our sakes, let's hope that your hope doesn't come out."

The young man was about to make a retort in kind, but at that instant his employer's attention was diverted to something more important. Virginia and Fanny had re-entered the boudoir from the bed chamber, and were standing conversing at the far end of the room.

On seeing his wife, the railroad man seemed to forget aught else. His eyes appeared to be fascinated by her; he closely watched her every movement. Never, it seemed to him, had Virginia looked so attractive. Was it her pale face, with the large appealing black eyes and small curved lips that thrilled him, or was it her negligée gown, the clinging folds of which imparted suggestive voluptuous lines to her slender figure, which set his sensualism aflame?

Virginia was painfully conscious of his steady stare and she trembled. Well she knew what it meant. If only she could keep her sister with her! But it was late; the Gillies would soon retire. Embarrassed by his persistent gaze, she went to the opposite side of the room on pretext of getting a photograph from a desk. Before she could reach it, her husband had intercepted her. Hoarsely he exclaimed:

"My, but you do look sweet to-night!"

He attempted to lay a hand on her arm and seemed about to bend over and kiss her, but she quickly evaded him. In a vexed tone, she exclaimed in a low voice:

"Please, Robert, behave yourself. Don't you see that there are others present?"

Thus unceremoniously repulsed, Stafford appealed to his sister-in-law, who had retreated to a corner on the other side of the room. In a maudlin, jocular way he asked:

"You wouldn't mind, would you? You wouldn't mind if a husband kissed his own wife."

"No, of course not," she smiled, at a loss what answer to make. She was anxious to defend her sister, but at the same time unwilling to displease her husband's employer.

The millionaire smiled, and leaving his wife, sauntered over to where Fanny was sitting.

"How's the kid?" he inquired affably.

"Very well, thank you."

Stafford shook his head. Dubiously he said:

"When I saw her this morning I thought she looked a little pale. It isn't good for kids to look pale. It shows that they don't get enough fresh air and sunshine. Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"No," replied the mother, looking up at her brother-in-law in surprise.

"In the morning I'm going to send you one of my cars as a present for her."

"Oh, Robert!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

He winked significantly as he went on:

"That's the reason I've just raised Jimmie fifty—to pay for the chauffeur and things. So the kid can have plenty of fresh air. See?"

Fanny clasped her hands in delight.

"Oh, you're too good!" she exclaimed gratefully.

"Hush!" he said in an undertone. "It's for the kid! I'm very fond of her!" After a pause he added: "Besides, she's named for Virgie!" Turning to Jimmie, he asked: "How does the idea strike you?"

"What idea?" demanded the father, who had not been listening.

"I've just made your little daughter—a present of an auto—"

"What make is it?"

The question came so spontaneously and was so characteristic of the man that Stafford burst into a roar of merriment. As soon as he had regained his composure he said:

"It's a—"

He was about to tell him the make when, realizing the colossal impudence of the question, he stopped short and burst into laughter. "You're always there, aren't you? Honest, Jimmie, you give me many a laugh! Don't change your disposition or I'll never forgive you!"

"I didn't know I was so funny!" said the clerk resentfully, quite at a loss to see humor in the situation.

"That's the beauty of the whole business!" laughed his employer.

"An auto—all for ourselves!" exclaimed Fanny, enthusiastically. "Isn't that lovely?"

Her husband looked dubious. Doggedly he said:

"I don't know that we ought to accept presents from anybody now, not even from —Robert."

The Christian name dropped as gingerly out of his mouth as if it had been a hot potato. At last he had summoned up courage enough to do what it had long been his ambition to do—call his employer by his first name. He felt it would be a victory for him—a triumph over the other men at the office to be on such terms

of intimacy. Besides it was his right. Wasn't he in the family?

Stafford turned quickly. There was a limit of endurance even to this clown's impudence.

"What's that?" he demanded curtly.

Not abashed and encouraged by the railroad promoter's previous good nature, Jimmie stood his ground and spoke up boldly:

"I said, I wasn't sure that we ought to accept presents even from you, Robert."

Quickly Stafford raised his hand. Coldly and distantly he said:

"Just a minute. To my wife I am—Robert. To my wife's sister I am—Robert. But to you I am—Mr. Stafford—even when I'm drunk."

Somewhat taken aback at this unexpected rebuff, the young man tried to bluff it out. Raising his voice, he protested:

"You call me Jimmie—you don't even call me James!"

"So I do," laughed the millionaire, who never remained in a bad humor long. It was beneath him to bandy words with his employee. The fellow was impertinent, but what of it? He simply did not know any better.

Fanny, who had been an anxious observer of the little passage at arms, spoke up. Turning to her husband, she said quickly:

"That's very different—"

"How?" demanded Jimmie, with an air of offended dignity.

"In every way," replied his wife, making dumb signs to him to desist.

But the clerk was not to be silenced so easily.

"I don't see it," he said doggedly.

The master of half a dozen railroad systems made a low bow to his employee. With mock courtesy he said:

"You're right! You're quite right! I have been entirely too familiar and I beg your pardon. From now on I shall be most careful to address you always as—Mr. Gillie."

Jimmie looked considerably crestfallen.

"You needn't rub it in," he said, shifting uneasily on his feet.

"No idea of such a thing," went on the millionaire in the same tone. "Just one gentleman to another—'Mr. Stafford' and 'Mr. Gillie.' That's perfectly fair." Turning towards his wife, who had apparently paid no attention to the discussion, he said: "Don't you think so, Virginia?"

"Yes," she answered shortly, without looking around.

Leaving the others, Stafford walked unsteadily over to where his wife was sitting. Bending over her, he exclaimed admiringly:

"My! You do look sweet to-night." Appealing to his clerk, he said: "Doesn't she? Doesn't she, Jimmie—James—I mean Mr. Gillie?"

"I think we had better say good-night," said the young man coldly.

"Yes, indeed," chimed in Fanny, rising and making preparations to retire for the night.

"Must you really go?" said the millionaire in a regretful tone as if they would really confer a favor by disturbing still longer the privacy of himself and his wife.

The clerk looked hesitatingly at his employer, as if there was still something on his mind that was troubling him. Peevishly he said:

"Yes, it's late. I want to get to bed. It's nearly one o'clock and I've got to be at the office by nine It's different with you. You haven't got to be there unless you want to. That makes a difference."

"So it does," said the millionaire carelessly. Abruptly, as if he did not wish the conversation prolonged, he said: "Well, good night!"

"Good night," rejoined the other in a surly, dissatisfied tone.

Virginia rose and went towards her sister.

"Good night, dear," she said affectionately.

"Good night."

As she was going out Fanny suddenly turned back. Running to her brother-in-law, she said:

"Thank you so much for the auto."

"That's all right!" he said with a good natured laugh, as if the giving away of automobiles was an incident of every day. "It's for the kid. Kiss her good-night for me, will you?"

"Indeed, I will!" exclaimed Fanny gratefully. "Good night."

She followed Virginia out of the room and the two men stood looking at each other—Jimmie somewhat intimidated, Stafford with an amused expression on his face as if wondering what demand this extraordinary employee of his would make upon him next. There was an awkward pause. Finally the clerk said:

"If I don't get a good eight hours' sleep my brain don't work right. Would you mind if I was late an hour or so in the morning?"

"I wouldn't," replied Stafford dryly. "But McLaughlin might. He's the superintendent of your department and I never interfere with the superintendent."

"He'd be sure to call me down," snapped Jimmie sourly. "He's got it in for me and don't mind showing it. Some time I'll tell him what I think about him."

Stafford shook his head. Warningly he said:

"Don't you do it. If you do he might tell you what he really thinks about you. So take my advice and don't go out of your class."

"But if I told him that you—"

"Don't!" said the millionaire curtly. "I never interfere with the superintendent."

"Then I suppose I'll have to be there," said Jimmie sulkily: "But remember this—if I don't get a good eight hours' sleep, my brain don't work right. So if I'm not up to my usual standard, don't blame me."

He turned on his heel and was leaving the room when he bumped into his sister-in-law, who was just coming in.

"Good night, Virginia," he mumbled.

"Good night, Jimmie," she replied cordially.

He went out, closing the door behind him.

Chapter XV

As the door slammed, leaving her alone with her husband, Virginia felt herself grow hot and cold by turns. Desperate, she looked around to see if there was anywhere she could go, but there was no escape possible. Practically she was a prisoner, at the mercy of a man who, his worst instincts aroused by wine, was temporarily another being. His naturally generous impulses, his gentlemanly bearing, his kindly consideration for the weaker sex, all that was momentarily cast to the winds and like the savage beast, unaccustomed to control his appetites, he stopped at nothing in a wild, passionate madness to gratify his brutal desires.

It was horrible, revolting, yet what could she do? The law gave this man certain rights over her. Was not she herself largely to blame? Had she not sold herself to a man she did not love without even the excuse of necessity to sanction the disgraceful barter of flesh and honor? And what made it the more cruel was that gradually love had come into her life. Yes, she was sure of it now. In spite of his neglect, his indifference, she loved him and it was just because she loved him that it broke her heart to see him degrade his manhood.

The distant sounds of the Gillies and the servants retiring died away. The lights throughout the big house were extinguished one by one. A heavy silence fell over everything. Growing more nervous each instant, Virginia watched her husband furtively. If only he, too, would say good-night and go to his room! At present he seemed to be in no hurry to depart, and yet he did not appear to be thinking about her, being still highly amused by what Jimmie had said. Suddenly bursting into laughter, he exclaimed:

"His brain! Ha! ha! Good night! Jimmie's brain! Ah, that's rich!"

Virginia went back to her dressing table, where she pretended to be busily occupied combing her hair. He followed her, still laughing. When his merriment had somewhat subsided, he hiccoughed:

"That boy's more fun to me! I wouldn't lose his company for anything in the world! From the very first day he came to work for me he's been full of

suggestions. They've all been good. One of them—one of them made me laugh for a week. I even laugh now whenever I think of it—"

He leaned awkwardly over her chair and Virginia instinctively recoiled. His flushed face and tainted breath frightened and disgusted her. Each instant she feared that he would take her in his arms. To avoid him, she rose from the dressing table and crossing the room, sat down on the sofa. He followed her, still laughing.

"You'll enjoy it too—so listen!" he said. Raising his voice and in a tone of command he went on: "Listen now, because you'll enjoy it. He wanted me—"

He halted again, unable to continue for laughing, as he thought of some of his employee's crazy notions. Then, proceeding, he said:

"You'll enjoy it. Such a joke! The man's as mad as a March hare. He wanted me —to put up a factory—"

He tried to complete the sentence; but the absurdity of the proposition was too much for him. He laughed till his face ached, while Virginia sat silent, watching him sideways. When he had calmed down, he said:

"It's the funniest thing I ever heard! You'll enjoy it too! He wanted me to put up a factory—to make infants' food out of prickly pears—" Once more he was unable to proceed for laughter. "Infants' food! Prickly pears! Isn't that immense? Isn't that the funniest idea that—"

Noticing that Virginia did not join in his merriment, he stopped and asked:

"Don't you think it's funny?"

"Yes, dear. It probably is," she answered evasively.

"There's no 'probably' about it—it certainly is," he insisted. "I don't think you got it, so I'll tell it again. He wanted me to put up a factory—"

"I understood," she interrupted coldly.

He looked at her closely, as if unable to understand her cold indifference.

"Well—don't you think it's funny?"

Wearily she answered:

"Yes, dear, it is."

"You don't seem to enjoy it," he grumbled.

She made no reply for a moment, at a loss what to say, anxious to avoid saying anything that would furnish him with an excuse for a scene. Her only hope was in keeping him in good humor and persuading him to retire. It would be terrible if she had to endure the same horrible experience with him as on former occasions when he came home in this condition. Rising, she said quietly:

"I'm very tired, so I think I'll say good-night, dear."

She went towards her bedroom door, but before she could reach it, he had intercepted her. There was a determined, not to be denied look in his face as he exclaimed:

"Not just yet! Not just yet!"

Trembling in every limb, but endeavoring to remain calm, she looked up at him pleadingly:

"Please let me go," she said coaxingly. "Be a nice, good husband and say good-night—won't you, dear, please?"

He put his arm around her waist. Hoarsely, amorously, he whispered:

"Stay with me a little—I want you here."

"No, dear—please, dear!" she pleaded, quickly disentangling herself from his grasp. "You'll make me so happy if you will! Besides, it's quite late, remember, and I'm tired—I really am—"

He stood off a little way, looking more closely at her as if doubtful that she was speaking the truth.

"Tired, are you?" he frowned.

"Yes, dear," she pleaded anxiously.

He laughed—a strange, horrid, artificial laugh which made her shudder. She had heard that laugh before and it omened nothing good. Quickly he said:

"I know the best thing in the world to cure that tired feeling—champagne. We'll have some—what do you say?"

He leaned towards her, trying to fondle her, but she avoided him and, falling back, stood looking at him. Her face was pale. Outwardly she was composed, but her heart was beating fast. There must be some explanation, after all. It might as well be now as later. Looking him straight in the face with an expression of contempt and disdain in her eyes that made him wince, she said coldly:

"So you've had some sent to your room—again?"

He nodded in half defiant, half ashamed fashion and Virginia, her tone changing, pleaded with him earnestly:

"Don't touch it now, Robert. Please! Please!"

"Why not?" he demanded defiantly.

"You've had enough already."

"Oh, nonsense!" he exclaimed, "I'm all right. I can take twice as much as I've had and not even feel it." Going towards the door he added: "I'll tell Oku to bring it in here—"

She ran quickly to intercept him. That was just what she dreaded. If he touched another drop he would be beyond control. It must be prevented at any cost.

"No, Robert! No!" she pleaded.

Stafford stopped and stared at her in amazement.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Don't take any more," she said, laying a hand coaxingly on his arm. "Please,

dear! It isn't good for you."

"Good for me!" he laughed. "Don't you worry about that. I know what's good for me!" Determinedly he added: "I want that wine and I'm going to have it."

"Then say good-night," she replied with what self-possession she could command, "and take it in your own room."

He looked at her stupidly.

"Drink alone?" he hiccoughed. "And you right here? Well, I guess not—"

He was standing at the door and as he spoke his hand happened to touch the key. Suddenly an idea occurred to him. She might try to get away. If he had the key, he would command the situation. Unobserved by his wife, he noiselessly withdrew the key from the lock and slipped it in his pocket. Carelessly he went on:

"Where'd be the fun of that? No, we'll have it in here and we'll have a little party —just you and me! A little party! Eh?"

He went towards her, arms outstretched, his eyes ardent. As he advanced she retreated to the farther side of the room.

"Please don't!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes wide in terror.

He halted.

"Why not?" he demanded.

Hesitatingly and in a low tone she answered:

"I remember—the last time."

"When was that?"

"About a week ago!"

"Well," he demanded in a surly tone, "what about it?"

"Don't you remember?"

"No," he answered sullenly.

She turned away in mute despair. Utterly discouraged, completely in his power, she was at a loss what to do or say. There was little use in appealing to the better nature of a man, in his present condition. She thought of flight, but it was impossible. He barred the way. Meanwhile he watched her, as a beast of prey watches its hapless victim. His ardent eyes feasted on her white neck, gloated on the lines of her body, revealed by the thin gown. He was too intent on his lustful purpose to be really conscious of the pain he was inflicting. He mistook her resistance for coquettishness. Approaching her, he bent over and whispered persuasively in her ear:

"What's the good of thinking about that, anyway? There's no time like the present, so I'll have Oku bring it in and I'll drink to your pretty eyes. My, but you look sweet to-night! I'll ring for Oku."

He started towards the door and had almost reached it when he heard a movement and rustle of skirts behind him. Turning quickly, he saw Virginia standing at the entrance to her own bedroom, as if hesitating as to whether to go into it or not. Her first impulse had been to take refuge in there and bolt herself in. But it seemed so cowardly, so undignified. So she stopped on the threshold and just looked at him in silence, and for a few moments neither spoke. At last he said:

"You won't run away?"

Slowly, deliberately, he advanced towards her. Virginia, cowed, intimidated, stood still as if glued to the spot. Impatiently he exclaimed:

"It wouldn't be a pretty thing for you to run away from your husband! So you won't do it, will you?"

She made no answer, and he repeated more loudly:

"Will you?"

She looked up at him bravely. Her face was white, but determined. Almost defiantly, she replied:

"No. I won't run away."

"That's the way to talk," he cried and going to the door leading to the outside hall, he opened it and called out:

"Oku, open the wine and bring it in here—two glasses."

Returning, he sat down, waiting for the butler to bring the champagne. His face was more flushed than ever. Instead of having a sobering effect, his wife's resistance seemed only to inflame him more. But just now his thoughts were not so much on her as on her brother-in-law.

"Oku's—a good boy," he hiccoughed. "A very—good boy. But he isn't half as funny as Jimmie. It's worth twice Jimmie's salary just to have him around to make me laugh. How he does make me laugh! He doesn't know that I'm laughing at him, but I know it. That's what makes it so funny—"

He was interrupted by the appearance of Oku with wine and glasses, which the butler placed on the table.

"Shall I serve?" asked the servant.

"Yes, fill 'em up," replied his master.

After he had drawn the cork and filled the glasses with the hissing, golden beverage, Stafford stammered thickly:

"That's—all for you—to-night."

"I must not wait?" inquired Oku.

"No! I'll ring—when I want you in the morning."

"Yes! Excuse, please. Excuse!"

The butler bowed himself out of the room and the millionaire, turning to his wife, pushed one of the glasses over to her. Then, raising his own glass to his lips, he gave her a toast:

"Here's to you, sweetheart!"

He drained the contents and put the glass down. As he did so he noticed that her

glass was untouched.

"You didn't drink!" he exclaimed in a surprised, aggrieved tone.

"No," she replied firmly.

"Aren't you going to?"

"No."

"Oh, go on—just a glass," he said coaxingly.

"No," she said again coldly.

"Why not?" he demanded, slightly raising his voice.

"Because I don't wish to," she answered with dignity.

"Is that so?" he said mockingly. Filling another glass and drinking, he added: "Suppose I wanted you to? Would you take it then?"

She shook her head.

"No, dear—"

"Would you?" he persisted.

"No."

"You wouldn't?" "No, I wouldn't!" she said positively. "I don't like it—I don't want it, and even you couldn't make me take it."

She rose abruptly and turned her back so that he might not see the tears in her eyes—tears of mortification and mental anguish. His face more congested than ever, his step uncertain, Stafford stumbled after her:

"I couldn't, eh?" he sneered. "Perhaps you'd like to see me try."

She turned around, almost hysterical. Pleadingly she cried:

"Please don't speak to me like that, dear! It hurts me dreadfully. If I didn't know

that it isn't yourself who is talking—"

"Not myself? Then, who is it?"

"It's the man who takes your place when—you are drunk!"

Leaning against a table to steady himself, he stared at her stupidly.

"Well, what about this man?" he sneered. "You don't like him, do you?"

"No," she replied quickly and frankly, "I do not."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

She turned to go. Pleadingly she cried:

"Please let me go, dear! I'm very unhappy. Good night!"

She started to go towards her room, but he held up his hand and in a tone of command, cried:

"Wait!"

Virginia paid no heed, and a second time in a louder voice he cried:

"Wait!"

She stopped involuntarily and after a pause he said:

"Don't you like to talk to me? Don't you?"

"Of course I do," she stammered.

"Then come and sit down and do it."

"I'm tired, dear," she pleaded.

But he was pitiless.

"Come and sit down here," he insisted, pointing to a chair near the table. "There!" he exclaimed.

"But, Robert—" she protested.

He refused to listen.

"There!" he commanded.

Virginia reluctantly retraced her steps and though trembling with mingled indignation and fear, obediently sat down on the chair he indicated. Stafford, as if suddenly seized by an insatiable thirst for champagne, refilled his glass a second time and swallowed the contents. Then taking a seat opposite her, he leaned his head on his two elbows and stared at her. For several moments he said nothing but just stared in a way that made her turn red and white in turn. Suddenly he blurted out:

"You looked great with the whole business on, but this fluffy thing—"

He leaned across the table and placing his hand on her bare shoulder, drew his fingers voluptuously down the arm. Virginia started back, feeling repulsion and disgust even at his touch.

"Oh! What's the matter?" he exclaimed sarcastically. "Is there anything wrong in a man telling his wife she's pretty? Is there?"

She remained silent and, frowning, he repeated his question:

"Is there?"

"No," she said quickly.

"Then why do you want to quarrel with me?"

"I don't want to quarrel with you."

"Then we're friends, are we?"

"Yes."

Holding out an unsteady hand, he said:

"Then shake hands on it."

She made no response and he said again more commandingly:

"Come on now—shake hands on it."

Still she made no move.

"If you don't want to quarrel," he said warningly, "shake hands on it."

Hesitatingly she put out her hand, which he immediately grasped.

"Good!" he exclaimed, rising. "And now let's kiss and make up!"

Virginia started up at the same time, and again turned to go to her own room. But he still had hold of her hand and she could not withdraw it. Tired out by the unequal struggle, nervous and almost in tears, she tried in vain to release herself:

"I tell you I want to go," she cried impatiently.

But he merely laughed at her puny efforts. Soothingly he exclaimed:

"Let's kiss and make up! Come on now, kiss me, and that'll show we're friends."

"I can't," she said, keeping her face averted.

"Can't—why?"

"For one thing," she retorted angrily, "the odor of stale wine and whiskey isn't pleasant."

"Is there any other reason?" he demanded.

"There is—and a very important one. I don't want to kiss you."

"That means you don't love me. Is that it?"

For a moment she made no answer, but looked him full in the face, her eyes blazing with scorn and anger. Then she spoke and raising her voice until it rang with all the anger and bitterness there was pent up in her heart she cried:

"I love the man I married—love him with all my heart and soul and he loves me! But you are not the man I married; you are another man. You are a stranger, a

man inflamed with liquor, a man who comes and talks to me of love when it isn't love at all, a man whose every protestation of love is an insult. That's the man you are and I hate him—I hate him—!"

Staggered by her vehemence, intimidated for a moment by her angry outburst, Stafford let go her hand. Quick to profit by it, Virginia turned, but before she could make a step, he had caught her again by the arm.

"So you hate me, do you?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I do!" she cried. "And now will you let me go?"

"No, I won't," he replied determinedly. "Even though you do hate me, you're still my wife—you belong to me—"

She stared at him in amazement.

"Robert! What do you mean?" she cried.

Shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, he exclaimed:

"Who were you till I married you—nobody! What were you? A telephone girl getting ten dollars a week. And now who are you? You're Mrs. Robert Stafford! And what are you? You're the wife of one of the richest men in the country. And how did he get you for his wife? He bought you and he paid for you."

"You didn't!" she almost screamed, her face white with anger, her whole being trembling with nervous excitement.

"Oh, yes, I did," he went on coldly. "Did you love me when you married me? No. Would you have married me if I'd been poor? No! I bought you and I paid for you and anything I've bought and paid for belongs to me. And now will you kiss me?"

"No," she cried in desperation, her head thrown back, her hands clenched. "I will not!"

He advanced threateningly.

"Then if you won't, I'll—"

He stopped abruptly and his manner changed. Shrugging his shoulders, he exclaimed:

"Oh, what's the use of quarreling? I don't want to be mean to you. I want to be nice to you."

Tears were in her eyes, her lips were trembling. Pathetically she asked:

"Then why do you insult me? Why do you wish to degrade me?"

"Degrade you?" he echoed, as if surprised. "Why—you're my wife—"

"Does that make the degradation any the less?" she demanded. "When I married you did I become your property? Do you own me? Have I surrendered all rights in myself? When you placed a wedding ring on my finger did it mean that I forfeited my free will? If so—then marriage is horrible."

He shrugged his shoulders. Carelessly he said:

"The law says that a husband—"

"The law! The law!" she echoed disdainfully. "Always remember this—the minute a husband even mentions his legal rights it shows that he has lost his moral rights and the moral rights are the ones that count." Changing her tone to one of pleading, she went on: "Let me go, dear! Please let me go!"

He smiled significantly at her.

"You just be a nice, good little wife, and in the morning you can go down to Tiffany's and buy anything you like, anything—"

"Ha! ha!" she cried desperately, hopelessly, "no wonder you talk of buying me! If I did that where would I be any better than a woman of the streets?"

Without stopping to hear his answer she turned quickly and again made an effort to reach her room.

"Good night!" she cried.

But once more he intercepted her.

"You're not going to leave me," he said warningly.

"I am, I tell you! I am!" she cried defiantly.

"Oh, no, you're not," he said determinedly, and approaching as if about to lay hands on her.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, recoiling as he advanced.

"At least not till you have given me a kiss—just one. Then you can go."

"You promise that?"

"Yes."

"Just one?"

"Just one," he said.

Thinking to get rid of him the sooner, she put up her face and kissed him on the cheek.

"Not that kind," he protested, "a real one."

She shook her head. Wearily she said:

"I can't! I can't!"

"All right then!" he exclaimed with a laugh.

Without further argument he seized hold of her and drew her close to him in spite of her struggles to free herself.

"Let me go! Let me go, I say! Let me go!" she screamed.

He paid no heed to her cries, but drawing her closer until her face touched his, he stooped suddenly and kissed her full on the mouth. Then he released her.

"Oh, my God!" she cried.

Directly she felt herself free, she rushed to her room. He tried to stop her, but

this time she was too quick. She reached the room before him and bolted the door in his face. Balked of his prey, he stood for a moment looking at the closed door in sullen silence. Then, as if seized by a sudden uncontrollable frenzy, he seized the poker in the fireplace and rushing to the door, smashed in the panel. Putting his arm through the jagged rent, he coolly withdrew the bolt and entered.

Chapter XVI

Daylight filtered slowly through the closed blinds of the palatial Stafford home. Through the dark nocturnal hours its inmates—master, guests and servants, had slumbered peacefully, all but one and to her sleep refused to come. Hysterical, mentally overwrought, physically exhausted from continual weeping, Virginia had tossed feverishly on her pillow until at last dawn had mercifully come to dispel the terrors of the long night.

As she lay there in the darkness, she had tried to see some way out of her misery. The truth was out at last. He had admitted it openly, had even boasted of it. He had bought her and paid for her. He considered her not as a wife, a companion to respect and love, but as a creature whom he had purchased and who must do his bidding at his command. What ignominy! There was only one thing a self-respecting woman could do in such circumstances. She must boldly assert her independence and leave him, no matter at what sacrifice of her comfort and happiness. It would be better to undergo any privation rather than endure such suffering, such degradation as this.

She could earn her own living. Perhaps she could get back the same position at the hotel, and if Fanny and Jim would have her, she could go and live with them. It would mean the sacrifice of many luxuries and much pride, but at least she would be able to lift up her head and look all decent people squarely in the face again. She would give him back all his jewels—every one. Much as she loved them, she would return them all—the diamond sunburst, the pearl necklace, the ruby cross—everything. They were the things he had bought her with. Hadn't he said so? Maybe it was true that she had married him only for his money. Well, if it was true, this was her punishment, the cross she must carry for her wickedness, and it was also why she must leave him. She would never give him another opportunity to accuse her of having bartered away her self-respect.

What should she say to him at breakfast? No doubt he would be very penitent and full of apologies. No matter what he might say, her mind was made up. She would listen in silence, and, breakfast over, begin to make her preparations for departure. Fanny, of course, must be told everything, but not yet. There was plenty of time to tell her. The rupture would interfere, no doubt, with Jimmie's

prospects, but it could not be helped. She could not be expected to go on suffering for their sake. They must all try and get along without the assistance of the rich Mr. Stafford. He would respect them the more if they did.

Everything occurred just as she had foreseen. Stafford woke with a terrific headache and thoroughly ashamed of himself. He had no distinct remembrance of the happenings of the evening before, but that he was drunk and had made a fool of himself he was pretty well sure. If he had not been, Virginia's cold demeanor would have soon enlightened him. At the breakfast table he mumbled an apology and tried to awaken some sympathy for his headache. But his wife paid no attention and beyond the merest commonplaces, made no attempt at conversation whatever and the meal ended as it began, in icy silence.

After breakfast she went to her room and, ringing for Josephine, ordered her to get out her blue cloth walking suit. The maid opened wide her eyes in surprise. Her mistress did not usually go walking so early.

"Madame va se promener de si bonne heure?"

"Don't ask questions, Josephine," replied her mistress sharply. "Do as I tell you. I'm going out of town. Pack my two trunks at once."

"Oui, Madame."

While the girl hurried to carry out her instructions, Virginia went to her safe, opened it, and, taking out the jewel cases one by one, carried them into the library, where she piled them high on the table. Soon there was quite a large heap of dainty boxes of every shape and color, each bearing the trademark of a fashionable jeweller. For a full hour the young wife worked steadily, packing and dressing, until at last nothing more remained to be done.

"Is that everything?" she asked Josephine, pointing to the boxes of jewelry on the table.

"Oui, Madame! All except those in the safe deposit vault, Madame."

"Oh, yes—I'll give you an order. You will go for them," said her mistress, going to a desk.

"Oui, Madame."

Virginia was just writing the order on the Safe Deposit Company when there came a knock on the boudoir door. The maid went to answer.

"Shall I open, Madame?"

"Yes."

The girl opened the door and Fanny entered, fresh and buoyant after a good night's sleep.

"Good morning!" exclaimed the newcomer cheerfully.

"Good morning, dear," replied Virginia quietly as she finished the note and put it in an envelope. Handing it to Josephine, she said quietly: "Give that to John."

"Oui, Madame."

The girl took the note and left the room. Fanny looked inquiringly at her sister. There was something in her manner which she did not like. At last she said hesitatingly:

"I'm so sorry about last night, dear."

"Don't, please!" said Virginia, quickly raising her hand.

"Have you seen him this morning?"

"No."

"Then you don't know how he is?"

"Oh, yes, I do."

"How do you know?"

"Previous experience," said Virginia bitterly.

Fanny took both her sister's hands in hers and gently drew her to her breast as a mother, full of gentle pity, would caress and console an unhappy child. For a moment Virginia tried to keep back the flood of tears that were choking her utterance, but the effort was too great and suddenly, with a stifled moan of

distress, she broke into a torrent of passionate weeping.

Her sister made no attempt to quiet her. She felt it would be useless. All she did was to stroke her beautiful hair and murmur:

"Don't cry, dear, everything will be all right."

"I'm So Unhappy, Dear," Cried Virginia.

"I'm So Unhappy, Dear," Cried Virginia.

In broken sentences, interrupted every now and then by renewed weeping, Virginia cried:

"I'm so unhappy—dear—so unhappy—you will never know. This thing is not of yesterday—I've endured it so long—until I could stand it no longer. He despises me—he said he did. He bought me—and paid for me. How can he have anything but contempt for me?"

"What did he do or say?" demanded Fanny, at a loss what to advise. "What does he say this morning? Have you spoken to him?"

Virginia, more calm, shook her head.

"No—I've scarcely exchanged a word with him. He can't definitely recall what he said or did, but he is thoroughly repentant and ashamed."

"That's something anyway," said Fanny encouragingly.

Virginia shook her head. Doubtfully she asked:

"Is it—when it gives no guarantee for the future?"

Fanny was silent. There are some crises in a woman's life when even a sister cannot advise, when a woman must decide for herself. Slowly she said: "But after all's said and done, dear—he is your husband and that makes everything right, doesn't it?"

"No," retorted Virginia bitterly, "it merely makes it legal."

"Legal?"

"Yes, lecherous old men of eighty marry girls in their teens—but does that make their relations right? Avaricious young men in their twenties marry women in their fifties. Does marriage make their relations right? In some States white women can marry black men—marry them just as properly as you and I are married—but does marriage make their relations right? No, marriage merely makes them legal."

"Do you mean to tell me that if a woman has a marriage certificate—"

"Precisely. She has documentary evidence that she is lawfully entitled to live with a man—that's all. A marriage certificate has nothing to do with the morality of marriage! Nothing!"

"Then what has?"

"Love—and self-respect," said Virginia. "The legal thing isn't always the right thing, and if I am ever forced to choose between what is legal and what is right I shall choose what is right."

"Are you going to do—anything?"

"What can I do?"

"I don't know," stammered Fanny. She was rather afraid of her impulsive little sister. She might do something rash—something that would hurt them all. Anxiously she said:

"And yet I feel that you are going to do something. Aren't you?"

Virginia made no reply and she repeated:

"Tell me—whatever it is—promise that you won't do anything rash."

"I can promise that freely enough," replied Virginia with a sad smile.

"I'm so glad!" exclaimed Fanny with a gesture of relief and starting forward to embrace her sister.

Virginia raised her hand. Quickly she said:

"And you—you too, must promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me whatever happens, that you will never tell Jimmie about—Robert—and me."

"Very well."

"If you do, I shall never forgive you! Never!"

"I won't."

"Whatever happens—remember!"

"Then something is going to happen?" demanded Fanny.

"That depends," said Virginia evasively.

"Oh, I'm so worried!" exclaimed Fanny. "I couldn't sleep last night for thinking about you. I was so nervous that I kept James awake too. I'm glad you're not going to do anything rash."

Before Virginia could reply there came a loud knock at the door.

"Come in!" cried Virginia.

The door opened and Jimmie entered, cheerful and debonair as usual.

"Morning, Virgie!" he chuckled.

"Good morning," she replied gravely.

"Just dropped in to say good-bye before I hike along."

"I'm glad you did," she smiled amiably.

"We've had a bully little visit." Turning to his wife, he said: "Haven't we, Fanny?"

"Yes, indeed," she smiled.

"Great finish too," he chuckled, "what with my raise and the car."

"Yes, isn't that fine?" chimed in his wife.

"I hope it's a late model," he went on, scratching his head. "I hate those old-fashioned things!"

"I'll be satisfied with any kind of a car," laughed Fanny.

"So will I—in a way," he said. "But I hate folks to think I'm not up to date." Turning to Virginia he added: "If Robert's ready we can go down together. Is he?"

Shaking her head, she said quietly:

"I don't think so."

He laughed loudly.

"I didn't expect he would be after last night's illumination! He was 'full' all right—circuited from tower to basement! On the level, he was so lit up that if every light on his machine had gone out the cops couldn't have said a word!"

"James! Keep still!" whispered his wife, giving her sister a significant glance.

"Why?" he exclaimed surprised. "Is there anything criminal in a man getting tanked up once in a while?"

Fanny colored with vexation. Angrily she said: "Take my advice—don't you ever try it!"

"And if I should," he demanded defiantly, "what can you do about it?"

"The husband's unanswerable question," smiled Virginia sadly, "what can you do about it?"

"Sure! What can you?" he repeated.

"I'll tell you what I'd do," cried Fanny, warming up. "I'd leave you at once."

Virginia started and looked thoughtfully at her sister, as if her words but echoed

a determination that was in her own heart.

"Yes, you would!" he sneered.

"Yes, I would," she cried hotly. "I wouldn't stand for any drunken husband. I'd leave him so quick that—that—"

She stopped abruptly, realizing what her words meant to one very dear to her. Virginia said nothing, but rising, walked to the other side of the room.

"That what?" demanded Jimmie.

"Nothing!" replied his wife crossly.

"You needn't worry, anyway," he continued, "I just can't stand the stuff. Give me three drinks and next morning my head's full of Roman candles. Huh! Not for mine, thank you!"

"I'm glad of it," said Fanny, with a sigh of relief.

Jimmie chuckled. With a side glance at his sister-in-law he exclaimed in an undertone: "Gee! But I'd like to be here when he comes in. I wonder what he'll say."

"He won't remember anything about it."

"Oh, that's the kind, is it—one of those convenient, witness stand, I-have-no-recollection things, eh! Well, you take it from me, that's the best kind to have. You can agree to any old thing and not remember it, you can make all kinds of promises and then forget 'em. You can—Say!"

The young man suddenly gasped and turned pale. Fanny, alarmed, started forward, thinking he was ill.

"What's the matter?" she exclaimed, anxiously.

"Good Lord!" he cried, "suppose he should forget about my raise!"

Reassured, his wife laughed nervously. Crossly she said:

"How you frightened me!" Quickly she said: "Oh, Robert won't forget about

that."

A determined, defiant expression came into her husband's face as he went on:

"You can just bet he won't while I have the power of speech. He won't come that 'I—can't—recall' gag on me."

"Of course not," said Fanny soothingly.

Anxiously he continued:

"I've calculated exactly what I'd do with that extra fifty. I reckoned that after we'd paid the chauffeur and for the gasoline and things we'd have about twenty left, so I figured we'd be able to leave a Hundred and Fortieth Street and move down town to a Hundred and Twenty-fifth. Then I'd pictured old McLoughlin's face when he'd heard I'd got another raise and what he'd look like every morning when I drove to the office in my own car. And I'd picked out the places we'd go to for the next four Sundays—yes, and a lot of other things too."

"How did you find the time?"

"I had plenty of time last night, after we went to bed and you kept me awake by doing your grand combined kicking and contortion act. You take it from me—every time you get one of your restless fits, you smash all world's records for landing sudden and violent kicks in unexpected places."

Fanny laughed good-humoredly.

"Can I help it if I'm a little nervous once in a while?" she said.

"Of course not, and I don't blame you for it, but that doesn't give me back my sleep, does it?" Taking out his watch he added: "I've got to skin. I'll be a bit late as it is and McLoughlin's sure to be there waiting for me with a few pleasant words."

He stooped to kiss his wife.

"Good-bye, dear!" he said. "Get home early so as to be sure the dinner's all right, won't you?"

"Yes, dear."

Hurriedly he went on:

"If it's O.K. about the car, have Virgie's chauffeur drive you home and leave it in front of the building where the neighbors can get a peek at it. I'll arrange about the garage when I get back."

"Very well."

Waving his hand, he made his way toward the door:

"Then good-bye. If we don't get that machine now after it being promised to us, after all the figuring I've done on it, it'll be hell, that's what it'll be—just hell!"

He disappeared and Fanny rose from her seat to go in search of her sister. She looked for her in the adjoining room but she was not there. Wondering where she could be, she went out into the hall and called:

"Virgie—Virgie!"

Virginia entered from the bedroom where she had been busy packing some things. Running up to her, Fanny said quickly:

"You know I didn't mean what I said about leaving him."

Virginia looked steadily at her without answering. There was a moment's pause during which each sister looked at the other, as if trying to read her most secret thoughts. Finally, the younger one said:

"You didn't really?"

"No—honest, I didn't. I don't think I could leave him, no matter what he did. I love him! And you love Robert, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, a woman couldn't deliberately leave the man she loves, could she?"

Virginia made no reply and, anxiously, Fanny demanded again.

"Could she?"

Virginia nodded. Slowly she said:

"I think a woman might—and be justified in it."

"Even if she loved him?"

"No matter how much she loved him."

Fanny was about to protest when there came a knock at the door, and Josephine entered, laden with jewel boxes of all sorts and sizes.

"These are all but the ruby cross, Madame. That is at the jeweller's. John showed me the receipt for it."

"Yes, I remember," said Virginia hurriedly.

The girl placed the boxes on the table near the other jewels.

"Aren't they beautiful!" exclaimed Fanny enthusiastically. Quickly she asked: "Which is your favorite?"

"The pearls," replied Virginia quietly.

Going to the table, the elder sister opened some of the boxes and took the jewels in her hand admiringly.

"They must have cost a fortune!" she went on ecstatically. "This is the first time I've seen them together. They're simply great!"

Josephine turned to address her mistress.

"Will Madame go out this morning?"

Virginia nodded.

"Probably."

"What furs will Madame wear?"

"None. Bring my cloth coat and the hat that goes with it."

"Oui, Madame."

Fanny was still standing spellbound before the table, feasting her eyes on the valuable collection of costly gems.

"If these were mine," she went on enthusiastically, "I'd have them out and count 'em up every day. They'd have no chance to get away from me! My, but they're stunning! Robert's very good to you, isn't he?"

"Very," replied her sister dryly.

Picking up a diamond solitaire ring and examining it, Fanny asked:

"This was his first present, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember how scared we both were that somebody might break into the room and steal it and how we used to hide it under the mattress every night and take it out again when we got up?"

Virginia nodded. With averted face she said:

"Yes—I remember."

"And the morning we were in a hurry and forgot it till we were on the car! I can see you now, reaching for the bell and then getting off the wrong way. And how you did run! If you had gone in the ladies' race at the Shipping Clerks' Annual Picnic and had run as fast as that, you'd have won the genuine tortoise-shell side combs sure!"

Virginia smiled in spite of herself. Quietly she replied:

"I suppose I was excited. It was the first piece of real jewelry I had ever owned."

"And now see what you've got!"

Virginia remained silent and her sister opened another box. Taking out a superb necklace of pearls, she held it up admiringly.

"This was his wedding present! I remember you tried it on at least fifty times the first night you had it! I did the same with Jimmie's. It was a horse-shoe—that big!—of near-diamonds. I never wear it now, but I wouldn't part with it for the world."

Virginia smiled.

"Jimmie's a pretty good husband, isn't he?" she said.

"Yes, indeed. He's stubborn at times—and cranky—and selfish—and wants everything his own way, but he's pretty good as husbands go! And then—we've got the baby."

At that moment Josephine re-entered with the coat and hat which she put down on a chair near the dressing table.

"Anything else, Madame?"

"No, Josephine, you needn't wait."

"Oui, Madame."

When the girl had left the room Fanny said:

"Josie's an awfully nice girl. Where did you get her?"

Before her sister could answer the question the door opened and the master of the house entered.

Chapter XVII

Stafford smiled pleasantly when he saw the two women and only a close observer would have noticed that his greeting lacked its customary spontaneity and heartiness. He at once made himself particularly agreeable to Fanny; but, while he chatted and laughed with his sister-in-law, anyone could see that he studiously avoided addressing his wife directly or even meeting her eye. To one who knew him well, his manner would have seemed unusually nervous and embarrassed.

The truth was that Robert Stafford felt very much of a fool. If he did not dare look Virginia in the face this morning it was because he was heartily ashamed of himself. He had only a faint recollection of what had happened the previous evening, but Virginia's coolness at breakfast had told him enough. It hurt his pride to think that he, who prided himself on being able to control thousands of workmen, failed utterly when it came to a question of controlling himself. That Virginia resented his conduct of the night before was very apparent. She was deeply offended and no doubt hated him. What would she do? Would this little domestic storm blow over as the others had done before or would there be a tremendous row, ending in no one knew what? The best plan was to appear as unconcerned as possible and leave matters to shape themselves. Looking round he asked:

"Has Jimmie gone?"

"Yes!" replied Fanny. Quickly she added: "He was a little bit worried though because—"

"Worried—why?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing!"

The millionaire looked searchingly at his sister-in-law. Imperatively he demanded:

"Why was he worried? Tell me—I insist!"

"Well, he was afraid you might forget your promises."

"Promises?"

"Those you made last night."

Stafford stared, as if trying to comprehend.

"Promises! Oh, yes—of course!"

"If you didn't really mean them—" went on Fanny.

"But I did," he interrupted hastily. "Most certainly I did," he stammered. He stopped for a moment as if trying to recollect and then went on: "I meant everything I said—but I don't quite remember what it was."

Virginia shrugged her shoulders. Caustically she said:

"Part of it was a car which you promised to send to-day as a present for my little niece."

Stafford's face brightened. If liberality could make amends for the night before he was willing to do anything.

"Of course!" he exclaimed quickly. "She's been looking rather pale and I wanted her to get out in the open more. Fine! I'll arrange about it before I leave!"

"And you raised James' salary fifty dollars a week," said Fanny timidly.

"Naturally! Naturally!" he exclaimed, "to pay for the chauffeur and the upkeep. If I increase Jimmie's expenses, it's only fair that I should fix his salary so that he can meet them."

His sister-in-law went up to him. Eagerly she said:

"Then you did mean it really? It wasn't only a—a—I mean you didn't do it just because you were—you were—well—you did?"

He nodded and with a smile he replied:

"I made up my mind about it early in the week, but I told you a little sooner than

I expected—that's all."

Fanny's face was radiant with happiness.

"Oh, Robert," she cried, "it's just lovely of you! You don't know how much we shall enjoy it."

"Is that all I promised?" he laughed. "I didn't agree to make Jimmie superintendent or anything?"

"No, that was all. It was enough, too."

Stafford turned to his wife.

"Dearie?"

"Yes," she answered coldly.

"Do you mind 'phoning for Oku to bring some ice-water?"

"Not at all."

Going to the 'phone on the wall, she took off the receiver and spoke into it.

"Hello! Have Oku bring some ice-water."

"I've got a terrible headache," he went on. "The man who drinks too much is a fool—" Looking towards Virginia, who stood silently by, he added:

"You don't have to say anything—I know you agree with me. And quite right too! I'm ashamed of myself."

Fanny discreetly went towards the door.

"I—I think I'll go," she said timidly.

"Don't go," he pleaded. "Please stay awhile and give me your moral support." Glancing at his wife, he added ruefully: "I feel that I'm going to need it."

Fanny halted and at that moment there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Virginia.

Oku entered with a pitcher o£ ice water and glasses. Salaaming low, he said:

"Excuse—please, Excuse!"

The butler filled a glass and offered it to Virginia, but she shook her head. He then offered it to Fanny, who also declined.

"Not them," smiled Stafford, "me!"

Draining the glass he handed it back.

"Anything else?" asked the man politely.

"No."

"Then excuse, please! Excuse."

The butler apologetically picked up his tray and started to go when his master stopped him.

"Here!"

Oku stopped, and his master made a sign to him to put the tray and ice-water on the table again.

"You want me leave water?"

"Yes!"

The butler placed the tray on the table.

"Anything else, sir?"

"No."

"Then excuse, please! Excuse!"

Oku withdrew and Fanny approached her sister, who was seated at the window idly gazing into the street. Stafford rose and joined them.

"Well, dear?" he stammered nervously.

"Now I—I must go!" exclaimed Fanny.

"Please!" pleaded Stafford, motioning her not to desert him.

"But the baby," exclaimed his sister-in-law.

"Oh, come!" he laughed. "Don't desert a comrade in distress."

"But she might need me—really she might. So—excuse me."

She hurried away and for some minutes after she had gone there was complete silence. Virginia made no movement and Stafford, afraid to begin talking, contented himself by watching her. At last, unable to keep up the artificial restraint any longer he said:

"Dearie, before you say a word I want to tell you that I'm sorry for the condition I was in when I came home last night. I'm dreadfully sorry, and ashamed—"

She did not turn round and for a moment she made no reply. He thought she had not heard. Then, coldly, she said:

"Do you know what you said to me?"

He advanced closer and, in the most apologetic manner possible, went on:

"Sweetheart, I was drunk last night and I'm sorry. I'm ashamed—and I apologize! I've got a dreadful head this morning and I'm as nervous as I can be! So don't bother me any more than you have to, will you, dearie? Be nice to me this morning. Come on now, dearie, be nice to me!"

She rose from her chair and confronted him. Her face was pale and determined looking. There was no love in it now, nothing but the expression of a woman who had been hurt in her most sensitive feelings. Slowly, deliberately, in tones that cut him like a knife, she said:

"Last night you said that you had *bought and paid for me*!"

"But I've explained, haven't I?" he protested. "I've said that I'm ashamed, and I've

apologized. Can I do any more? You don't know how nervous I am to-day—nor how I feel! I can't stand these rackets like I used to. Be a dear, good, sweet, little girl and don't scold me. Please dearie, please!"

"You said that you had *bought* and *paid* for me!" she repeated icily, with emphasis on the last words.

"But, sweetheart—"

Bitterly she went on:

"It isn't the first time you have said it either. And the dreadful thing about it is—that it's true!"

"But it isn't true," he protested.

She half turned away from him, unwilling that he should see the tears that had started to her eyes.

"Yes—it is true enough," she said half hysterically. "If you hadn't been rich—I should not have married you—because I didn't feel towards you—then—as a girl should feel towards the man she is to marry."

"Virginia!" he cried, making a stride forward.

She drew back as she replied coldly:

"You know it, and last night you told me of it."

"But last night—"

"And so the fact remains that you did buy me!" Pointing to the boxes of jewels heaped high on the table, she went on: "And these are the things you bought me with! These are the things you bought me with—I give them all back to you!"

"Virginia!" he cried appealingly.

Calmly she went on:

"You bought me, but you didn't buy my self-respect. And no matter what happens I am going to keep that."

"It's the last thing in the world that I'd have you lose," he said with some show of emotion.

"Then why do you try to rob me of it? Why did you come to me—as you did last night—and insult and degrade me?"

"I'm sorry, dear."

"So you have told me before! And I've cried—and suffered—and forgiven you—and prayed that it would never happen again. And now, dear, I'm not going to cry any more, and it won't happen again."

He looked at her inquiringly—almost apprehensively.

"You—mean?" he stammered. She sank into a chair a little distance from him. The tears had disappeared from her eyes. She had recovered her self-possession. It was only a matter of business which they had to discuss now. Calmly she continued:

"I mean that we have got to have a definite and explicit understanding. I refuse to remain in a position where you can humiliate me as you have done. What must I think of myself if I do? I ask you, Robert, what must I think of myself?" He said nothing and after a short pause she went on: "A good woman must retain her respect for herself—she must know in her heart that she is sweet and fine; if she doesn't what is there left for her? There are just two ways in which I can keep my self respect—and I'm going to keep it—two and only two. One is this—you must promise me now that you will never touch drink again."

He was silent for a moment as if weighing the exact meaning of her words and their significance; then gravely he replied:

"I'm not sure that I could keep such a promise. I'll agree though to try—"

She shook her head.

"No, dear—that won't do. How many times already have you agreed to try and how many times have you failed? You can stop if you wish. You are not a weakling. You're a big man, a strong man. You can stop if you wish and you must promise me that you will or—I—"

"Or what?" he demanded.

"Or I shall take the only other course open to me and—leave you."

"Leave me!"

"Yes."

He looked at her curiously as if trying to see if she really meant what she said. He could hardly believe that she was serious. Rising, he went towards her, and bending over her said gravely:

"Let me get this straight. You say I must promise that I will never take another drink or you'll leave me. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Your mind is made up?"

"Yes."

"Then it's an ultimatum?"

"Yes."

"And you want an answer here and now?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then, you shall have it. I won't promise."

His answer came upon her like a shock. She Had expected that he would agree to anything, but he actually defied her.

"Robert!" she cried despairingly.

"I can't be driven and I won't be bullied," he said doggedly. "No man, by holding a revolver to my head, can force me to do anything I don't want to do, nor can any woman either—not even you."

As he spoke, her face grew a little paler, the lines about her mouth deepened. If

that was the way he chose to look upon their relations, the sooner the end came the better.

"Very well," she said coldly.

She had turned as if to go to her room when he again spoke:

"Besides, there has to be a head of every family Just as there had to be a head of every business, and so long as I have any family I am going to be the head of it! If I had a partner and he came to me and said 'Do this thing or I quit you,' whether the thing was right or wrong, I'd say, 'Go ahead. Quit.' Because if I didn't, from that moment on, he, not I, would be the boss! So it is with us."

"Then I—am to—go," she said slowly.

"That is for you to say. But if you do go, remember that it is of your own volition. I want you to stay—you understand?"

She made no answer and he went on:

"One thing is certain. You can't think very much of me, or you couldn't even think of leaving me like this—"

"It is because I do love you," she cried hysterically, "that I must leave you. You don't understand that now but, oh! how I hope that some day you will. Good-bye!"

She went toward the dressing table as if to get her hat and coat. He halted her with a gesture.

"Just a minute, dear."

She stopped.

"Well?"

Approaching her, he said kindly:

"You are doing a very foolish thing."

She shook her head.

"I'm doing the right thing."

"I don't think so. Aside from marrying her husband, leaving him is the most serious step a woman can take. Serious steps should be given great consideration."

"I have considered this," she replied gravely.

"But not enough."

"Oh, yes, I have."

"In the first place you know that since you came into my life I haven't given any other woman even a thought. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"In the next place you are leaving me! I am not leaving you. My home is still open to you and I want you for my wife—"

He stopped and looked at her as if expecting her to say something, but she was silent and he went on:

"Of course under any circumstances I shall see you are well provided for."

Virginia made a gesture of dissent.

"Oh, no!" she cried.

"You mean that you wouldn't take-any allowance?"

"Yes! I came to you with nothing—that is what I'll take away."

"Now do be a sensible little woman," he said coaxingly. "If you won't take anything from me, where are you to go, what are you to do?"

"You seem to forget that I managed to live before I met you!"

"You would try to do as you did then?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's impossible—absolutely impossible."

"I don't think so."

He made an impatient gesture as if any such action were unthinkable.

"Come now, dearie, get all such foolish thoughts out of your head. The idea is absurd, ridiculous."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Among other reasons is the fact that I wouldn't let you."

"How can you prevent me? You can't keep me a prisoner here and you can't force me to take your money unless I wish to take it. You see?"

"The idea is preposterous, I tell you. You couldn't voluntarily go back and live as you did before. It isn't in human nature."

"I can try."

"And if you do, you'll fail. And I'll tell you why! When we met you were earning ten or twelve dollars a week."

"Ten," she corrected.

"On that you had to live and provide yourself with everything. You had a little room in Harlem and used to hang on to a strap every morning and night when you went to and from your work."

"Yes."

"And now you've had the touring car in the summer and the limousine in the winter; when the weather was cold you had your furs, when it was warm you had the yacht! Since we were married you have had every luxury that money could give and luxury gets in the blood, my dear. Luxury gets in the blood! It's got into mine! Could I, of my own free will, go back and live as I used to live and be satisfied? Certainly not! No more can you!"

"I can try," she said doggedly.

"Don't try," he pleaded. "Please don't! You're a dear, fine, sensible, high-minded little woman, but you weren't made to fight against such odds, and if you try it you'll fail. It's inevitable."

"Just the same I'm going to try it."

Her words were final. There was no recalling them. She was determined upon a separation. So be it, he thought to himself. He was as proud, as obstinate as she was. If she insisted on leaving him, he would not argue with her any longer. Sternly he said:

"Then mark my words—you'll either send for me or you'll come back to me."

"I won't, I tell you!" she retorted with spirit.

"That's what you think now."

"And it's what I shall always think!" she cried. "Send for you after last night? Come back to you and these same conditions? Never! Never!"

Once more he softened. He could not forget in a moment's anger what they had been to each other. Appealingly he said:

"Listen to me for just a minute, dear. You don't realize what you are undertaking. You don't know what you propose to do. Please, please don't do anything that is going to bring you so much misery and unhappiness. Think it over a little while and then perhaps—"

"My mind is made up," she said firmly.

Going to her dressing table, she picked up her hat and placed it on her head. Again he tried to dissuade her.

"Dearie!"

"I am quite decided, I tell you," she said firmly, putting on her hat.

"Don't do it, Virginia, don't do it!" he cried. "Remember, if you leave me like this you will have to come to me or it will be—forever."

"Then it will be forever!" she said decisively. "I won't be degraded and humiliated! I won't be told that I was bought and paid for! You've been able to say it up to now, but you'll never be able to say it again!" Pointing to the jewels she added: "There they are! I give them all back to you."

She stopped and suddenly noticed the rings she was wearing. They, also, were a present from him. With a subdued exclamation she muttered:

"I had almost forgotten these!"

Taking the gems off her fingers one by one, she laid them on the table before him. Her wedding ring still remained on her finger. That she hesitated to remove. She looked from the ring to her husband and made a movement as if about to remove it. Stafford, in his distress, made a supplicating gesture.

"Don't do that!" he cried

"Why not?" she replied coldly. "Since it's to be forever, why not?"

Taking off the wedding ring she placed it on the table with the others and left the room, closing the door behind her.

After she had gone Stafford went to the table, picked up the ring and softly read the inscription to himself:

"'*From Robert to Virginia, with eternal love!'* Eternal love!" he echoed bitterly to himself. "What irony!"

Slipping the ring into his pocket he stood for a time as if in deep thought. Then going to the telephone, he quickly unhooked the receiver.

"Hello! Give me Madison, 74. Hurry! Hurry! Is this Burley's Detective Agency? Is Mr. Burley there? Oh, is that you, Burley? This is Robert Stafford. I want the best man you have to meet me at my office in half an hour. Yes—your very best. What? No, no! I don't want him to watch anyone; I want him to protect someone. In half an hour, remember."

Replacing the telephone on the desk, he remained seated, and drawing from his pocket the wedding ring he gazed at it murmuring to himself:

"With eternal love!"

Taking Off The Wedding Ring, She Placed It On The Table

Taking Off The Wedding Ring, She Placed It On The Table

Chapter XVIII

For the next few days there was an atmosphere of gloom and depression at No. — Riverside Drive. Below stairs consternation reigned. No one knew exactly what had occurred, but that the relations between master and mistress were badly strained was plainly evident. Mrs. Stafford had driven hurriedly away in a taxicab without saying where she was going or when she would return, and Mr. Stafford, having locked himself in his room and denied himself to all callers, was in such an ugly mood that he was absolutely unapproachable. Never before had Oku seen his master in such a vicious temper. He had practically kicked him out when he had politely inquired how many would be home for dinner, and all that evening he heard him striding restlessly up and down like a caged lion, raging and fuming, and once it had sounded suspiciously to Oku as if his master might be weeping.

The little Japanese butler not only felt hurt at such treatment after fifteen years of faithful service, but he was really concerned at the protracted and mysterious absence of his dear mistress. In the two years that Virginia had been at the head of the household she had endeared herself to all her dependents. Always courteous and considerate, never unreasonable or exacting, the servants literally worshipped her and as the days went by without the least sign of her coming back the general gloom deepened. In the evening, after the day's work was done, and all hands could sit in the kitchen and take things easy, the mistress' strange disappearance was the one topic of conversation. The cook, a stout, apoplectic-looking Irishwoman, spoke straight up: Her mistress, as nice a lady as she ever worked for, was smart enough to know her own mind and if she had left her husband there was a mighty good reason for it. The waitress, indignantly repudiating the insinuation that she made a practice of listening to table conversation as she passed the dishes, admitted that, having been provided by nature with ears, she could not help overhearing certain things. On the morning of Mrs. Stafford's departure, she had noticed a decided coolness at the breakfast table, and later when on going down stairs she had heard loud voices she had stopped to listen she had distinctly heard her mistress say: "Then I shall leave you!" This pointed clearly enough to a serious rupture, especially when Josephine, the French maid, told how, at her mistress' orders, she had taken from

the safe all the boxes of jewelry and piled them up on the table where they still remained. Her candid opinion was that the master had been drinking again and that madame, disgusted at his behavior, had eloped with a tall, handsome stranger who had been seen loitering around the house. Oku scoffed at all this gossip. It was clear as daylight, he said. His master was tired of being married so long to the same woman, and as to madame, she also was weary of being married to the same man, so each had decided to try a little change, whereupon Lizzie, the second waitress—a buxom Irish girl who despised "furriners" in general and Japanese in particular—bid Oku hold his tongue and not jabber such heathenish nonsense.

But if the situation was productive of much unconscious humor in servants' hall, it was different upstairs. To Robert Stafford it was all serious enough, a tragedy which had suddenly blasted his life, and night after night as he sat alone in the library, making a hollow pretence at work, forcing his mind on a book or newspaper when really his thoughts were miles away, he wondered how he could have been such a fool as to allow his happiness slip through his fingers.

Now that Virginia was really gone, he realized what she had been to him and what he had lost. At the outset, he had taken it lightly, resentfully. He schooled himself to appear indifferent, afraid that he would be surrendering some of his pride if he displayed the slightest weakness. To himself he argued that if she chose to quarrel with him and disturb the harmony of their home on such a trivial pretext, he would be a poor weak fool to permit a woman to bully him and question rights which were of the very essence of his manhood. If she preferred to make a fuss and go her own way he could not prevent her. But when the door had closed behind her, when he saw that she was really in earnest, that she had been willing to give up all this comfort, all this luxury, to return to a precarious existence, a life of humiliation and self-denial, and all this for a mere matter of principle, he was startled.

The railroad promoter had never troubled to think deeply on matters outside his material interests. Of religion, he had none, and he seldom stopped to consider the ethical side of a question. But all at once, as by a miracle, the scales fell from his eyes. In a sudden flash of illuminating reason he saw himself as he was—selfish, cynical, inconsiderate, brutal. He was astounded at finding himself compelled to admit the truth of these self-made charges. He did not mean to be all these things. At heart he was a good fellow. It was simply the fault of his training. He saw now the truth of what in his egotism and cynicism he had

always scoffed at before, that some women are strong enough morally, brave enough physically to do anything, make any sacrifice for the sake of right. How unworthy he had proved himself of such a woman! What respect could she have left for him, what respect had he left for himself?

And as the days went by without word from her and the full realization of what he had lost slowly came to him, he thought he would go mad from anxiety and remorse. He did not know where she had gone and his pride prevented him from communicating with her sister. James Gillie had handed in a haughty resignation the day following Virginia's departure, so there was no way of learning anything from that source, and the detective he had employed had thus far discovered nothing. She might be in difficulties, in actual want and would not ask assistance from sheer pride. The thought was maddening and for days Stafford, distraught, unable to attend to his affairs, remained in the house, hoping, half expecting, she would return until the uncertainty and continual disappointment nearly drove him insane. He could not eat; he could not sleep. His ears still rang with her reproaches, her stinging words of bitter denunciation. At night he would wake up suddenly in a cold sweat imagining he saw her standing at the bed, looking at him with her large, sorrowful eyes, full of tears and reproach.

If he had never been sure of it before, he knew now that he loved her. Everything in the house, now she was gone, told him so. As he wandered aimlessly through the deserted rooms, and his glance fell on the corners and objects with which she was associated—the deep easy chair in the library in which she would bury herself for hours with an interesting book; her baby grand piano, still open with the sheets of music scattered about; her private chamber with the bed undisturbed, closets empty, furniture arranged in precise order, and already beginning to accumulate dust—he realized for the first time all that she had been to him. He had not married young like most men. She had come into his life when his habits and opinions were already formed. For that reason he had treated his wife like a child, to be petted and indulged, but who at no time must be permitted to assert her independence or interfere in any way with her husband's mode of living. But little by little, even without his being conscious of it, she had taken a larger place in his life. Gradually, she had made herself necessary to him, to his peace of mind, to his comfort. Not only did she fill the house with her youthful enthusiasm and girlish laughter, but when business cares weighed heavy on his shoulders and he came home tired, glad of someone to whom he could confide his troubles, he found in her the most sympathetic of listeners. In the evening she would sit at the piano and play for him his favorite music. Ah,

how divinely she played the Schubert *Serenade*; its sad, mournful melody was even now ringing in his ears, perfectly attuned to his present mood. Insensate fool that he had been! He had enjoyed all this and yet had deemed it of such little value that he had spurned it and driven it away. This woman, his wife, who had brought sunshine into his life and home—this loyal, faithful comrade—he had insulted beyond all forgiveness. When it all came clear to him, he thought he would go mad.

Ah, if she would only forgive him and come back! His first impulse was to go after her, humiliate himself, go on his knees if necessary, and beseech her to return. A dozen times he sat down and wrote her a letter, but they were never sent. His pride forbade it, and caused him to go about wearing a mask of indifference which he was far from feeling. No, he could not go after her. All through his life, he had prided himself on his strength of will. It was the keystone of his character, both in his relations with his workmen and also in his domestic life. If he were to weaken, no matter what the circumstances, after once taking a determined stand, he would forfeit not only the world's respect, but his own as well. He was as proud and self-willed as she. He had told her that he would never go to her unless she sent for him. If, therefore, she was as proud and determined as he was, they had said good-bye for ever. They would never see each other again. If she did not write, it was because she had tired of him and did not want to come back. Perhaps she had found someone for whom she cared more, and no doubt one of these days some lawyer would be serving him with papers in a separation or divorce suit. Thus, his brain conjuring up all kinds of possibilities, he began to nourish feelings of anger and resentment. Suppose he had been a little rough with her, it was far worse for her to abandon him and expose him to all kinds of slanderous rumors. Thus, steeling his heart, he tried to forget her.

For a time he went back to his old style of life, leading again that easy-going, bohemian existence of his bachelor days. He plunged into gaieties and dissipations of every kind. He gambled freely, drank heavily and gave midnight champagne suppers enlivened by "appetizing" vaudeville, to prominent ladies of the demi-monde. Yet even these excesses could not drown the prickings of conscience. Sometimes, amid one of these nocturnal debauches, and while the drunken revelry was at its height, he would suddenly see Virginia's pale, thoughtful face. Her eyes, dimmed with tears, and full of reproach, would seem to be gazing at him questioningly, wonderingly, that he should have so degraded himself. With a cry of disgust, he would spring up from his chair and go back to

his desolate home.

Gradually the strain told upon him. He grew nervous and depressed. His physician warned him against working too hard.

"It's the grave malady of our time," said the doctor, shaking his head. "All our successful men fall victims to it. It's this cursed race to get rich quick."

Stafford shook his head. With a grim smile he said:

"You are mistaken, doctor. My affairs were never in better shape. I'm ashamed to tell you what ails me. It's a schoolboy's complaint. I'm in love—for the first time in my life."

Chapter XIX

"Mrs. Travers! Mr. Brown! Mr. Travers! Mr. Brown!"

The hotel pages, smart-looking in their tight-fitting uniforms with gold braid and buttons, hurried here and there, scurrying through the lobbies and drawing-rooms, calling out the names of guests who were wanted.

It was five o'clock and the bustle at the hotel was at its height. Guests were constantly arriving from train and steamer; others were departing, tipping their way out royally. Porters, their backs bent under the weight of heavy baggage, and waiters, their trays heaped up with silver dishes, pushed unceremoniously through the crowd. Women, fashionably gowned, were promenading the halls, or sipping tea in the palm garden; others sat in little groups watching the animated scene. Men of all conditions—preachers, actors, politicians, gamblers—stood in the lobbies, chatting and smoking, blocking the way so that it was almost impossible to pass. From the open doors of the brilliantly illuminated café came the noise and laughter of popping corks, the metallic ring of money, and the sound of men's voices in dispute. In another corner was heard the click of telegraph instruments and the industrious, perpetual rattle of typewriters. At the front entrance a doorman, resplendent in gold lace, was having a heated altercation with an obstreperous cabman. The desk was literally besieged by a pushing, unmannerly mob of persons, each of whom wanted to be waited on before the other, while haughty clerks, moving about with languid grace, tried to satisfy requests of every conceivable kind. There was nothing extraordinary in this apparent commotion. It suggested pandemonium; it was really only a rather dull and uneventful day in the ordinary routine of a big metropolitan hotel.

Virginia sat back in her chair and stretched herself. Every bone in her body ached. She had worked steadily since 8 o'clock that morning, with only a brief respite for lunch, and the fatigue was beginning to tell upon her. Formerly she could have done twice as much without feeling it, but since her marriage she had gotten out of the way of it. Her muscles were stiff; her recent luxurious mode of living had unfitted her for the strenuous life she used to lead. She had regained her independence, but it had not been without a bitter struggle.

It was a great shock to Fanny when her sister walked in on her that afternoon now some three months ago and quietly told her that she had left Robert for good. At first the elder sister laughed, not believing it, and then, when she saw by Virginia's face that it was only too true, she broke down and cried. They fell into each others' arms and wept together, just as they had done many times before when they were children.

When they were somewhat calmer she had told Fanny everything, keeping nothing from her, and declaring her intention to go back to the hotel, if she could get the position, and earn her own livelihood again. Seeing that it was useless, Fanny did not attempt to dissuade her. On the contrary, now she was acquainted with all the facts in the case, she was indignant herself and gave her sister credit for displaying so much spirit. Of course, it meant a serious pecuniary loss to them all. Jimmie could not possibly remain in his position, in view of this rupture; he would resign his lucrative job and they would be compelled to go back to the days when they struggled along on fourteen dollars a week. It was hard, but better that, she told Virginia with an affectionate hug, than that millionaires should go around thinking they could buy and sell women like so many cattle.

So everything was quickly settled. Virginia, of course, would live henceforth with them. She applied for her old position at the hotel, and after some delay secured it. This was a great relief to her, for she would never have consented to being a burden on her sister and it assured her a competence as long as she chose to stay.

Jimmie, much to his disgust, handed in his resignation, which was accepted more promptly than he had secretly hoped, the flat in One Hundred and Fortieth street was given up and the Gillies moved into one a little less pretentious, but more in keeping with their curtailed income. A job of some kind to keep the kettle boiling was very necessary, so Jimmie reluctantly applied for his old job and became once more a $14 a week shipping clerk. This however was a temporary makeshift, he protested. He was chock full of good ideas, and now he was rid of Stafford, who he claimed, had really paralyzed his efforts, he would be able to give free rein to his inventive genius. Fanny listened patiently. By this time she had few illusions left concerning her husband's chances of success in life. All she asked was that they should get along respectably and happily.

So the time had passed. It was now three months since Virginia had left her

husband, and in all that time she had made no attempt to communicate with him. She had no desire to do so. If, sometimes, she had a secret yearning, if she sometimes hoped that he would miss her and come and fetch her back, she stifled it instantly. The very fact that he had made no attempt to come after her, showed plainly enough that he had never really cared for her. She thanked God that they had had no children. At least she was spared the torture of having brought unhappiness on innocent heads. At times she saw his name mentioned in the newspapers, and she smiled bitterly when she read accounts of sensational supper parties, scandalous proceedings which had attracted the attention of the public in which he had figured prominently. That was the kind of life he liked, the only kind he knew. How could she ever have dreamed that he was a man who would make her a good husband?

"Mr. Brown! Mr. Robinson! Mr. Brown! Mr. Robinson!"

The monotonous, shrill voices of the pages as they wearily made their rounds calling out the names of invisible guests, the orders of clerks and doormen, the chattering and laughing of the people as they passed and re-passed up and down the corridors made a perfect babel of conflicting sound. The afternoon was now well advanced. The crowds had begun to dispense. There was more breathing space in the passages. For the time being the rush was over and Virginia sat back in her chair, glad of a moment's respite after the busy day. She saw nothing and heard nothing of the commotion all around her. The noise and the crowds in the hotel lobby did not exist for her. Her thoughts, in spite of herself, were far away, with the man who before God's altar had solemnly promised to shield and protect her, and then permitted her to go out alone in the cold, unsympathetic world to earn her own living as best she could, without even making an effort to find how or where she was. With all his faults, she had always thought Robert kind-hearted. Why, then, should he have treated her in this cruel, heartless, indifferent manner? A man's voice suddenly aroused her from her words. In a cold, business-like tone it said:

"Are you busy? I have some letters to dictate."

Instantly aroused to a sense of her duties, Virginia sat up with a start. Without looking up, accustomed to be at the beck and call of the first stranger who came along, she said wearily:

"No, I'm not busy. I'll take the dictation."

The newcomer sat down at her desk. Virginia slipped a piece of paper into her machine and was ready to begin. Suddenly the man uttered an exclamation. She looked up and nearly fell from her chair.

"Mr. Hadley!" she exclaimed.

It was her husband's most intimate friend. Chance had brought him to the hotel and having some business letters to write, he had stopped at the desk of the first stenographer who appeared to be unoccupied. When he saw who the young operator was he could scarcely believe his eyes. With a gesture of the greatest concern, he exclaimed:

"Mrs. Stafford! You here?"

She smiled sadly.

"Yes. I've been here some time, ever since—" She stopped short, not knowing how much he might know of her difference with her husband. As yet the world knew nothing of the scandal that had shattered a home and as far as she was concerned it never would. After a pause she added timidly: "You see I am not rich—I have to support myself."

Hadley leaned forward and sympathetically grasped her hand. He had always liked Virginia. Her womanliness and spirit appealed strongly to him. Stafford had treated her like a brute. He ought never to have let her go. Many a time he had berated his friend for what he termed his pigheaded obstinacy.

"Oh, Mrs. Stafford!" he went on warmly. "I had no idea you were here. How noble and plucky it is of you—"

"Any self-respecting woman would do the same," she said quietly.

Hadley shrugged his shoulders. Cynically he replied:

"Some might, most wouldn't. You don't find women in our set making sacrifices even for a principle when it comes to giving up their comforts and their luxuries. I think you've acted splendidly and so does Bob, only he won't admit it. He's a good fellow at heart. The trouble was that he married too late in life. His habits were formed. He did not realize that to be happy in married life one must give as well as take; in other words, that a really happy marriage is a compromise.

Always having had his own way, accustomed to imposing his will upon that of others, he failed to realize that when he married he conferred certain rights on the woman to whom he gave his name. Now it is different. He sees his mistake. It has been a bitter lesson to him."

A deep flush spread over Virginia's pale face. What did these words mean? Could it be true that her husband still loved her?

"You see him sometimes?" she murmured.

"Almost every day. I dined with him at the club last night."

"Is he well?"

Hadley made no answer, but bending forward, looked more closely at his friend's wife. He took quick note of her tired-looking eyes, the pallor of her face. Slowly he said:

"And you? Are you well? I think that is more important."

She smiled wearily as she answered:

"Oh, I'm a little tired, that's all. This work is very confining. In fact, I've quite gotten out of the way of it."

He looked at her intently for a moment in silence. Then he said:

"I had no idea where you had gone. None of his friends knew. Some think you are abroad. Bob has let that impression get about. Even I, his most intimate friend, did not know all the particulars! I guessed the truth. Yet Bob knew where you were."

Virginia, startled, looked up quickly:

"He knows?" she exclaimed.

Hadley nodded.

"Yes—he has employed a man to watch you constantly from a distance. Not because he believed you would ever give him cause for divorce—to be fair to

him, that has never entered his mind; but he wanted someone to watch over you, protect you—"

Virginia flushed; her heart was beating violently. In a low tone, she said:

"He has done that?" she exclaimed. "Then he has not forgotten me after all—"

The young man laughed.

"Forgotten you! I should think not. You are never out of his thoughts. He won't admit it, but I know it. He loves you to-day better than he ever did."

"Then why, if he knows where I am, doesn't he come to me?"

Hadley clenched his fist. Vehemently, almost angrily, he answered:

"Because he's a fool. He said he wouldn't come to you until you sent for him, and he hasn't the moral courage to change his mind—he's afraid to be laughed at."

Virginia shook her head. Sadly she said:

"Then I'm afraid the breach will never be healed. If he is proud, I am not less so. I shall never send for him."

"But you can't go on like this, my dear Mrs. Stafford," he protested. "You really can't. You'll make yourself ill. It's not the kind of life you're fitted for."

"What else can I do?" she inquired. "Teach? I have not the patience. Go into a store? It is too humiliating. No, this is the best I can think of. I'm living with my sister. I am comfortable and as happy as I can expect to be under the circumstances."

"But won't you change your mind, won't you forgive Bob?" he persisted. "Let me go back to him now with a message from you. It is all he is waiting for, I know it—just one word. It will make him the happiest of men!"

Virginia shook her head.

"You are very kind, Mr. Hadley. I know you mean well, and that you are my

friend. My husband and I understand one another perfectly. Neither will consent to send for the other, so the situation will remain exactly where it is."

He rose to go.

"Is this final?"

She shook her head decisively.

"Yes—it is final."

"You will never go back to him?"

"Not till he comes for me."

He grasped her hand and the next minute was lost to view in the crowd.

All that night, while the Gillies slumbered peacefully, Virginia tossed restlessly on her bed, thinking over what Mr. Hadley had told her. Try as she would, she was unable to banish thoughts of her husband from her mind. If he still cared for her, if he missed her, why didn't he come for her? If he himself suffered, why did he let her go on weeping out her heart in this way? Why should two human beings allow their pride to make them suffer so abominably? She thought she would show herself the more generous of the two; and send him a message, urging him to come at once. Then, as she recalled his stern, merciless words, she again rebelled. No—no—it would degrade her in his eyes if she weakened! She would not—she would not! She loved him—yes—only now she realized how dearly she loved him; but it was just because she loved him that she would not forfeit his esteem. When morning broke, she was still wide awake, thinking, thinking, her eyes red and swollen from countless tears.

Chapter XX

The Gillies' new home was nothing to boast of. In fact they were ashamed of its shabbiness and lived in constant dread of some of their former acquaintances discovering their whereabouts and coming to see them. Yet it was the best they could expect to find for the little rent they were able to pay. Situated in one of the cheapest parts of Harlem, the flat was in a row of tenement-like buildings, facing a street always filled with noisy, unkempt children. The corridors and staircases were gaudily decorated and the narrow halls and small rooms, shut off from proper light and air, gave one a sense of suffocation. The furnishings were of the scantiest. Jimmie having incurred certain heavy debts, reckoning that the palmy days would always last, had been forced to sell his household effects to satisfy pressing creditors, so now they had to be satisfied with as few odd cheap pieces as they could manage with—a plain deal dining-table and a few ricketty chairs. Times were indeed hard. The shipping firm had also made a cut in Jimmie's salary, reducing him from $14 to $13 a week, so even with the $5 which Virginia contributed to the expenses, strict economy had to be exercised in order to make both ends meet.

Fanny did her best to look cheerful under these depressing conditions, but there were days when her patience was sorely tried and when she found herself regretting that Virginia had "taken it so particular" with Mr. Stafford. Of course, they all suffered by the sacrifice, but most of the burden fell upon her. She certainly had the worst of it. Virginia, away all day, at least escaped the household drudgery. It was a terrible existence—scrubbing floors and washing dishes from morning till night, seeing nobody, beginning to lose hope that she would ever see a change for the better.

To-day she was feeling particularly tired and discouraged. She had been kept busy all morning looking after the baby's wants and cleaning the kitchen stove, and the exertion required by both duties had completely exhausted her. Wiping her grimy hands on her apron, she sank listlessly down on a chair in the kitchen to rest a while. It could not be for long. The afternoon was well advanced. Jim and Virginia would soon be home. She must think presently of getting dinner.

The baby slept soundly in her little crib undisturbed by the noise of the wintry

gale outdoors. Fanny sighed as she fondly gazed on the chubby little face. How unfair to bring such an innocent into the world, only to inherit trouble and want! What had become of the brilliant prospects for her daughter once held out when Virginia was a rich man's wife? Instead of improving, their situation grew steadily worse. Jim was making no progress. Instead of his salary being increased, it was always being reduced. He was the kind of man who made progress backwards, like a crab. He was not practical—that was the trouble. If only he had fewer ideas, perhaps he would make more money. It was very discouraging. But what good did grumbling ever do? The work had to be done and the quicker she finished the stove, the better.

Wearily she rose from her seat and with a last look at the baby, was going towards the kitchen, when suddenly the doorbell rang violently. The baby started in its sleep. Indignant at the noise Fanny went and opened.

"Is that you, Jim?" she asked crossly.

"Yes," he called out.

"Well, I like your nerve!" she ejaculated. "Couldn't you make less noise? You woke the baby!"

Her husband entered, attired in a heavy overcoat, the collar of which was turned up. His nose was blue, his eyes red and he was shivering with cold.

"Gee! but it's tough weather, all right!"

Taking off his overcoat and muffler, and placing them on a chair together with his lunch box, he crossed the room to the radiator to warm his hands. Fanny, still fuming, went to the baby carriage, folded the blanket and arranged the cushions. Angrily she exclaimed:

"Is that why you must ring the bell and wake the baby when you have the key? Don't you think I've got enough to do running this flat and cooking for three people and looking after the baby without having to go and open the door for you? Why didn't you open it yourself?"

Her husband looked at her in a stupid kind of way. With a grin he said:

"Well, if you must know, I've lost my key."

"Lost your key?"

"Yes."

"Don't you know that keys cost twenty-five cents apiece?"

"Sure I do."

"Well," she went on indignantly, "you want to remember that every quarter—yes, and every nickel—counts these days. You're not working for Mr. Stafford at a hundred a week now; you're a shipping clerk getting thirteen per! Not even fourteen—thirteen!"

Her husband squirmed. Shifting his feet uneasily he muttered

"You needn't rub it in."

Fanny held out her hand.

"Hand it over," she commanded.

"What?"

"The thirteen," she said determinedly. "This is pay day. Come on!—come on!—come on!" she ordered, going up to him threateningly.

With a grimace, he thrust his hand in his trousers' pocket and bringing out a small roll of bills, handed it to his wife. She counted the money carefully, and then stuffed it inside her dress. He watched her, a comic expression of resignation on his face.

"Don't I get any?" he grumbled.

"Yes," she answered quickly, "you get carfare and cigar money—twenty cents a day and you get it each day—"

Saying this, she turned her back and fastening on her apron, made a move towards the kitchen. Jimmie, with a gesture of disgust, threw his lunch box on the table and dropped into a chair.

"Can't I even have lunch money" he growled.

Fanny turned on him like a tigress. For some time he had been getting on her nerves and to-day she was in just the humor to let out what she felt. Angrily she exclaimed:

"Won't you ever get it into your head that I'm running this flat on eighteen dollars a week—thirteen from you and five from Virginia? Lunch money! You're lucky even to get lunch!"

He made no reply, but lapsed into a sulky silence. Presently, with a wry face, he growled:

"I'm getting tired of nothing but dry sandwiches and dill pickles."

"What do you expect for thirteen per?" she retorted, "terrapin or paté de fois gras? Getting tired of—"

She stopped short. Her eyes had just lighted on the lunch box on the table. Swooping down on it like an angry vulture she exclaimed angrily: "What's that?"

Even in his bluest moments, Jimmie never lost his sense of humor. Picking up the box and pretending to examine it, he said:

"I think it's a bunch of lilies of the valley."

He grinned, but got no response. Fanny was not in a mood to jest.

"Oh, don't get funny," she said crossly. "I know it's your lunch box all right, but what's it doing on the table? Put it in the drawer where it belongs." He hesitated, still grinning, and she went on sternly: "Go on, now! I've got enough to do without putting things away after you."

Rising, he took the offending box and placed it in a drawer of the sideboard. When this was done Fanny pointed to his hat and coat:

"Now hang them up in the hall," she ordered.

Without another word he picked up the things and left the room. Directly he was gone, Fanny took a key from under a vase, opened another drawer in the sideboard and put the money in it. Then she hastily locked the drawer and replaced the key. No sooner was this done than Jimmie reappeared. He was

puffing a cheap cigar and judging by his expression the flavor was not all that it might be. After a few moments, and while Fanny was laying the cloth, he threw it away with an exclamation of disgust:

"It's no good! I can't get used to these damned cheap things. I suppose I'd be satisfied with 'em if I'd never smoked *real* cigars! But to be educated up to Villa de Villas and then drop to them—punkerinos—"

Fanny looked round, saw the cigar on the floor and then looked at him:

"Jimmie," she said, "pick that up and let it die outside."

He obeyed her without a word. Opening the window he picked up the offending weed and threw it out.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed bitterly. "In three months to parachute from first-class cafés to carrying home-made lunches; to go from threes for a half to twos for a nickel; instead of having plenty of money in pocket to be without even a cent! I tell you, Fanny, the way we're living now is—hell!"

Flopping down on a chair near the table, he presented an abject picture of utter despondency. If Fanny had been in better humor she would have laughed at him, but in her present mood his complaints only irritated her the more. Stopping in her work, she turned on him. Her face was flushed; her eyes flashed fire. At last the moment had come to give it to him:

"Don't you think I know it better than you do?" she cried. "I used to be able to pay twenty-five or thirty dollars for a hat, now when I want one I'll have to trim it myself; I could have a taxi once in a while, now I'm lucky if I can take a car; a seat in the orchestra at the matinées was none too good for me, now I think it is great to go to the moving pictures; I used to have a nine-room apartment at a Hundred and Fortieth street, now I've got a five-room flat at a Hundred and Seventy-sixth! My 'friends' don't come to see me because it's too far uptown. I used to have a servant to do my work and a woman come in to do my washing, now I have to do the work and the cooking and the washing into the bargain. Don't talk to me about your cigars, and your lunches, and your pocket money! Only a woman can know what it means to come down in the world!"

He listened in silence to her tirade, carelessly rocking back and forth on the two rear legs of his tilted chair. When finally she stopped for sheer want of breath he

said:

"I guess you're right, Fanny, I'm sorry I spoke. The woman gets the worst of it every time."

"Yes—every time, Jimmie," she said emphatically as she proceeded to lay the table. "Whether she's right or wrong."

"If Virginia hadn't quit Stafford," he grumbled, "it would have been different."

"There's no use talking of that—she did leave him—"

Jimmie looked up, an injured expression on his face.

"Yes, and what day did she pick out?" he cried indignantly. "The very day Stafford raised me to a hundred and fifty!" Jumping up from his chair he began to pace the floor nervously. "Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "just think of it! I used to get a hundred and fifty! Of course I only got it for a day and a quarter—but I got it!"

His wife stopped in her work. Sharply she demanded:

"And whose fault was it that you only got it for a day and a quarter?"

"Mine, I suppose," he replied gloomily.

"You had no right to try to interfere between Mr. Stafford and Virginia—that was their business."

"So he told me! And when I said that anything that concerned my wife's sister was *my* business and I wouldn't be associated with a man who didn't treat her right, and walked out, I thought he'd send a messenger after me before I reached the corner. In fact, I waited at the corner."

"But the messenger didn't come," she said sarcastically.

"No. But even that didn't bother me much—then! I thought I'd soon get another job just as good."

Fanny shrugged her shoulders. With a sigh she said:

"I wonder if you'll ever have one 'just as good.'"

"Of course, I will," he said confidently.

"When?"

"I'm likely to get a good job most any time."

"Well, till you do," she retorted, "hang on to the one you have. When rent day comes, thirteen dollars in real money is a heap sight better than a hundred and fifty in hopes."

Jim shifted about uneasily on his feet. Stupidly he said:

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I know so," she exclaimed.

"Besides," he said with some hesitation, "one of my ideas might turn out big."

His wife laughed scornfully.

"Might—yes," she exclaimed.

"Oh, I know you don't believe in 'em any more," he went on. "But let me tell you this—I've got one idea right now that would make me five hundred dollars just as easy as that—" He snapped his fingers at her as he continued: "Do you hear? As easy as that!" His wife, still skeptical, seemed to pay no heed, so petulantly he inquired: "Why don't you ask me about it?"

Fanny again stopped in her work and looked up.

"What is it?" she demanded in a resigned tone.

Jimmie frowned. He did not like his wife's incredulous attitude.

"That's a fine way to ask!" he exclaimed. Imitating her tone he went on: "What is it? You'd show more interest than that if I told you Mrs. Brown's canary had died of the croup!"

In spite of herself Fanny smiled. She was too good-natured to remain cross very

long. After all, it was only natural that her husband should confide in her. In a more conciliatory tone, she said:

"I didn't mean anything, Jimmie. What *is* the idea?"

But he was offended now.

"Oh, what's the use?" he exclaimed.

"Go on, tell me," she coaxed.

"What's the use? You wouldn't think it was any good."

"All right, then, don't!" she exclaimed, turning away. "I know there'd be nothing in it, anyway."

He followed her across the room. Airily he said:

"Is that so? Well, just to prove that there is something in it, I *will* tell you. Of course I shouldn't really expect to do it—but the idea's there just the same."

"Well—what is it?" she asked, stopping in her work to listen.

Jimmie took a chair and sat down on it straddle-wise. Hesitatingly he said:

"You know the fuss the papers made about Stafford marrying Virginia and how the Sunday editions had page after page about it with illustrations—"

"Yes—what about it?" she demanded, impatient to get to the point.

"And you know," he went on, "how clever he's been in keeping this from them by sending out the news that she'd gone to Europe for the winter—"

"Yes."

"Well, if I was to go to one of 'em and tip off the story that instead of being in Europe, Virginia was workin' in a hotel for ten dollars a week, and I would agree not to tell any other paper about it, don't you think I could get five hundred for it? You just bet I could!"

Fanny had listened with growing indignation. When he had finished she

exclaimed:

"Jimmie, if you did anything like that I'd never speak to you again—never!"

Weakening before her outburst, he said evasively:

"I told you I didn't expect to do it."

"Whether I think Virginia's a fool or not," went on his wife, "she's my sister. Right or wrong, she's my sister and nobody—not even you—is going to do anything to hurt her feelings and get away with it without a fight from me."

Jimmie rose and resumed his nervous pacing of the floor. Hastily he said:

"I ain't going to do anything to hurt her feelings! But I must say it's pretty tough on a fellow to have all his good ideas spoiled! Take the one I had about the auto. I could have sold it for fifteen hundred dollars, but Virginia wouldn't let me and made me send it back. There was a great idea gone wrong—" He was silent for a few moments and then suddenly he burst out: "I've got another one."

"I've Got Another Idea," Said Jimmie.

"I've Got Another Idea," Said Jimmie.

"What—another idea?" exclaimed his wife sarcastically.

"Yes," he replied eagerly, "and even you will think this one all right."

"What is it?"

He looked round as if to make sure no one was listening. Then, in a tragic whisper, he said:

"We must bring Virginia and Stafford together again."

"Jimmie!" exclaimed his wife, looking at him in amazement.

"You know she's still in love with him, don't you?" he went on calmly.

"Yes."

"And he's just crazy over her. He 'phoned me again to-day asking about her."

"Well—what of it?"

A crafty expression came into her husband's face. He looked wise for a moment; then he said solemnly:

"To make two people who are in love forget and forgive, all you have to do is to get them into each others' arms. That's the way it would be with them! Only stubbornness keeps them apart now—just stubbornness!"

"Yes—that's true," admitted Fanny.

"Well," he said significantly, "it's very simple—we must get them into each others' arms."

"How?" she demanded.

"Ah," he smiled, "that's where my idea comes in."

Fanny looked at him curiously. It was the first time she had ever heard her husband say anything sensible.

"Go on—tell me," she said eagerly.

"If she sent for him," he went on, "he'd break all speed laws getting up here, and if he came for her of his own accord—if she thought he did that she'd be in his arms so quick that she'd make a bounding antelope look like a plumber's assistant going back for his tools!"

Fanny looked puzzled. She did not quite understand his meaning.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Her husband hesitated for a moment as if not daring to suggest what was on his mind; then suddenly he blurted out:

"Suppose I 'phoned him—right now—that she had sent for him?"

"'Phone him—that Virginia—"

"Sure! He'd think she'd given in and she'd think the same of him. It would be a case of a pair of open arms, the rustle of a skirt, a little head on a manly chest and then good-bye John, farewell everything, and the lid is off! I imagine that is some idea!"

Fanny clasped her hands nervously. Hesitatingly she exclaimed:

"Oh—I think it's splendid! But—what if they found out?"

"What would it matter if they'd already made up?" he grinned.

"But do you think it would be right?"

"Oh, no!" he cried mockingly. "Certainly not! It would be a terrible crime to unite a husband and wife and fix up a broken home! To say nothing of giving me back my regular job at a hundred and fifty. Shall I?"

Fanny wrung her hands with excitement. It certainly was a daring plan.

"I—I'm scared," she stammered, unwilling to commit herself.

"I'm not," he said boldly, "I'm never afraid of any game where I can't lose! And if it came through, you know what it would mean for us—good clothes, good food, money to spend and nothing to worry about except moving down to a Hundred and Twenty-fifth street! What do you say?"

"I don't know—" she answered hesitatingly.

"And then," he continued persuasively, "you must think of little Virgie. A baby makes a lot of difference—"

"Indeed it does," she replied warmly. "I bet Virginia would never have left Robert if they had had a baby."

"Shall I do it?" he asked tentatively.

"I'm scared. I am—honest I am!"

"Oh, go on! Be game!" he coaxed. "Besides, we have everything to win and nothing to lose and for a gamble you can't beat that!"

"But, Jimmie—" she exclaimed fearfully.

He paid no attention to her objections. All absorbed in his idea, he went on eagerly:

"There's no time to lose. Virginia's likely to be back any minute now and if we're going to put it through, we must do it quick. Shall I? Shall I?"

Fanny, flustered, was at a loss what to say.

"Why do you put the responsibility on to me?" she exclaimed. "You're the one to decide. You're the head of the house."

He grinned. The head of the house? Of course he was. Why hadn't he thought of it before? That being the case, he need consult no one but himself. Swelling up with self-importance, he exclaimed:

"Sure I am. I'll do it!"

Going into the hall, he quickly took the receiver off the telephone.

"Jimmie!" exclaimed his wife excitedly.

He stayed his hand and looked around.

"What?" he asked.

"I don't think you'd better," she gasped.

He eyed her sternly. If she had always awed him before, it was different now. As the originator of an idea that was going to save them all, he held the whip hand.

"See here," he exclaimed, "Who is head of this house?"

"I don't think you'd better," she pleaded.

Shaking his head, he paid no attention to her protests:

"I'm going to just the same," he said firmly. "You've got nothing to say about it. I'm the head of this house." Taking off the receiver he spoke into the telephone.

"Hello—hello! Give me River 2540. Is this River 2540? Is Mr. Stafford there? Please tell him that Mr. Gillie wishes to talk to him. Yes, his brother-in-law, Mr. Gillie! Is that you, Mr. Stafford? This is Jimmie! No, not James—just Jimmie! Virgie told me to 'phone and ask you to come for her. Yes—that's it—I guess she can't stand being separated from you any longer. All right—I'll tell her. Good-bye!"

Hanging up the receiver he closed the door and exclaimed triumphantly:

"It's done!"

"Oh—I'm scared to death!" gasped Fanny.

"I ain't," he grinned. Proudly he added: "After all, it takes a man to rise to the occasion."

"But if it should turn out wrong?" persisted his wife.

He shook his head incredulously as if such a thing were an utter impossibility. With a shrug of his shoulders he said:

"It's done now and that's all there is to it. I'll bet that by this time Stafford is in his machine and dashing up here like mad. Suppose he should get here before Virginia?"

"That would spoil everything!" exclaimed Fanny.

"Not necessarily," he replied loftily, as if no problem was so difficult that he could not grapple with it. "I'd probably get some kind of an idea in time to save the situation. Leave everything to me."

Fanny, lost in thought, said nothing, while her husband nervously paced the floor. Glancing at the clock, he exclaimed impatiently:

"I wish she'd come. She ought to be here by now—"

He stopped and listened, and then going out into the hall, opened the front door. No one was there and he came back into the room:

"I thought I heard her key in the door," he said.

"I'm so worried," exclaimed Fanny anxiously.

"What about?" he demanded airily. "I did the 'phoning. If there's any worrying to be done, let Jimmie do it!"

"I wish you hadn't," she said timidly.

"But I have," he cried. "Great Scott, ain't that just like a woman!" Reassuringly he went on: "Now look here, Fanny, you leave this to me. When Virginia comes you make yourself scarce, get busy in the kitchen or something and I'll talk to her. You'll see that I—"

As he spoke there was the metallic click of a key turning in the front door lock.

"Holy Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "Here she is! Be careful what you say." Greeting his sister-in-law amiably he called out: "Hallo, Virgie, we're in here!"

Chapter XXI

Virginia came in tired and worn-looking. Her clothes were soaked through from the storm and in her hand she carried a dripping umbrella. She smiled wearily as she greeted the others:

"Hello, Fanny! How's this for weather?" Holding out her umbrella to her brother-in-law she said: "Here, Jim, please take this."

While he went to put the gingham in the bathtub, Fanny helped to make the newcomer comfortable. With concern, she exclaimed:

"Poor darling—you're wet through. You'd better change everything."

Virginia threw off her raincoat and dropped, exhausted, into a seat.

"I'm too tired to do anything but sit down," she exclaimed wearily.

"Was it a hard day?" inquired her sister as she brought a pair of comfortable slippers to be exchanged for the wet shoes.

"Very," replied Virginia with a sigh of relief. "There are some days when everything goes wrong. This was one of them. People were cranky and exacting —there was a terrific rush. I scarcely had time to lunch and tonight the cars were so crowded that I had to stand all the way."

Jimmie, re-entering from the bedroom, caught the last few words. Anxious in furtherance of his plans to improve every opportunity of ingratiating himself in his sister-in-law's good graces he exclaimed apologetically:

"That's tough! Was the same fellow on the car?"

She nodded, while Fanny went to see how things were getting on in the kitchen.

"Yes," she said listlessly.

"And going downtown?"

"Yes."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Of course not!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Well, if he does or if he gets fresh at all," said her brother-in-law with a fierce gesture, "you tell me and I'll punch his head!"

"He won't," she smiled.

"He'd better not."

At that moment Fanny re-entered from the kitchen. Cheerfully she exclaimed:

"Dinner's all ready to put on, but I'll get you a cup of tea first!" Pointing to the wet rubbers, she made a significant gesture to her husband. "Jimmie!"

Docilely he picked up the rubbers and proceeded as before in the direction of the bathroom. Virginia looked at her sister gratefully.

"You're very good to me."

"Don't be silly!" exclaimed Fanny, as she busied Herself setting the table.

Virginia smiled.

"You're the best sister in the world!" she murmured.

"No, I'm not, you are!" Cheerily, as her husband reappeared, she added:

"Now you sit still and talk to Jim while I get the tea ready."

She went out and the clerk carelessly took a chair. This was his opportunity. He could hardly hope for a better one. After a brief pause he said sympathetically:

"You're not looking well, Virginia. These last three months have told on you."

The young woman nodded. With a weary sigh she replied:

"Yes—I know it."

Thus encouraged, he continued:

"I guess you don't like it any better than we do."

"Like it!" she exclaimed. "Like working under tremendous pressure from morning till night in a public hotel corridor at the beck and call of the first comer, exposed to all kinds of insult and indignity? Like to have two dollars a week pocket money out of which I must pay my carfare and buy whatever I need? Like to come home every night so tired I can scarcely walk and with my head aching till I can hardly see? Like it! Like it, indeed!"

Quietly he replied:

"Then why don't you quit It? Why don't you go back to your husband?"

Virginia started. In spite of herself, her face changed color. Abruptly she said:

"I've asked you not to—"

"I know you have, but tonight I'm going to talk sense to you if I never do it again."

She held out a hand in protest.

"Jimmie—I—"

"Yes, I am," he interrupted. "I hate to see you going on like this. You've been away from Stafford for less than three months and, on the level, you look five years older. Why don't you go back to him?"

"I've told you why—it's a matter of principle. You wouldn't have me give up my principles, would you?"

He shrugged his shoulders as he replied dryly:

"I don't know about yours, but I can tell you this about mine—if hanging on to 'em meant hard work, tired bones and an empty pocket while giving 'em up meant a fine house, a bully time and all the money I could spend, then I'd kiss my principles good-bye and pass 'em up without a quiver! That's common sense."

She turned her head away.

"We don't see things the same way," she said quietly.

He rose from the chair and began to pace the floor in silence. Then, turning on her suddenly he said:

"I never understood why you quit him anyway. Tell me, did he punch you?"

"Certainly not!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Was he mixed up with another woman?"

"Another woman! Robert? The idea!!"

"Well, if it wasn't one of them, in heaven's name what was it?"

"You wouldn't understand," she replied simply.

He stopped short in front of her and folded his arms. With as severe an air as he could muster he said sternly:

"Perhaps not, but here's something I can understand. Why did I quit my job? Because of you. Who has brought us down to this? You! Who makes Fanny work harder than any hired girl in the city? You! Who has ruined my career? You! You and your selfishness!"

Taken aback by the suddenness of his denunciation, Virginia stared at him in surprise, as if not comprehending.

"My selfishness?" she stammered.

"Just that!" he sneered. With pretended indignation he went on: "And the things you were going to do for little Virgie! She was going to have a governess; she was going to learn music and painting when she grew up; she was going to have a horse. A horse! Ha! ha! The only horse she'll ever have will be a clothes-horse!!"

Hurt in her most sensitive nature, Virginia listened to his words, each one of which fell on her with the weight of a blow.

"Please, Jimmie, please!" she cried.

But he had no pity; he was ready to inflict any suffering so long as it did not hurt himself and it accomplished his object.

"Yes," he went on, "and she'll have to do the same as Fanny does, break her back washing the things to put over it! And why? Because you think more of your 'principles' than you do of your relations. Because you think only of yourself. Because you're selfish. That's why!"

Almost in tears, Virginia put out her hand, pleading to him to desist.

"Stop, please!" she cried. "Don't you see how nervous and tired I am?"

At that instant Fanny re-entered with the tea things, in time to hear her sister's cry of distress. Turning indignantly to her husband, she said:

"You behave yourself! What have you been saying to her, anyway?"

He shrugged his shoulders as he replied carelessly:

"I've been telling her things for her own good." Almost viciously he added: "And I'm going to keep on telling her."

Virginia rose, her face flushed. With some spirit she cried:

"No—you're not!"

"Who's going to stop me?" he demanded.

"I am," she said firmly. "I'm doing what I think is right and you're not going to bully me into doing what I think is wrong. If you ever mention my going back to my husband again, I'll—I'll—"

"I suppose you'll leave us as well?" he said sarcastically.

Fanny, meantime, was making frantic signs to her husband to desist. Angrily she exclaimed:

"Jimmie—will you stop?"

She was about to put her hand over her husband's mouth to silence him when Virginia interfered. In a resigned tone, she said weakly:

"Let him talk. No, I couldn't leave you. I've got to have some one to love. And you know I love you, don't you?"

"I should say so," exclaimed Fanny, embracing her.

Taking her sister's hand Virginia turned towards her brother-in-law. The look of anger and defiance had died out of her face. In its place was a peaceful expression of patient resignation. Gently she said:

"And I love the baby—dearly! Yes, and you as well, Jimmie! Oh, you don't know how hard this has been for me! You see, I've not only had my own sorrows and troubles—and they've been quite enough for any woman—"

Fanny tenderly embraced her sister. Placing a cup of tea in front of her she said soothingly:

"Never mind, dearie—everything will come out all right."

Virginia shook her head. Mournfully she said:

"But I've had yours as well—to know Jimmie lost his position because of me. To have you come down in the world like this—because of me; to know Jimmie is just where he started! To see you—breaking your back—at the washing—"

Standing over her, Fanny stroked her hair, trying to reassure her. Cheerily she said:

"Don't you worry about me. I'm all right."

"It's been dreadfully hard," went on Virginia tearfully. "At times I've felt that I just couldn't bear it—that I should—have—to go back, because, after all, I'm only human! And I may have to go back yet—I may—" She stopped abruptly and threw back her head. With spirit she exclaimed: "No, I won't go back. I won't!" Then, her tone changing again, she said pleadingly: "But please don't talk about it any more. I'm so tired!"

She sank listlessly into a chair at the table. Jimmie, judging the moment

favorable to renew the attack, opened his mouth as if to speak, but before he could utter a word Fanny silenced him.

"Oh, shut up!" she exclaimed, more forcibly than elegantly.

"I didn't say anything," he protested.

"No, but you were going to!" she retorted. Turning to Virginia and pushing the tea-cup before her, she said coaxingly:

"Take your tea, dear, before it gets cold."

Jimmie was repulsed, but not beaten. The prize was too important to permit of his accepting defeat so easily. Rising from his seat, he said in a more conciliatory tone:

"I was only going to say—suppose he was to send for her—or come for her?"

Virginia looked up with an expression of mingled surprise and alarm. Almost anxiously she exclaimed:

"Robert—come for me! There isn't the slightest chance in the world."

The clerk grinned knowingly. With the self-important air of a man who enjoys the confidence of others, he said significantly:

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you."

"Why what do you know about it?" demanded Fanny in pretended surprise.

"He's crazy in love with her—that's what I know," he said.

Virginia shook her head despondently.

"Not enough to come for me," she said. "He said he would never do it—and he never will. That's the kind of man he is."

"Per—perhaps" suggested Fanny, "just perhaps—he might."

"No," murmured Virginia, "you don't know him as well as I. Once he makes up his mind, no one can induce him to change it."

"But if he should," persisted Jimmie craftily, taking a seat near her and adopting a cordial, sympathetic tone.

"He won't," replied Virginia sadly. "We'll have to go along just as we are! And we might be much worse off, don't forget that. Even as it is, we're getting twenty dollars a week between us. I'm getting seven and Jimmie's getting thirteen—"

"I *was* getting thirteen," interrupted Jimmie ruefully.

Virginia looked at him.

"They've raised you?" she asked quickly.

"No. They've fired me."

"Discharged?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean to say you have lost your job?"

"Of course I have. How could you expect me to keep it? Do you think I could work under a man getting thirty dollars a week—me, who used to get a hundred and fifty?"

"Fired!" echoed Fanny, turning pale. "Why—what's the matter?"

Jimmie assumed an injured air. With nonchalance he explained:

"Oh, I could see that lots of things were wrong with the system. When I went to give the manager of the department the benefit of my advice and wide experience, instead of taking it and being thankful for it, he fired me—fired me cold. The bonehead!"

Virginia stared at him in dismay.

"But what are we going to do now?" she cried.

Fanny had collapsed on to a chair, the picture of utter discouragement. Weakly she repeated after her sister:

"Yes, what are we going to do now?"

"Don't worry," smiled the young man confidently. "Everything's going to be all right."

"But if it shouldn't?" argued his wife.

"It will," he retorted. With a significant glance towards his sister-in-law, he added: "You know about my new idea!"

Fanny gave a snort of scornful incredulity.

"Oh, you and your ideas!"

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. What was the good of arguing with a bunch of women? That was just how his ideas had always been laughed at, and that was why he had never been able to do anything with them. Angrily he exclaimed:

"I know what you think about 'em. Gee, but ain't you women the comforting lot!"

With this parting shot he turned on his heel and disappeared into the kitchen. Virginia, afraid that she was the cause of this little domestic storm, said apologetically:

"I'm sorry you quarrelled. Don't blame him too much, though. Things are rather hard for him."

"For him?" echoed Fanny in surprise. "What about you?"

"Oh, I'll manage," replied her sister quietly.

"He had no right to lose that job," said Fanny angrily.

"He'll soon find another," said Virginia encouragingly. "Till he does we'll get along some way. We've shared the good times together and we'll take the hard ones the same way."

"My, but you are a thoroughbred!" exclaimed her sister admiringly. "If any girl

ever deserved to be happy, you're the one."

"The same to you and many of them," laughed Virginia.

At that moment the front doorbell rang. Fanny half rose to go and open, but sat down again.

"Oh, it's only the postman. Jimmie will go."

Taking both her sister's hands in hers and bending over, Fanny embraced her sister affectionately. Soothingly she said:

"Things ought to turn for you pretty soon, dear. I hope that they will. How I hope they do!"

As she spoke the front doorbell rang again, this time more loudly. Fanny started to her feet.

"I thought Jimmie was there. He must have gone out."

"I wonder who it is?" murmured Virginia.

"I'll go and see," said Fanny. "I hope it isn't company. Our next door neighbors have been threatening to call for some time."

In no humor to be bothered by visitors, Virginia rose hastily.

"I don't want to see anyone," she said. "I'll go and lie down."

As her sister went toward the door, Virginia made a quick escape into the bedroom.

Chapter XXII

When the telephone message had come, telling him that his wife wished to see him, Stafford had been instantly raised from the depths of gloomy despondency, to dizzy heights of hope and joy. A mere sound wave vibrating along a copper wire had made him the happiest and most amazed man in New York.

He had come home particularly out of sorts that evening and instead of dining at his club as usual, had told Oku to prepare a meal. Since Virginia's departure he had seldom had the courage to dine at home. The large dining room with the big table set for himself alone only served to remind him the more keenly of his loss. Especially empty and cheerless they looked that day and his mind was obsessed by thoughts of the absent one when suddenly the loud ringing of the telephone bell had aroused his reveries. He picked up the receiver thinking it was Hadley calling him or possibly someone in his office, when to his amazement he heard the voice of Jimmie Gillie.

A thrill ran through him as he listened. At last she had sent for him. His life was not to be irretrievably blasted, after all. Virginia was ready to forgive him and to come home again. He could scarcely believe his ears and in his joy he was ready to embrace the polished surface of the telephone. A reconciliation was possible without the sacrifice of his self-respect. He did not stop to analyze her motives or to question the authenticity of the summons. It was enough that her sister's husband said she wanted to see him. Then, suddenly, an idea occurred to him, which sent the blood from his face. He felt hot and cold in turns. Suppose she were ill, dying and they had sent for him because she was on her death-bed. He would not delay a moment.

Touching a few electric bells, he set Oku and other servants running with hurry orders that galvanized new life into the sleepy household, and half an hour later he was in his motor car, speeding in the direction of Harlem.

At the first sound of the bell, instinct had told Fanny who it was. She had delayed answering in order not to unduly alarm Virginia, and for a few moments she was at a loss what to do. Jimmie had hastily but discreetly disappeared, preferring to let his wife now play her role in the little comedy intended to bring

Robert and Virginia together, but it was by no means an easy part to play and it was only when she knew that the millionaire was standing outside waiting for admittance that she quite realized how difficult was her task. There was no telling how the plan would work. A lie had been told, even if it was a lie in a good cause. If Stafford found out that he had been imposed upon, it might make matters worse, and as to Virginia she would certainly never forgive them.

It was not, therefore, without misgivings that Fanny opened the door and with a cordial smile on her anxious face bade Robert Stafford welcome.

He greeted his sister-in-law in his usual hearty manner, as if nothing had occurred to interrupt their intimacy and friendship. But it was easy to see that his thoughts were on one person only. Directly he came in, his eyes wandered round the apartment in search of her and he seemed to be listening intently as if for the sound of her voice. Standing still and questioning Fanny with an anxious look he asked in a low tone:

"Where is she?"

"Gone to her room, probably."

"You're sure she's not ill?" he demanded anxiously.

"Quite sure," smiled Fanny.

"That's the truth, is it?"

"Of course it is. She—she's a little tired, that's all."

He gave a deep sigh of relief and taking off his greatcoat, threw it together with his chauffeur's cap on the sofa.

"Thank God it's only that!" he exclaimed. "Jimmie said there was nothing the matter with her, but all the time I was coming up here I was thinking that perhaps suddenly she—" Pausing abruptly he said: "Tell her, please."

Without a word or attempting to enter into any explanations which, under cross-examination, might become embarrassing, Fanny went to Virginia's room and knocked at the door.

"It's someone to see you, Virgie!" she called out.

"To see me?" echoed Virginia in a surprised tone.

"Yes."

"Very well, I'll be there in just a minute."

Approaching her big brother-in-law Fanny gently laid her hand on his arm. There was nothing to be said. Each understood the other.

"Be very kind to her," she said pleadingly.

"Don't worry," he smiled.

"She's had a hard time."

"So have I," he replied with some emotion.

Fanny turned away and without another word left the room. For a few moments that seemed like years, Stafford remained alone, his eyes fixed on the door through which would presently pass the one woman in the whole world. It seemed like an age before she appeared. Would she never come? Then, all at once, the door opened and Virginia appeared on the threshold. On seeing who the visitor was, she stood like one spellbound. The blood went from her cheeks, leaving her deathly pale. She made a step forward, but stumbled and nearly fell. He darted forward and caught her in his strong arms.

"Darling!" he whispered.

Her head rested on his shoulder as it had done that first time the day at his apartment on Riverside Drive when he asked her to be his wife. Her pale, weary face was turned upwards, her tired eyes looking wonderingly into his. Her lips were within his reach, but he resisted the temptation. It was enough to feel that once more she was safe within his arms. Slowly she murmured:

"Robert! You did come! You did!"

"Of course I did," he said soothingly, as he stroked her hair caressingly.

"I'm so happy, dear," she murmured.

"You're not a bit happier than I am," he said, trying to keep back the tears that were fast filling his own eyes.

"And you came for me!"

"Of course, dear. Did you think I wouldn't?"

"Yes, because I thought I knew you and understood you. But I didn't. I knew you were fine and big, but you are finer and bigger than ever I imagined and I adore you for it! Oh, my darling, you came for me!"

He listened, bewildered, not understanding. Gently he said:

"But, dear—I—don't—"

She motioned him to a seat.

"Sit down, sweetheart, and let me sit on your knee, just as I used to."

"Yes, darling—just as we used to."

He took off his coat, threw it on the sofa and sat on a chair in front of the table. Virginia, with a cry of delight, jumped on his knee and threw her arm around his neck.

"Let me snuggle up to you in the way I love," she cried. "Hold me close—very, very close—and don't say a word—not even one."

Too happy to ask questions, he held her tight in his arms. In a low voice she murmured:

"I'm so tired, dear. I'm so tired—"

Fondly, tenderly, he caressed her.

"My poor little girl! Come, dear, the machine is outside. We'll go home at once."

"Not yet—please—I'm too happy. And it's you. It's really, really you."

"It really is," he smiled.

"Yes," she went on, "I've hoped and longed and prayed that you would come for me, but I didn't think you would. I imagined that your pride wouldn't let you."

"My pride?" he echoed, perplexed.

"Yes. You said you wouldn't come unless I sent for you."

Stafford started and stared fixedly at her.

"Virginia!" he exclaimed.

He was about to demand explanations when she interrupted him.

"I'm not reproaching you, dear. I mention it because it makes your coming all the bigger and finer!" Rising she added; "I'm the happiest girl in all the world. You came for me. Nothing else matters—"

Stafford listened to her in amazement. It was very clear. She had not sent for him after all. There had been some misunderstanding. Yet what of it? He had found her, he had clasped her once more to his breast. That was all he cared about. Not for anything in the world would he lose her again. He said nothing, gazing fondly into her dear tired face as she went on:

"If you hadn't come, I should probably have had to come to you! And that would have robbed me of everything I've been fighting for. But now I shall know that I didn't have to do what I knew to be wrong, and it makes me so happy, dear! So happy! So very, very happy!"

Sobbing she fell on her knees beside him and covered her face with her hands. For a moment or so he made no answer, but continued to caress her in silence. Then, slowly, he said:

"Of course I came for you! If I had known all that it meant to you I should have come long ago—"

She looked up at him eagerly.

"Then you did miss me?"

He nodded.

"I can't tell you how lonely I was. You had Fanny and Jimmie and the baby, but I had no one. As I sat alone in the house—the bigness of which seemed to make it all the lonelier—I thought of you, and your goodness, and sweetness and there I fought things out—I fought them out, and now I can make you any promise that you ask."

"But I don't ask any," she smiled.

"I give it to you just the same. I shall never, forgive myself either for letting you go. But I'll make it all up to you now. Ask for anything you please and you shall have it—to-morrow we'll go to Tiffany's and—"

Quickly she put her hand over his mouth.

"Don't dear, don't!" she cried. "I don't want you to buy things for me—I just want you to love me, dear! To love me! Love me! Love me!"

He smiled as he clasped her closer."

"No matter how hard I tried I couldn't help loving you."

"That's all I want," she murmured.

Her face was turned upwards and he bent down and kissed her. They were still in each others' embrace when the door opened slowly and Jimmie cautiously put his head in. He grinned when he saw the good results that had come of his work.

"May I come in?" he asked comically.

"Yes and go out again—that way," laughed Stafford good-humoredly. Pointing to the front door he added: "Tell Oku to bring the things out of the machine."

"You're on," grinned the clerk.

"And keep your mouth shut," said Stafford in a low tone.

"Tight as a clam!" grinned Jimmie.

As the millionaire turned to Virginia the young man again interrupted them.

"There's just one thing more," he said.

"What?"

"When do I go back to work?"

"Tomorrow," laughed Stafford.

"What salary?"

"What salary were you getting?"

"Well—one hundred and fifty a week."

"You were," laughed his employer, "for about fifteen minutes! Well—one hundred and fifty goes."

Jimmie nodded with satisfaction and went towards the door. Before he reached it he again turned round:

"And do we get the auto?"

"You do," laughed Stafford.

"Fine!" grinned Jimmie.

He disappeared and Stafford turned to Virginia.

"He's still the same old Jimmie!"

"And you're still the same generous Robert!"

He smiled indulgently at her as he said:

"I shall never miss what Jimmie gets."

"And it means so much to them," murmured Virginia.

"I'm glad it does. I'm glad I can make them happy for your—"

Before he could complete the sentence, Jimmie reappeared.

"Oku's coming," he grinned.

"You didn't get wet?" laughed Virginia.

"Not while I have my voice. I stood at the door and shouted to him. Here he is now."

The door was pushed open and the Japanese butler entered carrying a fur coat which he gave to his master. The millionaire turned to him.

"Oku, Mrs. Stafford has finished her visit to her sister and is coming home."

"How are you, Oku?" smiled Virginia.

The butler made a low salaam.

"I am big obliged. Anything else, sir?"

"Tell the chauffeur we're coming right out."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Then excuse, please! Excuse! Oh, I am big obliged."

The butler went out and Stafford hurriedly held up his wife's coat.

"Here it is," he smiled.

At that instant Fanny opened the door and cautiously peeped in. Jimmie, seeing her, called out:

"Come in. It's all right."

She entered, looking timidly at her brother-in-law. Apprehensively, she said to Virginia:

"Is it?"

Going up to her sister, Virginia threw her arms around her neck.

"Yes—and I'm so happy!"

"So am I," laughed Fanny almost hysterically. "One of Jimmie's ideas has turned out right at last."

"One of his ideas?" echoed Virginia puzzled.

"Yes—about you and Robert," said Fanny, ignoring her husband's dumb signals to keep silent.

"Shut up!" he whispered fiercely.

"Didn't she know?" demanded Fanny.

The clerk made a gesture of disgust.

"Know what?" asked Virginia in surprise.

"Why—why—"

"What didn't I know?" insisted Virginia. "What is it about you and me—" She looked to her husband for an explanation, but he was silent. Anxiously she said: "Robert, tell me! Tell me!"

Stafford went up to her. Tenderly he replied:

"I will. It probably would have come up some time and perhaps it's best that it has come up now. Listen, dear!"

"Yes?"

"Don't you think it would be best to start afresh without there being even a chance for a misunderstanding between us—start on a basis of absolute truth?"

"Certainly! Aren't we starting that way?"

Stafford shook his head as he replied gravely:

"No, dear."

Startled, she recoiled and looked at him in dismay.

"Robert!" she exclaimed.

"There's nothing to be alarmed about," he went on soothingly. "Everything is all right."

"Tell me," she insisted firmly.

"Well, dear, now please, please don't be worried about it—when I came I thought you had sent for me."

She looked at him as if bewildered. Unable to comprehend she cried wildly:

"You thought I—Then everything is wrong! Everything!"

"No, dear," he replied firmly, "everything is right. You were fighting for a principle. Have you surrendered it?"

"No," she stammered, bewildered.

"You asked for a promise. I gave it and now I repeat it, so that is settled, isn't it?"

"Yes," she faltered.

"You said you wouldn't send for me and you haven't. Have you?"

"No."

"Then don't you see, dear, all along the line you won the victory?"

Jimmie, no longer able to contain himself, gave vent to a loud chuckle. Delighted at this successful outcome of his scheming, he cried gleefully:

"It's more than a victory! It's a landslide!"

Virginia remained silent. She was trying to understand. It was all a mystery. Yet why let it trouble her further? All she knew was that her husband had come for her and that her days of suffering were at an end. What mattered whose the victory so long as her tears were dried and they were reunited? Looking gratefully up at her husband she said gravely:

"You thought the victory was yours, but when you found me claiming it and

realized what it meant to me, you hand it to me without a word. That was a big thing to do!"

"What does anything matter?" he said eagerly. "I love you, you love me and we are together again. That's everything, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear, that's everything," she answered, looking up at him fondly and proudly. "We can go."

"Let's hurry then," he said quickly, as if still afraid that his new-found bride might change her mind.

"Quick, Jimmie—get Virginia's rubbers!" cried Fanny.

"Sure," he said, disappearing on the run.

Stafford handed the automobile veil to his sister-in-law.

"You can fix this better than I," he smiled.

While Fanny was adjusting the veil, Jimmie re-entered with the rubbers and put them on.

Stafford picked up the fur coat.

"Now for the coat," he said. Putting his hand in his waistcoat pocket, he added with a significant smile:

"By the way, I've something else for you. It's from Tiffany's."

Virginia made a gesture of protest.

"Oh, Robert, didn't I tell you that—"

"Wait! Wait!" he laughed. "You don't know what it is!"

Taking from his pocket the wedding ring which three months before she had returned to him, he held it up and solemnly replaced it on her finger.

"With eternal love," he said gravely.

Taking her gently in his arms, he kissed her.

THE END

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