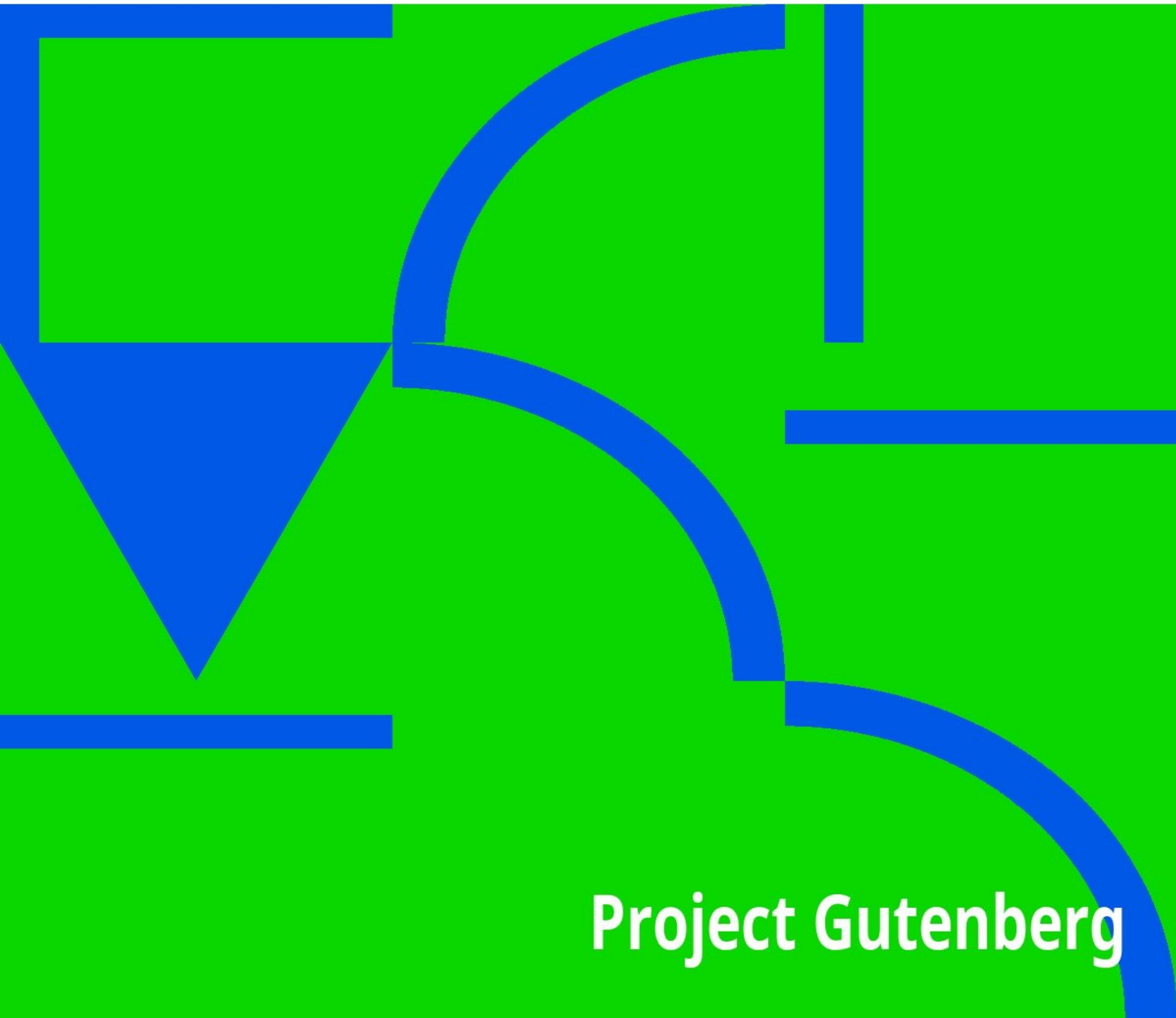
Outside Inn

Ethel M. Kelley



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OUTSIDE INN

“If—if you’ve made a woman really care”

OUTSIDE INN

By

ETHEL M. KELLEY

Author of

Over Here, Turn About Eleanor, Etc.

With Frontispiece by

W. B. KING

emblem

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OUTSIDE INN

CHAPTER I
A Good Little Dream

“I Elijah Peebles Martin, of the city and county of Harrison, in the state of Rhode Island, being of sound and disposing mind and memory, do make and declare the following, as and for, my last will and testament.’ ... I wish you’d take your head out of that barrel, Nancy, and listen to the document that is going to make you rich beyond the dreams of avarice.”

“I was beyond them anyway.” The young woman in blue serge made one last effectual dive into the depths of excelsior, the topmost billows of which were surging untidily over the edge of a big crate in the middle of the basement floor, and secured a nest of blue and rose colored teacups, which she proceeded to unwrap lovingly and display on a convenient packing box. “Not one single thing broken in this whole lot, Billy.... What is a disposing mind and memory, anyhow?”

“You don’t deserve to know,” the blond young man in the Norfolk jacket assured her, adjusting himself more firmly to the idiosyncrasies of the rackety step-ladder he was striding. “You’re not human about this. Here you are suddenly in possession of a fortune. Money enough to make you independently wealthy for the rest of your life—money you didn’t know the existence of, two weeks ago—fed to you by a gratuitous providence. A legacy is a legacy, and deserves to be treated as such, and I propose to see that it gets what it deserves, without any more shilly-shallying.”

“I’m a busy woman,” Nancy groaned, “and I’ve hammered my finger to a pulp, trying to open this crate, while you perch on a broken step-ladder and prate to me of legacies. The saucers to these cups may be in here, and I can’t wait to find out. I’m perfectly crazy about this ware. It’s English—Wedgewood, you know.”

“I didn’t know.” Billy resignedly let himself to the floor, and appropriated the screwdriver. “I thought Wedgewood was dove color, and consisted chiefly of ladies in deshabille, doing the tango on a parlor ornament. I smashed one in my youth, so I know. There, it’s open now. I may as well unpack what’s here. These seem to be demi-tasses.

‘You may tempt your upper classes,
With your villainous demi-tasses.

But Heaven will protect the working girl,’”

he finished lugubriously, in a wailing baritone, taking an imaginary encore by bowing a head picturesquely adorned with a crop of excelsior curls, accumulated during his activities in and about the barrel.

“The trouble with the average tea-room, or Arts and Crafts table d’hôte,” Nancy said, sinking into the depths of a broken armchair in the corner of the dim, overcrowded interior, “is that when the pinch comes, quantity is sacrificed to quality. Smaller portions of food, and chipped chinaware. People who can’t keep a place up, let it run down genteelly. They won’t compromise on quality. I should never be like that. I should go to the ten-cent stores and replenish my whole establishment, if I couldn’t make it pay with imported ware and Colonial silver. I’d never go to the other extreme. I’d never be so perceptibly second-rate, but in the matter of furnishings as well as food values, I’d find my perfect balance between quality and quantity, and keep it.”

“I believe you would. You are a thorough child, when you set about a thing. I’ll bet you know the restaurant business from A to Z.”

“I do. You know, I studied the organization of every well-run restaurant in New York, when I was doing field work from Teachers’ College. I’ve read every book on the subject of Diet and Nutrition and Domestic Economy that I could get my hands on. I’m just ready now for the practical application of all my theories.”

“Nancy Calory Martin is your real name. I don’t blame you for hating to give up this tea-room idea. You’ve dug so deep into the possibilities of it, that you want to go through. I get that.”

Nancy’s eyes widened in satiric admiration.

“You could understand almost anything, couldn’t you, Billy?” she mocked.

“All I want now,” Billy continued imperturbably, “is a chance to make *you* understand something.” He smote the document in his left hand. “Of course, your uncle’s lawyer has explained all the details in his letters to you, but if you won’t read the letters or familiarize yourself with the contents of this will, somebody has got to explain it to you in words of one syllable. My legal training, slight as it is—”

“Sketchy is the better word, don’t you think so, Billy?”

“Slight as it is”—except for a prodigious frown, Billy ignored the interruption, though he took advantage of her suddenly upright position to encircle her neatly with a barrel hoop, as if she were the iron peg in a game of quoits—“enables me to put the fact before you in a few short, sharp, well-chosen sentences. I won’t

again attempt to read the document—”

“You’d better not,” Nancy interrupted witheringly, “your delivery is poor. Besides, I don’t want to know what is in that will. If I had, it stands to reason that I would have found out long before this. I’ve had it three days.”

“You’ve had it three days and never once looked into it?” Billy groaned. “Who started all this scandal about the curiosity of women, anyway?”

“I don’t want to know what’s in it,” Nancy insisted. “As long as I’m not in possession of any definite facts, I can ignore it. I’ve got the kind of mind that must deal with concrete facts concretely.”

Billy grinned. “I’d hate the job of trying to subpœna you,” he said, “but you’d make a corking good witness, on the stand. Of course, you can proceed for a certain length of time on the theory that what you don’t know can’t hurt you, but take it from me, little girl, what you ought to know and don’t know is the thing that’s bound to hurt you most tremendously in the long run. What are you afraid of, anyway, Nancy?”

“I’m not *afraid* of anything,” Nancy corrected him, with some heat. “I just plain don’t want to be interrupted at this stage of my career. I consider it an impertinence of Uncle Elijah, to make me his heir. I never saw him but once, and I had no desire to see him that time. It was about ten years ago, and I caught a grippe germ from him. He told me between sneezes that I was too big a girl to wear a mess of hair streaming down my back like a baby. I stuck out my tongue at him, but he was too near-sighted to see it. Why couldn’t he have left his money to an eye and ear infirmary? Or the Sailors’ Snug Retreat? Or—or—”

“If you really don’t want the money,” Billy said, “it’s your privilege to endow some institution—”

“You know very well that I can’t get rid of money that way,” Nancy cried hotly. “I am at least a responsible person. I don’t believe in these promiscuous, eleemosynary institutions. It would be against all my principles to contribute money to any such philanthropy. I know too much about them—but he didn’t. He could have disposed of his money to any one of a dozen of these mid-Victorian charities, but no—he was just one of those old parties that want to shift their responsibilities on to young shoulders, and so he chose mine.”

“You don’t speak very kindly of your dear dead relative.”

“I don’t feel very kindly toward him. He was a meddling old creature. He never gave any member of the family a cent when they wanted it and needed it. Now that I’ve just got my life in shape, and know what I want to do with it without being beholden to anybody on earth, he leaves me a whole lot of superfluous money.”

“If I weren’t engaged to Caroline, who is a jealous woman, though I say it as shouldn’t, I’d be tempted to undertake the management of your fortune myself,” Billy said reflectively; “as it is—honor—”

“I know what I want to do with my life,” Nancy continued, as if he had not spoken. “I want to run an efficiency tea-room and serve dinner and breakfast and tea to my fellow men and women. I want the perfectly balanced ration, perfectly served, to be my contribution to the cause of humanity.”

She looked about her ruefully. The sun, through the barred dusty windows, struck in long slant rays, athwart the confusion of the cellar, illuminating piles upon piles of gay, blue latticed chinaware,—cups set out methodically in rows on the lids and bottoms of packing boxes; assorted sizes of plates and saucers, graded pyramidically, rising from the floor. There were also individual copper casseroles and serving dishes, and a heterogeneous assortment of Japanese basketry tangled in excelsior and tissue. A wandering sunbeam took her hair, displaying its amber, translucent quality.

“I’ve just got capital enough to get it going right; to swing it for the first year, even if I don’t make a cent on it. It’s my one big chance to do my share in the world, and to work out my own salvation. This legacy is a menace to all my dreams and plans.”

“I see that,” Billy said. “What I don’t see is what you gain by refusing to let it catch up with you.”

“You’re not it till you’re tagged. That’s all. If I don’t know whether my income is going to be five thousand dollars or twenty-five thousand a year, I can go on unpacking teacups with—”

Billy whistled.

“Five thousand or twenty-five—my darling Nancy! You’ll have fifty thousand a year at the very lowest estimate. The actual money is more than five hundred thousand dollars. The stock in the Union Rubber Company will amount to as much again, maybe twice as much. You’re a real heiress, my dear, with wads of real money to show for it. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Fifty thousand a year!” Nancy turned a shocked face, from which the color slowly drained, leaving it blue-white. “Fifty thousand a year! You’re mad. It can’t be!”

“Yes’um. Fifty thousand at least.”

Nancy’s pallor increased. She closed her eyes.

“Don’t do that,” Billy said sharply. “No woman can faint on me just because she’s had money left her. You make me feel like the ghost of Hamlet’s father.”

Nancy clutched at his sleeve.

“Don’t, Billy!” she besought. “I’m past joking now. Fifty thousand a year! Why, Uncle Elijah bought fifteen-dollar suits and fifteen-cent lunches. How could a retired sea captain get all that money by investing in a little rubber, and getting to be president of a little rubber company?”

“That’s how. Be a good sensible girl, and face the music.”

“I’ll have to give up the tea-room.”

Billy laid a consolatory arm over her shoulder, and patted her awkwardly.

“Cheer up,” he said, “there’s worse things in this world than money. The time may come when you’ll be grateful to your poor little old uncle, for his nifty little fifty thousand per annum.”

Nancy turned a tragic face to him.

“I tell you I’m not grateful to him,” she said, “and I doubt if I ever will be. I don’t want the stupid money. I want to work life out in my own way. I know I’ve got it in me, and I want my chance to prove it. I want to give myself, my own brain and strength, to the job I’ve selected as mine. Now, it’s all spoiled for me. I’m subsidized. I’m done for, and I can’t see any way out of it.”

“You can give the money away.”

“I can’t. Giving money away is a special science of itself. If I devote my life to doing that as it should be done, I won’t have time or energy for anything else. I’m not a philanthropist in that sense. I wanted my restaurant to be philanthropic only incidentally. I wanted to cram my patrons with the full value of their money’s worth of good nourishing food; to increase the efficiency of hundreds of people who never suspected I was doing it, by scientific methods of feeding. That’s my dream.”

“A good little dream, all right.”

“To make people eat the right food; to help them to a fuller and more effective use of themselves by supplying them with the proper fuel for their functions.”

“You could buy a chain of restaurants with the money you’ve got.”

“I don’t want a chain of restaurants.”

“You can endow a perpetual diet squad. You can buy out the whole Life Extension Institute. If you would only stop to think of the advantages of having all the money you wanted to spend on anything you wanted, you’d—”

“Billy,” Nancy said solemnly, “I’ve been through all that. If I had thought I would have been a better person with a great deal of money at my disposal, I—I might have—”

“Married Dick,” Billy finished for her. “I forgot that interesting possibility. I suppose to a girl who has just turned down a cold five millions, this meager little

proposition”—he flourished the crumpled document in his hand—“has no real allure. Lord! What a world this is. You’ll marry Dick yet. Them as has—*gits*. It never rains but it pours. To the victor belong the spoils, *et cetera, et cetera*—”

“Money simply does not interest me.”

“Dick interests you. I don’t know to what extent, but he interests you.”

“Don’t be sentimental, Billy. Just because you’re in love with Caroline, you can’t make all your other friends marry each other. Tell me what to do about this legacy. What is customary when you get a lump of money like that? I suppose I’ll have to begin to get rid of all *this* immediately.” There was more than a hint of tears in her voice, but she smiled at Billy bravely. “I’m so perfectly crazy about these—these cups and saucers, Billy. See the lovely way that rose is split to fit into the design. Oh, when do I come into possession, anyway?”

“You don’t come into possession right away, you know. You don’t inherit for a couple of years, under the Rhode Island law. The formalities will take—”

“Billy Boynton, do you mean to say that I won’t have to do a blessed thing about this money for two years?” Nancy shrieked.

“Why, no. It takes a certain amount of red tape to settle an estate, to probate a will, etc., and the law allows a period of time, varying in different states—”

“Oho! Is there anything in all this universe so stupid as a man?” Nancy interrupted fervently. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? Do you suppose I care how much money I have two years from now? Two years of freedom, why, that’s all I want, Billy. There you’ve been sitting up winking and blinking at me like a sympathetic old owl, when all I needed to know was that I had two years of grace. Of course, I’ll go on with my tea-room, and not a soul shall know the difference.”

“While the feminine temperament has my hearty admiration and my most cordial endorsement,” Billy murmured, “there are things about it—”

“I won’t have to tell anybody, will I?”

“There’s no law to that effect. If your friends don’t know it from you, they’re not likely to hear it.”

“I haven’t mentioned it,” Nancy said. “I only told you, because it seemed rather in your line of work, and I was getting so much mail about it, I thought it would be wise to have some one look it over.”

“I’ve given up my law practice and Caroline for three days in your service.”

“You’ve done more than well, Billy, and I’m grateful to you. Of course, you would have saved me days of nervous wear and tear if it had only occurred to you to tell me the one simple little thing that was the essential point of the whole matter. If I had known that I didn’t inherit for two years, I wouldn’t have cared

what was in that will."

Billy stared at her feelingly.

"A peculiar sensation always comes over me," he said musingly, "after I spend several hours uninterruptedly in the society of a woman who is using her mind in any way. I couldn't explain it to you exactly. It's a kind of impression that my own brain has begun to disintegrate, and to—"

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Billy." Nancy soothed him sweetly,—Billy was not one of the people to whom she habitually allowed full conversational leeway: "Swear you won't tell Caroline or Betty—or Dick."

"I swear."

Nancy held out her hand to him.

"You're a good boy," she said, "and I appreciate you, which is more than Caroline does, I'm afraid. Run along and see her now—I don't need you any more, and you're probably dying to."

Billy bowed over her hand, lingeringly and politely, but once releasing it, he shook his big frame, and straightening up, drew a long deep breath of something very like relief.

"With all deference to your delightful sex," he said, "the only society that I'm dying for at the present moment is that of the old family bar-keep."

As Billy left her, Nancy turned to her basement window, and stood looking out at the quaint stone court he had to cross in order to reach the high gate that guarded the entrance to the marble worker's establishment, under the shadow of which it was her intention to open her out-of-door tea-room. She watched him dreamily is he made his way among the cinerary urns, the busts and statues and bas-reliefs that were a part of the stock in trade of her incongruous business associate.

In her investigation of the various sorts and conditions of restaurants in New York, she characteristically hit upon the garden restaurant, a commonplace in the down-town table d'hôte district, as the ideal setting for her adventure in practical philanthropy, while the ubiquitous tea-room and antique-shop combination gave her the inspiration to stage her own undertaking even more spectacularly. Her enterprise was destined to flourish picturesquely in the open court during the fair months of the year, and in the winter months, or in the event of a bad storm, to be housed under the eaves in the rambling garret of the old brick building, the lower floor of which was given over to traffic in marbles.

She sighed happily. Billy, extricating himself from the grasp of an outstretched marble hand, which bad seemed to clutch desperately at his elbow, and narrowly escaping a plunge into a too convenient bird's bath, turned to see her eyes

following him, and waved gaily, but she scarcely realized that he had done so. It was rather with the eye of her mind that she was contemplating the dark, quadrangular area outstretched before her. In spirit she was moving to and fro among the statuary, bringing a housewifely order out of the chaos that prevailed,—placing stone ladies draped in stone or otherwise; cherubic babies, destined to perpetual cold water bathing; strange mortuary furniture, in the juxtaposition that would make the most effective background for her enterprise.

She saw the gritty, gray paving stones of the court cleared of their litter, and scoured free from discoloration and grime, set with dozens of little tables immaculate in snowy napery and shiny silver, and arranged with careful irregularity at the most alluring angle. She saw a staff of Hebe-like waitresses in blue chambray and pink ribbons, to match the chinaware, and all bearing a marked resemblance to herself in her last flattering photograph, moving among a crowd of well brought up but palpably impoverished young people,—mostly social workers and artists. They were *all* young, and most of them very beautiful. In all her twenty-five years, she had never before been so close to a vision realized, as she was at that moment.

“Outside Inn,” she said to herself, still smiling. “It’s a perfect name for it, really. Outside Inn!”

CHAPTER II
Applicants for Blue Chambray

Ann Martin was an orphan of New England extraction. Her father, the eldest child of a simple unpretentious country family in Western Massachusetts, had been a brilliant but erratic throw-back to Mayflower traditions and Puritan intellectualism. He had married a girl with much the same ancestry as his own, but herself born and brought up in New York, and of a generation to which the assumption of prerogative was a natural rather than an acquired characteristic. The possession of a comfortable degree of fortune and culture was a matter of course with Ann Winslow, while to poor David Martin education in the finer things of life, and the opportunity to indulge his taste in the choice of surroundings and associates, were hard-won privileges.

Both parents had been killed in a railroad accident when Ann, or Nancy as her mother had insisted on calling her from the day of her christening, was about seven years old. She had been placed in the care of a maternal aunt, and had flourished in the heart of a well ordered establishment of the mid-Victorian type, run by a vigorous, rather worldly old lady.

From her lovely mother—Ann Winslow had been more than a merely attractive or pretty woman; she had the real grace and distinction, and purity of profile that placed her in the actual category of beauty,—Nancy had inherited a healthy and equitable outlook on life, while her father, irresistible and impracticable being that he was, had endowed her with a certain eccentric and adventurous spirit in the investigation of it.

She had been educated in a boarding-school, forty minutes' run from New York, and had specialized in the domestic sciences and basket ball; and on attaining her majority had taken up a course or two at Columbia, rather more to put off the evil day of assuming the responsibility of the stuffy, stately old house in Washington Square than because she ever expected to make any use of her superfluous education. She was conceded by every one to be her aunt's heir, but old Miss Winslow died intestate, very suddenly in Nancy's twenty-third year; and the beneficiaries of this accident, most of them extremely well-to-do themselves, combined to make Nancy a regular allowance until she was twenty-five. On her twenty-fifth birthday fifteen thousand dollars was deposited to her account in the Trust Company which conserved the family fortunes of the

Winslows, and Nancy understood that they considered their duty by her to be done. It was with this fifteen thousand dollars that she was to inaugurate her darling enterprise,—Outside Inn.

Money, as she had truthfully told Billy, meant nothing to her. Her aunt, living and giving generously, had furnished her with a background of comfortable, unostentatious well being, against which the rather vivid elements that went to make up her intimate social circle—she was a creature of intimates—stood out in alluring relief. She had literally never wanted for anything. Her tastes, to be sure, were modest, but the wherewithal to gratify them had always been almost stultifyingly near at hand. The excitement and adventure of an income to which there was attached some uncertainty had never been hers, and she was too much her father's daughter to be interested in the playing of any game in which she could not lose. With all she possessed staked against her untried business acumen she was for the first time in her life concerned with her financial situation, and quite honestly resentful of any interruption of her experiment. Her life was closely associated with her mother's family. Her father's people had at no time entered into her scheme of living,—her uncle Elijah less than any member of it, and she found his post-obit intervention in her affairs embarrassing in a dozen different connections.

The best friend she had in the world, before he had made the tactical error of asking her to marry him, was Richard Thorndyke. He was still, thanks to his immediate skill in trying to retrieve that error, a very good friend indeed. Nancy would normally have told him everything that happened to her in the exact order of its occurrence; but partly because she did not wish to exaggerate her eccentricity in eyes that looked upon her so kindly, and partly because she had the instinct to spare him the realization that there was no way in which he might come to her rescue in the event of disaster,—she did not inform him of her legacy. She knew that he was shrewdly calculating to stand behind her venture, morally and practically, and that the chief incentive of his encouragement and helpfulness was the hidden hope that through her experiment and its probable unfortunate termination she would learn to depend on *him*. Nancy was so sure of herself that this attitude of Dick's roused her tenderness instead of her ire.

The two girls who were closest to her, Caroline Eustace and Betty Pope, had been actively enlisted in the service of Outside Inn and the ideals that it represented. Betty, a dimpling, dynamic little being, who took a sporting interest in any project that interested her, irrespective of its merits, was to be associated with Nancy in the actual management of the restaurant. Caroline, who took herself more seriously, and was busy with a dozen enterprises that had to do with

the welfare of the race, was concerned chiefly with the humanitarian side of the undertaking and willing to deflect to it only such energy as she felt to be essential to its scientific betterment. She was tentatively engaged to Billy Boynton,—for what reason no one—not even Billy—had been able to determine; since she systematically disregarded him in relation to all the interests and activities that went to make up her life.

The affairs of the Inn progressed rapidly. It was in the first week of May that Nancy and Billy had their memorable discussion of her situation. By the latter part of June, when she could be reasonably sure of a succession of propitious days and nights, for she had set her heart on balmy weather conditions, Nancy expected to have her formal opening,—a dinner which not only initiated her establishment, but submitted it to the approval of her own group of intimate friends, who were to be her guests on that occasion.

Meantime, the most extensive and discriminating preparations were going forward. Billy and Dick were present one afternoon by special request when Betty and Nancy were interviewing a contingent of waitresses.

“We’ve got three perfectly charming girls already,” Nancy said, “that is, girls that look perfectly charming to me, but a man’s point of view on a woman’s looks is so different that I thought it would be a good plan to have you boys look over this lot. They are all very high-class and competent girls. The Manning Agency doesn’t send any other kind.”

“Trot ’em along,” Billy said; “where are they anyway?”

“In the room in front.” They were in the smallest of the nest of attic rooms that Nancy planned to make her winter quarters. “Michael receives them, and shows them in here one by one.”

“You like Michael then?” Dick asked. “I always said his talents were hidden at our place. He has a soul above the job of handy man on a Long Island farm.”

“He’s certainly a handy man here,” Nancy said; “I couldn’t live without him.”

“The lucky dog,” Billy said, with a side glance at Dick.

“You see,” Betty explained, “the girl comes in, and we ask her questions. Then if I don’t like her I take my pencil from behind my ear, and rap against my palm with it. If Nancy doesn’t like her she says, ‘You’re losing a hairpin, Betty.’ If we like her we rub our hands together.”

“It’s a good system,” Billy said, “but I don’t see why Nancy doesn’t take her pencil from behind her ear, or why you don’t say to her—”

“I wouldn’t put a pencil behind my ear,” Nancy said scathingly.

“And she never loses a hairpin,” Betty cut in. “If I approve this system of signals I don’t see what you have to complain of. Nancy couldn’t get a pencil

behind her ear even if she wanted to. It's only a criminal ear like mine that accommodates a pencil."

"Speaking of ears," Dick said, looking at his watch, "let's get on with the beauty show. I have to take my mother to see *Boris* to-night, and she has an odd notion of being on time."

"Aw right," Betty said. "Here's Michael. Bring in the first one immediately, Michael."

"Sure an' I will that, Miss Pope." The old family servitor of the Thorndykes pulled a deliberate lid over a twinkling left eye by way of acknowledging the presence of his young master. "There's quite a display of thim this time."

The first applicant, guided thus by Michael, appeared on the threshold and stood for a moment framed in the low doorway. Seeing two gentlemen present she carefully arranged her expression to meet that contingency. She was a blonde girl with masses of doubtfully tinted hair and no chin, but her eyes were very blue and matched a chain of turquoise beads about her throat, and she radiated a peculiar vitality.

Betty took her pencil from behind her ear.

"You're losing a hair—" Nancy began, but Dick and Billy exchanged glances and began rubbing their hands together energetically and enthusiastically.

"I'm sorry," Nancy said crisply, "but you're a little too tall for our purpose."

"And too blonde," Betty added with a bland dismissing smile. "We're looking for a special type of girl."

"I understood you were looking for a waitress," the girl said pertly, with her eyes on Billy.

"I was," Billy answered, "but I'm not now. My—my wife won't let me." He waved an inclusive hand in the direction of Nancy and Betty.

"If you don't behave," Nancy said, while they waited for Michael to bring in the next girl, "you can't stay. If that is the kind of girl you men find attractive then my restaurant is doomed from the beginning. I wouldn't have that girl in my employ for—"

Before she could begin again, applicant number two stood before them,—a comfortable, kind-eyed girl, no longer very young but with efficiency written all over her, despite the shyness that beset her.

Nancy rubbed her hands with satisfaction and looked at Betty, who beamed back at her. The girl, encouraged by Nancy's kindly smile took a step forward, and began to recite her qualifications for the position. Dick fumbled with a fountain-pen which he placed elaborately behind his ear for an instant, and then as ostentatiously removed.

“I think you’re losing a hairpin, Dick,” Billy suggested solicitously, as Nancy, ignoring their existence entirely, proceeded to make terms with the newcomer.

The next girl created a diversion—being palpably an adventuress out of a job and impressing none of the quartette as being interesting enough to deserve one,—but the two girls who followed her were bright and sprightly creatures, disarmingly graceful and ingenuous, of whom the entire quartette approved. They were twin sisters, they said, Dolly and Molly, and they had always had places together ever since they had begun working out.

“Tell me, pretty maiden, *are* there any more at home *like*—” Billy was addressing Molly gravely when Dick slipped a friendly but firm hand over his jugular region, and cut off his utterance.

“He’s not feeling quite himself,” he explained suavely to Dolly, “but we’ll bring him around soon.—I think you’ll find Miss Martin an ideal person to work for, and the salary and the hours unusually satisfactory.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Molly and Dolly together, in the English manner which showed the excellence of their training.

There were several other dubby creatures so much out of the picture that they were not even considered, and then Michael brought in what he called “a grand girl,” and left her standing statuesquely in their midst.

“With large lovely arms and a neck like a tower,” Dick quoted in his throat.

Nancy engaged her without enthusiasm.

“She’ll draw,” she said briefly. “Personally, I dislike these Alma Tadema girls.”

“What the men see,” Betty said, curling around the better part of two straight dining chairs, in the moment of relaxation that followed the final disposition of the business of the day, “in a girl like that first one is one of the mysteries of existence.”

“I know it,” Nancy agreed, with New England colloquialism. “You feel reasonably allied to them as a sex, and then suddenly they show some vulgar preference for a woman like that, and it’s all off.”

“This from the woman who thinks my chauffeur is an ideal of manly beauty,” Dick scoffed, “a dimpled man with a little finger ring.”

“He can run a car, though,” Nancy retorted.

“I’ll bet little blue eyes could run a restaurant.”

“That was just the trouble,—she would have been running mine in twenty-four hours. Oh! I think what you men really like is a bossy woman.”

“Now, what a woman really likes in a man—” Betty began, “is—is—”

“Quality,” Nancy finished for her succinctly.

“I wonder—” Dick mused. “I should have said finish.”

“Almost any kind of finish so long as it is smooth enough,” Billy supplemented. “Look at the way they eat up this artistic and poetic veneer.”

“Look at the way they mangle their metaphors,” Nancy complained to Betty.

“I know what I really like in a woman,” Dick whispered to Nancy, as he helped her into her coat just before they started out together, “and you know what I like, too. That’s one of the subjects that needs no discussion between us.”

Betty and Billy walking up the avenue ahead of them,—Outside Inn was located in one of the cross-streets in the thirties,—were discussing their relation to one another.

“I wonder sometimes if Nancy’s got it in her really to care for a man,” Betty argued; “she’s as fond as she can be of Dick, but she’d sacrifice him heart, soul and body for that restaurant of hers. She’s a perfect darling, I don’t mean that; she’s the very essence of sweetness and kindness, but she doesn’t seem to understand or appreciate the possibilities of a devotion like Dick’s. Do you think she’s really capable of loving anybody—of putting any man in the world before all her ideas and notions and experiments?”

“Lord, yes,” said Billy, accelerating his pace, suggestively in the hope of getting Betty home in good time for him to dress to keep his engagement with Caroline.

CHAPTER III
Inauguration

Nancy's heart was beating heavily when she woke on the memorable morning of the day that was to inaugurate the activities of Outside Inn. A confused dream of her Uncle Elijah in tatters on a park bench, which was instantly metamorphosed into one of the rustic seats she had arranged against the wall along the side of some of the bigger tables in the marble worker's court, was ostensibly the cause of the disturbance in her cardiac region. She had, it seemed, in the interminable tangle of nightmare, given Molly and Dolly and the Alma Tadema girl instructions to throw out the unwelcome guest, and she was standing by with Michael, who was assuring her that the big blonde was "certain a grand bouncer," when she was smitten with a sickening dream-panic at her own ingratitude. "He has given me everything he had in the world, poor old man," she said to herself, and approached him remorsefully; but when she looked at him again she saw that he had the face and figure of a young stranger, and that the garments that had seemed to her to be streaming and unsightly rags, were merely the picturesque habiliments of a young artist, apparently newly translated from the Boulevard Montparnasse. At the sight of the stranger a heart-sinking terror seemed to take possession of her, and so, quaking and quavering in mortal intimidation,—she woke up.

She laughed at herself as she brushed the sleep out of her eyes, and drew the gradual long breaths that soothed the physical agitation that still beset her.

"I'm scared," she said, "I'm as excited and nervous as a youngster on circus day.—Oh! I'm glad the sun shines."

Nancy lived in a little apartment of her own in that hinterland of what is now down-town New York, between the Rialto and its more conventional prototype, Society,—that is, she lived east of Broadway on a cross-street in the forties. The maid who took care of her had been in her aunt's employ for years, and had seen Nancy grow from her rather spoiled babyhood to a hoydenish childhood, and so on to soft-eyed, vibrant maturity. She was the only person who tyrannized over Nancy. She brought her a cup of steaming hot water with a pinch of soda in it, now.

"You were moaning and groaning in your sleep," she said, in the strident accents of her New England birthplace, "so you'll have to drink this before I

give you a living thing for your breakfast."

"I will, Hitty," Nancy said, "and thank you kindly. Now I know you've been making pop-overs, and are afraid they will disagree with me. I'm glad—for I need the moral effect of them."

"I dunno whether pop-overs is so moral, or so immoral if it comes to that. I notice it's always the folks that ain't had much to do with morals one way or the other that's so almighty glib about them."

"There's a good deal in what you say, Hitty. If I had time I would go into the matter with you, but this is my busy day." Nancy sat up in bed, and began sipping her hot water obediently. She looked very childlike in her straight cut, embroidered night-gown, with a long chestnut pig-tail over either shoulder. "I feel as if I were going to be married, or—or something. I'm so excited."

"I guess you'd be a good sight more excited if you was going to be married"—Hitty was a widow of twenty-five years' standing—"and according to my way of thinking 'twould be a good deal more suitable," she added darkly. "I don't take much stock in this hotel business. In my day there warn't no such newfangled foolishness for a girl to take up with instead o' getting married and settled down. When I was your age I was working on my second set o' baby clothes."

"Don't scold, Hitty," Nancy coaxed. "I could make perfectly good baby clothes if I needed to. Don't you think I'll be of more use in the world serving nourishing food to hordes of hungry men and women than making baby clothes for one hypothetical baby?"

"I dunno about the hypothetical part," Hitty said, folding back the counterpane, inexorably. "What I do know is that a girl that's getting to be an old girl—like you—past twenty-five—ought to be bestirring herself to look for a life pardner if she don't see any hanging around that suits her, instead of opening up a hotel for a passel of perfect strangers. If ever I saw a woman spoiling for something of her own to fuss over—"

"If ever there was a woman who *had* something of her own to fuss over," Nancy cried ecstatically, "I'm that woman to-day, Hitty. You're a professional Puritan, and you don't understand the broader aspects of the maternal instinct." She sprang out of bed, and tucked her bare pink toes into the fur bordered blue mules that peeped from under the bed, and slipped into the wadded blue silk bathrobe that lay on the chair beside her. "Is my bath drawn, Hitty?"

"Your bath is drawed," Hitty acknowledged sourly, "and your breakfast will be on the table in half an hour by the clock."

"I suppose I must require that corrective New England influence," Nancy said

to herself, as she tried the temperature of her bath and found it frigid, “just as some people need acid in their diet. If my mother were alive, I wonder what she would have said to me this morning.”

Nancy spent a long day directing, planning, and arranging for the great event of the evening, the first dinner served to the public at Outside Inn.

From the basement kitchen to the ground-floor serving-room in the rear, space cunningly coaxed from the reluctant marble worker, the mechanism of Nancy’s equipment was as perfect as lavish expenditure and scientific management could make it. The kitchen gleamed with copper and granite ware; huge pots for soup and vegetables, mammoth double boilers of white enamel,—Nancy was firm in her conviction that rice and cereal could be cooked in nothing but white enamel,—rows upon rows of shelves methodically set with containers and casseroles and odd-shaped metal serving-dishes, as well as the ubiquitous blue and rose-color chinaware presenting its gay surface from every available bit of space.

Presiding over the hooded ranges, two of gas and one coal for toasting and broiling, there was to be a huge Franco-American man-cook, discovered in one of the Fifth Avenue pastry shops in the course of Nancy’s indefatigable tours of exploration, who was the son of a French *chef* and a Virginian mother, and could express himself in the culinary art of either his father’s or his mother’s nativity. His staff of helpers and dishwashers had been chosen by himself, with what Nancy considered most felicitous results, while her own galaxy of waitresses, who operated the service kitchen up-stairs, proved themselves to a woman almost unbelievably superior and efficient.

The courtyard itself was a brave spectacle in its final aspect of background for the detail and paraphernalia of polite dining. The more unself-conscious of the statues, the nymphs and nereids and Venuses, she managed either to relegate to the storehouse within, or to add a few cunningly draped vines to the nonchalance of their effect, while the gargoyles and Roman columns and some of the least ambitious of the fountain-models she was able to adapt delightfully to her outrageous ideal of arrangement. Dick had denuded several smart florist shops to furnish her with field flowers enough to develop her decorative scheme, which included strangely the stringing of half a dozen huge Chinese lanterns that even in the daylight took on a meteoric light and glow.

The night was clear and soft, and Fifth Avenue, ingratiatingly swept and garnished, stretched its wake of summer allure before the never unappreciative eyes of Billy and Caroline, and Betty and Dick respectively, who had met at the Waldorf by appointment, and were now making their way, thus ceremoniously and in company, to the formal opening dinner of Nancy’s Inn.

Two nondescript Pagan gentlemen of Titanesque proportions had joined the watch of the conventional leonine twins, and the big gate now stood hospitably open, over it swinging the new sign in gallant crimson and white, that announced to all the world that Outside Inn was even at that moment, at its most punctilious service.

Molly and Dolly, in the prescribed blue chambray, their cheeks several shades pinker than their embellishment of pink ribbon, and panting with ill-suppressed excitement, rushed forward to greet the four and ushered them solemnly to their places,—the gala table in the center of the court, set with a profusion of fleur de lis, with pink ribbon trainers. Thanks to Dick's carefully manipulated advertising campaign and personal efforts among his friends and business associates, they were not by any means the first arrivals. Half a dozen laughing groups were distributed about the round tables in the center space, while several tête-à-tête couples were confidentially ensconced in corners and at cozy tables for two, craftily sheltered by some of the most imposing of the marble figures and columns.

"It seems like a real restaurant," Caroline said wonderingly.

"What did you think it would seem like?" Betty asked argumentatively. "Just because Nancy is the best friend you have in the world, and you're familiar with her in pig-tails and a dressing-gown doesn't argue that she is incapable of managing an undertaking like this as well as if she were a perfect stranger."

"I don't suppose it does," Caroline mused, "but someway I'd feel easier about a perfect stranger investing her last cent in such a venture. I don't see how she can possibly make it pay, and I don't feel as if I could ever have a comfortable moment again until I knew whether she could or not.—What are you looking so guilty about, Billy?"

"I was regretting your uncomfortable moments, Caroline," Billy said, "and wishing it were in my power to do away with them, but it isn't. I was also musing sadly, but quite irrelevantly, on the tangled web we weave when first we practise to deceive."

"Are you deceiving Caroline in some way?" Dick inquired.

"No, he isn't," Caroline answered for him, "though he has full permission to if he wants."

"The time may come when he will avail himself of that permission," Betty said; "you ought to be careful how you tempt Fate, Caroline."

"She ought to be," Billy groaned, "but the fact is that I am not one of the things she is superstitious about. Pipe the dame at the corner table with the lorgnette. Classy, isn't she?"

“Friend of my aunt’s,” Dick said, acknowledging the lady’s salute.

“And the Belasco adventuress in the corner.”

“My stenographer,” Dick explained, bowing again.

“I’ve got a bunch of men coming,” Billy said; “if they put the place on the bum you’ve got to help me bounce them, Dick.”

“Up-stairs in the service kitchen,” Betty was explaining to Caroline, “they keep all the dishes that don’t have to be heated for serving, also the silver and daily linen supply. When we seat ourselves at a table like this, the waitress to whom it is assigned goes in and gets a basket of bread—I think it’s a pretty idea to serve the bread in baskets, don’t you?—and whatever silver is necessary, and a bottle of water. When she places those things she asks us what our choice of a meat course is,—there is a choice except on chicken night—and gives that order in the kitchen when she goes to get our soup.”

“Who serves the things,—puts the meat on the plates, and dishes up the vegetables?”

“The cook—Nancy won’t let me call him the *chef*—because she is going to make a specialty of the southern element of his education. He has a serving-table by his range and he cuts up the meat and fowl, and dishes up the vegetables. In a bigger establishment he would have a helper to do that.”

“Why can’t Michael help him?” Dick asked.

“Michael calls him the Haythan Shinee. He is rather a *glossy* man, you know, and he says when the time comes for him, Michael, to dress like a street cleaner and pilot a gravy boat, he’ll let us know.”

“Respect for his superiors is not one of Michael’s most salient characteristics,” Dick twinkled. “Nancy and I have a scheme for making a match between him and Hitty.”

“Here’s the soup,” Betty announced. “Nancy’s idea is to have everything perfectly simple, and—and—”

“Simply perfect,” Billy assisted her.

“Isn’t she going to eat with us?” Dick asked.

“She can’t. She’s busy getting it going just at present. She may appear later.”

“Somebody’s got to direct this pageant, old top,” Billy reminded him.

“The soup is perfect,” Caroline said seriously. “It is simple—with that deceptive simplicity of a Paris morning frock.”

“French home cooking is all like that,” Dick said. “I like purée of forget-me-nots!”

“Molly or Dolly, I can’t tell the difference between you,” Billy said, “extend

our compliments to Miss Martin, and tell her that this course is a triumph."

"Wait till you see the roast, sir."

"It's the very *best* sirloin," Dick announced at the first mouthful, "and these assorted vegetables all cut down to the same size are as pretty as they are good, as one says of virtuous innocence."

"This variety of asparagus is expensive," Caroline said; "she can't do things like this at seventy-five cents a head. She'll ruin herself."

"I don't see how she can," Dick said thoughtfully, "with the price of foodstuffs soaring sky-high."

"I never for a moment expected it to pay," Betty said, "but think of the run she will have for her money, and the experience we'll get out of it."

"You're in it for the romance there is in it, Betty. I must confess it isn't altogether my idea of a good time," Caroline said.

"I know, you would go in for military training for women, and that sort of thing. There's a woman over there asking for more olives, and she's eaten a plate full of them already."

"They're as big as hen's eggs anyhow," Caroline groaned, "and almost as extravagant. I don't see how Nancy'll go through the first month at this rate. There she comes now. Doesn't she look nice in that color of green?"

"How do you like my party?" Nancy asked, slipping into the empty chair between Dick and Billy; "isn't the food good and nourishing, and aren't there a lot of nice-looking people here?"

"Very much, and it is, and there are," Dick answered with affectionate eyes on her.

"The salad is alligator pear served in half sections, with French dressing," she said dreamily. "I'm too happy to eat, but I'll have some with you. Look at them all, don't they look relaxed and soothed and refreshed? Every individual has a perfectly balanced ration of the most superlatively good quality, slowly beginning to assimilate within him."

"I don't see many respectable working girls," Billy said.

"There are though,—from the different shops and offices on the avenue. There is a contingent from the Columbia summer school coming to-morrow evening. This group coming in now is newspaper people."

"Who's the fellow sitting over in the corner with that Vie de Bohême hat? He looks familiar, but I can't seem to place him."

"The man in black with the mustache?" Dick asked. "He's an artist, pretty well known. That impressionistic chap—I can't think of his name—that had that

exhibition at the Palsifer galleries."

"Does he sell?" Caroline asked.

"No, they say he's awfully poor, refuses to paint down to the public taste. What the deuce is his name—oh! I know, Collier Pratt—do you know him, Nancy? Lived in Paris always till the war. He'll appreciate Ritz cooking at Riggs' prices if anybody will."

Nancy looked fixedly at the small side-table where the stranger had just placed himself as if he were etched upon the whiteness of the wall behind him. He sat erect and brooding,—his dark, rather melancholy eyes staring straight ahead, and a slight frown wrinkling his really fine forehead. He wore an Inverness cape slung over one shoulder.

"Looks like one of Rembrandt's portraits of himself," Caroline suggested.

"He looks like a brigand," Betty said. "Nancy's struck dumb with the privilege of adding fuel to a flame of genius like that. Wake up and eat your peach Melba, Nancy."

Nancy started, and took perfunctorily the spoon that Molly was holding out to her, which she forgot to lift to her lips even after it was freighted with its first delicious mouthful.

"I dreamed about that man," she said.

CHAPTER IV
Cinderella

Nancy shut the door of her apartment behind her, and slipped out into the dimly lit corridor. From her sitting-room came a burst of concerted laughter, the sound of Betty's sweet, high pitched voice raised in sudden protest, and then the echo of some sort of a physical struggle; and Caroline took the piano and began to improvise.

"They won't miss me," Nancy said to herself, "I must have air." She drew a long breath with a hand against her breast, apparently to relieve the pressure there. "I can't stay shut up in a *room*," she kept repeating as if she were stating the most reasonable of premises, and turning, fled down the two flights of stairs that led to the outside door of the building.

The breath of the night was refreshingly cool upon her hot cheeks, and she smiled into the darkness gratefully. Across the way a row of brownstone houses, implacably boarded up for the summer, presented dull and dimly defined surfaces that reflected nothing, not even the lights of the street, or the shadow of a passing straggler. Nancy turned her face toward the avenue. The nostalgia that was her inheritance from her father, and through him from a long line of ancestors that followed the sea whither it might lead them, was upon her this night, although she did not understand it as such. She only thought vaguely of a strip of white beach with a whiter moon hung high above it, and the long silver line of the tide,—drawing out.

"I wish I had a hat on," she said. There was a night light in the chemist's shop at the corner, and the panel of mirror obligingly placed for the convenience of the passing crowd, at the left of the big window, showed her reflection quite plainly. She was suddenly inspired to take the soft taffeta girdle from the waist of her dark blue muslin gown, and bind it turban-wise about her head. The effect was pleasingly modish and conventional, and she quickened her steps—satisfied. There was a tingle in the air that set her blood pleasantly in motion, and she established a rhythm of pace that made her feel almost as if she were walking to music. Insensibly her mind took up its responsibilities again as the blood, stimulated from its temporary inactivity, began to course naturally through her veins.

"There is plenty of beer and ginger ale in the ice-box," she thought, "and I've

done this before, so they won't be unnaturally disturbed about me. Billy wanted to take Caroline home early, and Dick can go on up-town with Betty, without making her feel that she ought to leave him alone with me for a last tête-à-tête. It will hurt Dick's feelings, but he understands really. He has a most blessed understandingness, Dick has."

She had the avenue almost entirely to herself, a silent gleaming thoroughfare with the gracious emptiness that a much lived in street sometimes acquires, of a Sunday at the end of an adventurous season. It was early July, the beginning of the actual summer season in New York. Nancy had never before been in town so late in the year, nor for that matter had Caroline or Betty, but Betty's interest in the affairs of the Inn was keeping her at Nancy's side, while Caroline had just accepted a secretarial position in one of the big Industrial Leagues recently organized by women for women, that would keep her in town all summer. Billy and Dick, by virtue of their respective occupations, were never away from New York for longer than the customary two weeks' vacation.

"My soul smoothed itself out, a long cramped scroll,"—her conscience placated on the score of her deserted guests, Nancy was quoting Browning to herself, as she widened the distance between herself and them. "I wonder why I have this irresistible tendency to shake the people I love best in the world at intervals. I am such a really well-balanced and rational individual, I don't understand it in myself. I thought the Inn was going to take all the nonsense out of me, but it hasn't, it appears," she sighed; "but then, I think it is going to take the nonsense out of a lot of people that are only erratic because they have never been properly fed. I guess I'll go and have a look at the old place in its Sunday evening calm. Already it seems queer not to be there at nine o'clock in the evening, but I don't really think there are people enough in New York now on Sundays to make it an object."

Nancy's feet turned mechanically toward the arena of her most serious activities. Like most of us who run away, she was following by instinct the logical periphery of her responsibilities.

The big green latticed gate was closed against all intruders. Nancy had the key to its padlock in her hand-bag, but she had no intention of using it. The white and crimson sign flapped in the soft breeze companionably responsive to the modest announcement, "Marble Workshop, Reproductions and Antiques, Garden Furniture," which so inadequately invited those whom it might concern to a view of the petrified vaudeville within. Through the interstices of the gate the courtyard looked littered and unalluring;—the wicker tables without their fine white covers; the chairs pushed back in a heterogeneous assemblage; the

segregated columns of a garden peristyle gaunt against the dark, gleamed a more ghostly white than the weather-stained busts and figures less recently added to the collection. It seemed to Nancy incredible that the place would ever bloom again with lights and bouquets and eager patrons, with her group of pretty flower-like waitresses moving deftly among them. She stared at the spot with the cold eye of the creator whose handiwork is out of the range of his vision, and the inspiration of it for the moment, gone.

"I feel like Cinderella and her godmother rolled into one," she thought disconsolately. "I waved my wand, and made so many things happen, and now that the clock has struck, again here I am outside in the cold and dark,"—the wind was taking on a keener edge, and she shivered slightly in her muslins —"with nothing but a pumpkin shell to show for it. Hitty says that getting what you want is apt to be unlikely business, and I'm inclined to think she's right."

It seemed to her suddenly that the thing she had wanted,—a picturesque, cleverly executed restaurant where people could be fed according to the academic ideals of an untried young woman like herself was an unthinkable thing. The power of illusion failed for the moment. Just what was it that she had hoped to accomplish with this fling at executive altruism? What was she doing with a French cook in white uniform, a competent staff of professional dishwashers and waitresses and kitchen helpers? How had it come about that she owned so many mounds and heaps and pyramids of silver and metal and linen? What was this Inn that she had conceived as a project so unimaginably fine? Who were these shadow people that came and went there? Who was she? Why with all her vitality and all her hungry yearning for life and adventure couldn't she even believe in her own substantiality and focus? Wasn't life even real enough for a creature such as she to grasp it,—if it wasn't—

She saw a figure that was familiar to her turn in from the avenue, a tall man in an Inverness with a wide black hat pulled down over his eyes. For the moment she could not remember who he was, but by the time he had stopped in front of the big gate, giving utterance to a well delivered expletive, she knew him perfectly, and stood waiting, motionless, for him to turn and speak to her. She was sure that he would have no recollection of her. He turned, but it was some seconds before he addressed her.

"Doubt thou the stars are fire," he said at last, with a shrug that admitted her to the companionship of his discomfiture. "Doubt thou the sun doth move, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt that your favorite New York restaurant will be closed on a Sunday night."

"Oh! *is* it your favorite New York restaurant?" Nancy cried, her heart in her

throat. “It’s mine, you know, my—my favorite.”

“So I judged, or you wouldn’t be beating against the gate so disconsolately.” It was too dark to see his face clearly, but Nancy realized that he was looking down at her quizzically through the darkness.

“Do you really like this restaurant?” she persisted.

“In some ways I like it very much. The food is quite possible as you know, very American in character, but very good American, and it has the advantage of being served out-of-doors. I am a Frenchman by adoption, and I like the outdoor café. In fact, I am never happy eating inside.”

“The surroundings are picturesque?” Nancy hazarded.

The stranger laughed. “According to the American ideal,” he said, “they are—but I do admit that they show a rather extraordinary imagination. I’ve often thought that I should like to make the acquaintance of the woman,—of course, it’s a woman—who conceived the notion of this mortuary tea-room.”

“Why, of course, is it a woman?”

“A man wouldn’t set up housekeeping in—in *Père Lachaise*.”

“Why not, if he found a really domestic-looking corner?”

“He *wouldn’t* in the first place, it wouldn’t occur to him, that’s all, and if he did he couldn’t get away with it. The only real drawback to this hostelry is, as you know, that they don’t serve spirits of any kind. I’m accustomed to a glass or two of wine with my dinner, and my food sticks in my throat when I can’t have it, but I’ve found a way around that, now.”

“Oh! have you?” said Nancy.

“Don’t give me away, but there’s a man about the place here whose name is Michael, and he possesses that blend of Gallic facility with Celtic canniness that makes the Irish so wonderful as a race. I told my trouble to Michael,—with the result that I get a teapot full of Chianti with my dinner every night, and no questions asked.”

“Oh! you do?” gasped Nancy.

“You see Michael is serving the best interests of his employer, who wants to keep her patrons, because if I couldn’t have it I wouldn’t be there. He couldn’t trouble the lady about it, naturally, because it is technically an offense against the law. Come, let’s go and find a quiet corner where we can continue our conversation comfortably. There’s a painfully respectable little hotel around the corner here that looks like the Café L’avenue when you first go in, but is a place where the most bourgeoise of one’s aunts might put up.”

“I—I don’t know that I can go,” said Nancy.

“There’s no reason why you shouldn’t, you know. My name is Collier Pratt. I’m an artist. The more bourgeoise of my aunts would introduce me if she were here. She’s a New Englander like so many of your own charming relatives.”

“How did you know that?” Nancy asked, as she followed him with a docility quite new to her, past the big green gate, and the row of nondescript shops between it and the corner of Broadway.

“I was *born* in Boston,” Collier Pratt said a trifle absently. “I know a Massachusetts product when I see one. Ah! here we are.”

He led her triumphantly to a table in the far corner of the practically empty restaurant, waved away the civilities of a swarthy and somewhat badly coordinated waiter, and pulled out her chair for her himself.

“Now, let me have a look at you,” he said; “why, you’ve nothing on but muslin, and you’re wearing your belt for a turban.”

“A sop to the conventions,” Nancy said, blushing burningly. She was not quite able yet to get her bearings with this extraordinary man, who had assumed charge of her so cavalierly, but she was eager to find her poise in the situation. “I ran away, and I thought it would look better to have something like a hat on.”

“Looks,” said Collier Pratt, “looks! That’s New England, always the looks of a thing, never the feel of it. Mind you I don’t mean the *look* of a thing, that’s something different again.”

“Yes, I know, the conventional slant as opposed to the artistic perspective.”

“Good! It isn’t necessary to have my remarks followed intelligently, but it always adds piquancy to the situation when they are. Speaking of artistic perspective, you have a very nice coloring. I like a ruddy chestnut hair with a skin as delicately white and pink as yours.” He spoke impersonally with the narrowing eye of the artist. “I can see you either in white,—not quite a cream white, but almost,—against a pearly kind of Quakerish background, or flaming out in the most crude, barbaric assemblage of colors. That’s the advantage of your type and the environment you connote—you can be the whole show, or the veriest little mouse that ever sought the protective coloring of the shadows.”

“You aren’t exactly taking the quickest way of putting me at my ease,” Nancy said. “I’m very much embarrassed, you know. I’d stand being looked over for a few minutes longer if I could,—but I can’t. I’m not having one of my most equable evenings.”

“I beg your pardon,” Collier Pratt said.

For the first time since she had seen his face with the light upon it, he smiled, and the smile relieved the rather empiric quality of his habitual expression. Nancy noticed the straight line of the heavy brows scarcely interrupted by the

indication of the beginning of the nose, and wondering to herself if it were not possible for a person with that eyebrow formation to escape the venality of disposition that is popularly supposed to be its adjunct,—decided affirmatively.

"I'm not used to talking to American girls very much. I forget how daintily they're accustomed to being handled. I'm extremely anxious to put you at your ease," he added quietly. "I appreciate the privilege of your company on what promised to be the dullest of dull evenings. I should appreciate still more," he bowed, as he handed her a bill of fare of the journalistic proportions of the usual hotel menu, "if you would make a choice of refreshment, that we may dispense with the somewhat pathological presence of our young friend here," he indicated the waiter afflicted with the jerking and titubation of a badly strung puppet. "I advise Rhine wine and seltzer. I offer you anything from green chartreuse to Scotch and soda. Personally I'm going to drink Perrier water."

"I'd rather have an ice-cream," Nancy said, "than anything else in the world,—coffee ice-cream, and a glass of water."

"I wonder if you would, or if you only think it's—safer. At any rate I'm going to put my coat over your shoulders while you eat it. I never leave my rooms at this hour of the night without this cape. If I can find a place to sit out in I always do, and I'm naturally rather cold-blooded."

"I'm not," said Nancy, but she meekly allowed him to drape her in the folds of the light cape, and found it grateful to her.

"Bring the lady a big cup of coffee, and mind you have it hot," Collier Pratt ordered peremptorily, as her ice-cream was served by the shaking waiter. "Coffee may be the worst thing in the world for you, nervously. I don't know,—it isn't for me, I rather thrive on it, but at any rate I'm going to save you from the combination of organdie and ice-cream on a night like this. What is your name?" he inquired abruptly.

"Ann Martin."

"Not at my service?"

"I don't know, yet."

"Well, I don't know,—but I hope and trust so. I like you. You've got something they don't have—these American girls,—softness and strength, too. I imagine you've never been out of America."

"I—I have."

"With two other girls and a chaperon, doing Europe, and staying at all the hotels doped up for tourist consumption."

Nancy was constrained to answer with a smile.

"You don't like America very much," she said presently.

“I like it for itself, but I loathe it—for myself. My way of living here is all wrong. I can’t get to bed in this confounded city. I can’t get enough to eat.”

“Oh! can’t you?” Nancy cried.

“In Paris, or any town where there is a café life one naturally gets fed. The technique of living is taken care of much better over there. Your *concierge* serves you a nourishing breakfast as a matter of course. When you’ve done your morning’s work you go to your favorite café—not with the one object in life—to cram a *Châteaubriand* down your dry and resisting throat because he who labors must live,—but to see your friends, to read your daily journals, to write your letters, and do it incidentally in the open air while some diplomat of a waiter serves you with food that assuages the palate, without insulting your mood. That’s what I like about the little restaurant in the court there. It’s out-of-doors, and you may stay there without feeling your table is in requisition for the next man. It’s a very polite little place.”

“You didn’t expect to get in there to-night.”

“I had hopes of it. I’ve not dined, you see.”

“Not dined?” Nancy’s eyes widened in dismay.

“There’s no use for me to dine unless I can eat my food tranquilly, in some accustomed corner. Getting nourished with me is a spiritual, as well as a physical matter. It is with all sensitive people. Don’t you think so?”

“I suppose so. I—I hadn’t thought of it that way. Couldn’t you eat something now—an oyster stew, or something like that?”

“Nothing in any way remotely connected with that. An oyster stew is to me the most barbarous of concoctions. I loathe hot milk,—an oyster is an adjunct to a fish sauce, or a preface to a good dinner.”

“You ought to have something,” Nancy urged, “even ice-cream is more nourishing than mineral water, or coffee with cream in it.”

“I like coffee after dinner, not before.”

“If you only eat when it’s convenient, or the mood takes you,” Nancy cried out in real distress, “how can you ever be sure that you have calories enough? The requirement of an average man at active labor is estimated at over three thousand calories. You must have something like a balanced ration in order to do your work.”

“Must I?” Collier Pratt smiled his rare smile. “Well, at any rate, it is good to hear you say so.”

She finished her ice-cream, and Collier Pratt drank his mineral water slowly, and smoked innumerable cigarettes of Virginia tobacco. The conversation which

had proceeded so expeditiously to this point seemed for no apparent reason, suddenly to become gratuitous. Nancy had never before begun on the subject of the balanced ration without being respectfully allowed to go through to the end. She had not been allowed to feel snubbed, but she was a little bewildered that any conversation in which she was participating, could be so gracefully stopped before it was ended by her expressed desire.

Collier Pratt took his watch out of his pocket, and looked at it hastily.

"By jove," he said, "I had entirely forgotten. I have a child in my charge. I must be about looking after her."

"A child?" Nancy cried, astonished.

"Yes, a little girl. She's probably sitting up for me, poor baby. Can you get home alone, if I put you on a bus or a street-car?"

"If you'll call a taxi for me—" Nancy said.

She noticed that the check was paid with change instead of a bill. In fact, her host seemed not to have a bill of any denomination in his pocket, but to be undisturbed by the fact. He parted from her casually.

"Good-by, child," he said with his head in the door after he had given the chauffeur her street number; "with the permission of *le bon Dieu*, we shall see each other again. I feel that He is going to give it to us."

"Good-by," Nancy said to his retreating shoulder.

At her own front door was Dick's big Rolls-Royce, and Dick sitting inside of it, with his feet comfortably up, feigning sleep.

"You didn't think I'd go home until I saw you safe inside your own door, did you?" he demanded.

"Where's Betty?" Nancy asked mechanically.

"I sent Williams home with her. Then he came back here, and left the car with me."

"You needn't have waited," Nancy said, "I'm sorry, Dick, I—I had to have air. I had to get out. I couldn't stay inside a minute longer."

"You need never explain anything to me."

"Don't you want to know where I've been?"

Dick looked at her carefully before he made his answer. Then he said firmly.

"No, dear."

"I might have told you," she said, "if you had wanted to know." She felt her knees sagging with fatigue, and drooped against the door-frame.

"Come and sit in the car, and talk to me for a minute," he suggested. "Do you good, before you climb the stairs."

He opened the car door for her ingratiatingly, but she shook her head.

“I’ve done unconventional things enough for one evening,” she said. “Unlock the door for me. Hitty’ll be waiting up to take care of me.”

“What’s that queer thing you’re wearing?” he asked her, as he held the door for her to pass through, “I never remember seeing you wear that before.”

Nancy looked down wonderingly at the folds of the Inverness still swinging from her shoulders. She had been subconsciously aware of the grateful warmth in which she was encased ever since she snuggled comfortably into the depths of the taxi-cab into which Collier Pratt had tucked her.

“No, I never *have* worn it before,” she said, answering Dick’s question.

CHAPTER V
Science

The activities of the day at Outside Inn began with luncheon and the preparation for it. Nancy longed to serve breakfast there, but as yet it had not seemed practicable to do so. Most of the patrons of the restaurant conducted the business of the day down-town, but had their actual living quarters in New York's remoter fastnesses,—Brooklyn, the Bronx or Harlem. Nancy was satisfied that the bulk of her patronage should be the commuting and cliff dwelling contingent of Manhattanites,—indeed it was the sort of patronage that from the beginning she had intended to cater to.

Nancy did most of the marketing herself at first, but Gaspard—the big cook—gradually coaxed this privilege away from her.

"You see," he said, "we sit—us together, and talk of eating"—he prided himself on his use of English, and never used his native tongue to help him out, except in moments of great excitement. "It is immediately after breakfast. Yes! I am full of milk-coffee sopped with bread, and you of bacon with eggs and marmalade. We say, what shall we give to our custom for its dinner and its luncheon? We think sadly—we who have but now brushed away the crumbs of breakfast—of those who must sit down so soon to the table groaning with viands. Therefore we say, 'Market delicately. Have the soup clear, the entrée light and the salad green with plenty of vinegar.' Even your calories—they do not help us much. They are in quantities so unexpected in the food that weighs nothing in the scales. We say you shall go to market and buy these things, and you go. I stir and walk about, and grow restless for my *déjeuner*, and when you return from market, hungry too, we are not the same people who had thought our soup should be clear, and our entrée more beautiful than nutritious. If I go to market myself *late* I am inspired there to buy what is right, because by that hour I have a proper relish and understanding of what all the world should eat."

"I know he is right," Nancy said to Billy afterward in reporting the conversation, "I hate to admit it, but even my notion of what other people should eat is colored by my own relation to food. I never realized before how little use an intellect is in this matter of food values. I can actually get up a meal that according to the tables is scientifically correct that wouldn't feed anybody if they were hungry."

“One banana is equal to a pound and three-quarters of steak,” Billy misquoted helpfully.

“The trouble is that it *isn’t*,” Nancy said, “except technically.”

“You can’t eat it and grow thin.”

“You can’t eat it and grow *fat* unless it happens to be the peculiar food to which you are idiosyncratic.”

“If that’s really a word,” Billy said, “I’ll overlook your trying it out on me. If it isn’t you’ll have to take the consequences.” He went through the pantomime of one preparing to do physical violence.

“Oh! it’s a word. Ask Caroline.” Nancy’s eyes still held their look of being focussed on something in the remote distance. “The trouble with all this dietetic problem is that the individual is dependent on something more than an adjustment of values. His environment and his heredity play an active part in his diet problem. Some people can eat highly concentrated food, others have to have bulk, and so on. You can’t substitute cheese and bananas for steak and do the race a service no matter what the cost of steak may soar to. You can’t even substitute rice for potatoes.”

“Not unless your patronage is more Oriental than Celtic.”

“Healthy people have to have honest fare of about the type to which their environment has accustomed them, but intelligently supervised,—that’s the conclusion I’ve come to.”

“You may be right,” Billy said, “my general notion has always been that everybody ate wrong, and that everybody who would stand for it ought to be started all over again. I wouldn’t stand for it, so I’ve never looked into the matter.”

“People don’t eat wrong, that’s the really startling discovery I’ve made recently. I mean healthy people don’t.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Billy; “the way people eat is one of the most outrageous of the human scandals. I read the newspapers.”

“The newspapers don’t know,” Nancy said; “the individual usually has an instinctive working knowledge of the diet that is good for him, and his digestional experiences have taught him how to regulate it to some extent.”

“How do you account for the clerk that orders coffee and sinkers at Child’s every day?”

“That’s exactly it,” Nancy said. “He knows that he needs bulk and stimulation. He’s handicapped by his poverty, but he gets the nearest substitute for the diet that suits him that he can get. If he could afford it he would have a square meal that would nourish him as well as warm and fill him.”

“I don’t see but what this interesting theory lets you out altogether. Why Outside Inn, with its foxy table d’hôte, if what’s one man’s meat is another man’s poison, and natural selection is the order of the day?”

“Outside Inn is all the more necessary to the welfare of a nation that’s being starved out by the high cost of living. All I need to do is to have a little more variety, to have all the nutritive requirements in each meal, and such generous servings that every patron can make out a meal satisfying to himself.”

“Everybody knows that all fat people eat all the sweets that they can get, and all thin people take tea without sugar with lemon in it.”

“These people aren’t healthy. That’s where the intelligent supervision comes in.”

“What do you intend to do about them?”

“Watch over them a little more carefully. Regulate their servings craftily. Be sure of my tables. I have lots of schemes. I’ll tell you about them sometime.”

“*Sometime*,—for this relief much thanks,” murmured Billy; “just now I’ve had as much of these matters as I can stand. I don’t see how you are going to run this thing on a profit, though.”

“I’m not,” Nancy said, “I’m losing money every minute. That fifteen thousand dollars is almost gone now, of course. Billy, do you think it would be perfectly awful if I didn’t try to make money at all?”

“I think it would be a good deal wiser. I’ll raise all the money you want on your expectations.”

“All right then. I’m not going to worry.”

Billy looked down into the courtyard from the room up-stairs in which they had been talking. Already the preparations for lunch were under way. The girls were moving deftly about, laying cloths and arranging flower vases and silver.

“Can I get right down there and sit down at one of those tables and have my lunch,” Billy inquired, “or do I have to go out of the back door and come in the front like a regular customer?”

“Whichever you prefer. There’s Caroline coming in at the gate now.”

“Well, then, I know which I prefer,” Billy said, swimming realistically toward the stairs.

“You are getting fat, Billy,” Caroline informed him critically after the amenities were over, and the meal appropriately begun. “You ought to watch your diet a little more carefully.”

“No,” Billy said firmly, “I don’t need to watch my diet, I’m perfectly healthy, and therefore my natural cravings will point the way to my most judicious

nourishment. Nancy has explained all to me."

"That's a very interesting theory of Nancy's," Caroline said, "but I don't altogether agree with it."

"I do," said Billy, then he added hastily, "but I agree with you, too, Caroline. You are to all other women what moonlight is to sunlight, or I mean—what sunlight is to moonlight. In other words—you are the goods."

"Don't be silly, Billy."

"There's only one thing in all this wide universe that you can't say to me, Caroline, and 'don't be silly, Billy,' is that thing,—express this same thing in *vers libre* if you must say it! Look at the handsome soup you're getting. What is the name of that soup, Molly?"

He smiled ingratiatingly at the little waitress, who always beamed at any one of Nancy's particular friends that came into the restaurant, and made a point of serving them if she could possibly arrange it.

"Cream of spinach," she said, "it's a special to-day."

"Beautiful soup so rich and green," Billy began in a soulful baritone, "waiting in a hot tureen. Where's mine, Molly?"

"Dolly's bringing your first course, sir."

Billy gazed in perplexity at the half of a delicious grapefruit set before him by the duplicate of the pretty girl who stood smiling deprecatingly behind Caroline's chair.

"Where's my soup, Dolly?" Billy asked with a thundering sternness of manner.

"I'm sorry, sir," Dolly began glibly, "but the soup has given out. Will you be good enough to allow the substitution of—"

"That's a formula," Billy said. "The soup can't be out. We're the first people in the dining-room. Go tell Miss Nancy that I will be served with some of that green soup at once, or know the reason why."

The two waitresses exchanged glances, and went off together suppressing giggles, to return almost immediately, their risibility still causing them great physical inconvenience.

"Intelligent supervision, she says." Dolly exploded into the miniature patch of muslin and ribbon that served her as an apron.

"She says that's the reason why," Molly contributed,—following her sister's example.

"Nancy doesn't serve soup to a fat man if she can possibly avoid it. That's part of her theory," Caroline explained. "There's no use making a fuss about it,

because you won’t get it.”

Billy sat looking at his grapefruit for some seconds in silence. Then he began on it slowly.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said.

Nancy was learning a great many things very rapidly. The practical application of her theories of feeding mankind to her actual experiments with the shifting population of New York, revolutionized her attitude toward the problem almost daily. She had started in with a great many ideas and ideals of service, with preconceived notions of balanced rations, and exact distribution of fuel stuffs to the human unit. She had come to realize very shortly, that the human unit was a quantity as incalculable in its relation to its digestive problems as its psychological ones. She had believed vaguely that in reference to food values the race made its great exception to its rule of working out toward normality; but she changed that opinion very quickly as she watched her fellow men selecting their diet with as sure an instinct for their nutritive requirements as if she had coached them personally for years.

From the assumption that she lived in a world gone dietetically mad, and hence in the process of destroying itself, she had gradually come to see that in this phase of his struggle for existence, as well as in every other, the instinct of man operated automatically in the direction of his salvation. This new attitude in tie matter relieved her of much of her responsibility, but left her not less anxious to do what she could for her kind in the matter of calories. She was, as she had shown in her treatment of Billy, not entirely blinded by her growing predilection in favor of the doctrine of natural selection.

Every day she had Gaspard make, in addition to his regular table d’hôte menu, dozens of nutritive custards, quarts of stimulating broths and jellies and other dishes containing the maximum of easily digested and highly concentrated nutriment, and these she managed to have Molly or Dolly or even Hildeguard—the Alma Tadema girl—introduce into the luncheon or dinner service in the case of those patrons who seemed to need peculiarly careful nourishing. Let a white-faced girl sink into a seat within the range of Nancy’s vision,—she always ensconced herself in the doorway screened with vines at the beginning of a meal,—and she gave orders at once for the crafty substitution of invalid broth for soup, of rich nut bread for the ordinary rolls and crackers, of custards or specially made ice-cream for the dessert of the day. No overfed, pasty-faced man ever escaped from Outside Inn until an attempt at least had been made to introduce a portion of stewed prunes into his diet; and all such were fed the minimum of bread and other starchy foods, and the maximum of salad and green

vegetables. Nancy had gluten bread made in quantities for the stouter element of her patronage, and in nine cases out of ten she was able to get it served and eaten without protest. Some of her regular patrons began to change weight gradually, a heavy man or two became less heavy, and a wraithlike girl now and then took on a new bloom and substantiality. These were the triumphs for which Nancy lived. Her only regret was that she was not able to give to each her personal time and attention, and establish herself on a footing with her patrons where she might learn from their own lips the secrets of their metabolism.

She was not known as the proprietor of the place. In fact, the management of the restaurant was kept a careful secret from those who frequented it and with the habitual indifference of New Yorkers to the power behind the throne, so long as its affairs were manipulated in good and regular order, they soon ceased to feel any apparent curiosity about it. Betty, who sometimes rebelled at remaining so scrupulously incognita, defiantly took the limelight at intervals and moved among the assembled guests with an authoritative and possessive air, adjusting and rearranging small details, and acknowledging the presence of *habitués*, but since her attentions were popularly supposed to be those of a superior head waitress, she soon tired of the gesture of offering them.

Nancy's intention had been to allow the restaurant to speak for itself, and then at the climactic moment to allow her connection with it to be discovered, and to speak for it with all the force and earnestness of which she was capable. She had meant to stand sponsor for the practical working theory on which her experiment was based, and she had already partially formulated interviews with herself in which she modestly acknowledged the success of that experiment, but the untoward direction in which it was developing made such a revelation inexpedient.

There was one regular patron to whom she was peculiarly anxious to remain incognita. Collier Pratt made it his almost invariable habit to come sauntering toward the table in the corner, under the life-sized effigy of the *Vênus de Medici*, at seven o'clock in the evening, and that table was scrupulously reserved for him. To it were sent the choicest of all the viands that Outside Inn could command. Michael was tacitly sped on his way with his teapot full of claret. Gaspard did amazing things with the breasts of ducks and segments of orange, with squab chicken stuffed with new corn, with *filets de sole a la Marguery*. Nancy craftily spurred him on to his most ambitious achievements under pretense of wishing her own appetite stimulated, and the big cook, who adored her, produced triumph after triumph of his art for her delectation, whereupon the biggest part of it was cunningly smuggled out to the artist. From behind her

screen of vines Nancy watched the fine features of her quondam friend light with the rapture of the *gourmet* as be sampled Gaspard's sauce *verte* or Hollandaise or lifted the glass cover from the mushrooms *sous cloche* and inhaled their delicate aroma.

"I wonder if he finds our food very American in character, now," she said to herself, with a blush at the memory of the real southern cornbread and candied sweet potatoes that were offered him in the initial weeks of his patronage. Gaspard still made these delicacies for luncheon, but they had been almost entirely banished from the dinner menu. Afternoon tea at the Inn was famous for the wonderful waffles produced with Parisian precision from a traditional Virginian recipe, but Collier Pratt never appeared at either of these meals to criticize them for being American.

CHAPTER VI
An Eleemosynary Institution

One night during the latter part of July Betty had a birthday, and according to immemorial custom Caroline and Nancy and Dick and Billy helped her to celebrate it at one of the old-fashioned down-town hotels where they had ordered practically the same dinner for her anniversaries ever since they had been grown up enough to celebrate them unchaperoned. Caroline's brother, Preston, had made a sixth member of the party for the first two or three years, but he had been located in London since then, in charge of the English office of his firm, to which he had been suddenly appointed a month after he and Betty, who had been sweethearts, had had a spectacular quarrel.

Nancy stayed by the celebration until about half past nine, and then Dick put her into a taxi-cab, and she fled back to her responsibilities as mistress of Outside Inn, agreeing to meet the others later for the rounding out of the evening. As she drew up before the big gate the courtyard seemed practically deserted. The waitresses were busy clearing away the few cluttered tables left by the last late guests, and in one sheltered corner a man and a girl were frankly holding hands across the table, while they whispered earnestly of some impending parting. The big canopy of striped awning cloth had been drawn over the tables, as the rather heavy air of the evening bad been punctured occasionally by a swift scattering of rain. Nancy was half-way across the court before she realized that Collier Pratt was still occupying his accustomed seat under the shadow of the big Venus. She had not seen him face to face or communicated with him since the day she had looked him up in the telephone book and sent his cape to him by special messenger. She stopped involuntarily as she reached his side, and he looked up and smiled as he recognized her.

"You're late again, Miss Ann Martin," he said, rising and pulling out a chair for her opposite his own. "I think perhaps I can pull the wires and procure you some sustenance if you will say the word."

"I've no word to say," Nancy said, "but how do you do? I've just dined elsewhere. I only stopped in here for a moment to get something—something I left here at lunch."

"In that case I'll offer you a drop of Michael's tea in my water glass." He poured a tablespoonful or so of claret from the teapot into the glass of ice-water

before him, and added several lumps of sugar to the concoction, which he stirred gravely for some time before he offered it to her. “I never touch water myself. This is *eau rougie* as the French children drink it. It’s really better for you than ice-cream and a glass of water.”

“And less American,” Nancy murmured with her eyes down.

“And less American,” he acquiesced blandly.

Nancy sipped her drink, and Collier Pratt stirred the dregs in his coffee cup—Nancy had overheard some of her patrons remarking on the curious habits of a man who consumed a pot of tea and a pot of coffee at one and the same meal—and they regarded each other for some time in silence. Michael and Hildeguard, Molly and Dolly and two others of the staff of girls were grouped in the doorway exactly in Nancy’s range of vision, and whispering to one another excitedly concerning the phenomenon that met their eyes.

“The little girl?” Nancy said, trying to ignore the composite scrutiny to which she was being subjected, by turning determinedly to her companion, “the little girl that you spoke of—is she well?”

“She’s as well as a motherless baby could be, subjected to the irregularities of a life like mine. Still she seems to thrive on it.”

“Is she yours?” Nancy asked.

“Yes, she’s mine,” Collier Pratt said, gravely dismissing the subject, and leaving Nancy half ashamed of her boldness in putting the question, half possessed of a madness to know the answer at any cost.

“I’ve discovered something very interesting,” Collier Pratt said, after an interval in which Nancy felt that he was perfectly cognizant of her struggle with her curiosity; “in fact, it’s one of the most interesting discoveries that I have made in the course of a not unadventurous life. Do you come to this restaurant often?”

“Quite often,” Nancy equivocated, “earlier in the day. For luncheon and for tea.”

“I come here almost every night of my life,” Collier Pratt declared, “and I intend to continue to come so long as *le bon Dieu* spares me my health and my epicurean taste. You know that I spoke of the food here before. The character of it has changed entirely. It’s unmistakably French now, not to say Parisian. Outside of Paris or Vienna I have never tasted such soups, such sauce, such delicate and suggestive flavors. My entire existence has been revolutionized by the experience. I am no longer the lonely and unhappy man you discovered at this gate a short month ago. I can not cavil at an America that furnishes me with such food as I get in this place.

“Man may live without friends, and may live without books.
But civilized man can not live without cooks,”

Nancy quoted sententiously.

“Exactly. The whole point is that the cooking here is civilized. Oh! you ought to come here to dinner, my friend. I don’t know what the luncheons and teas are like—”

“They’re very good,” Nancy said.

“But not like the dinners, I’ll wager. The dinners are the very last word! I don’t know why this place isn’t famous. Of course, I do my best to keep it a secret from the artistic rabble I know. It would be overrun with them in a week, and its character utterly ruined.”

“I wonder if it would.”

“Oh! I’m sure of it.”

“What is your discovery?” Nancy asked.

Collier Pratt leaned dramatically closer to her, and Nancy instinctively bent forward across the tiny table until her face was very near to his.

“Do you know anything about the price of foodstuffs?” he demanded.

“A little,” Nancy admitted.

“You know then that the price of every commodity has soared unthinkably high, that the mere problem of providing the ordinary commonplace meal at the ordinary commonplace restaurant has become almost unsolvable to the proprietors? Most of the eating places in New York are run at a loss, while the management is marking time and praying for a change in conditions. Well, here we have a restaurant opening at the most crucial period in the history of such enterprises, offering its patrons the delicacies of the season most exquisitely cooked, at what is practically the minimum price for a respectable meal.”

“That’s true, isn’t it?”

“More than that, there are people who come here, who order one thing and get another, and the thing they get is always a much more elaborate and extravagant dish than the one they asked for. I’ve seen that happen again and again.”

“Have you?” Nancy asked faintly, shrinking a little beneath the intentness of his look. “How—how do you account for it?”

“There’s only one way to account for it.”

“Do you think that there is an—an unlimited amount of capital behind it?”

“I think that goes without saying,” he said; “there must be an unlimited amount of capital behind it, or it wouldn’t continue to flourish like a green bay

tree; but that's not in the nature of a discovery. Anybody with any power of observation at all would have come to that conclusion long since."

"Then, what is it you have found out?" Nancy asked, quaking.

"My discovery is—" Collier Pratt paused for the whole effect of his revelation to penetrate to her consciousness, "that this whole outfit is run *philanthropically*."

"Philanthropically?"

"Don't you see? There can't be any other explanation of it. It's an eleemosynary institution. That's what it is."

Nancy met his expectant eyes with a trifle of wildness in her own, but he continued to hold her gaze triumphantly.

"Don't you see," he repeated, "doesn't everything point to that as the only possible explanation? It's some rich woman's plaything. That accounts for the food, the setting,—everything in fact that has puzzled us. Amateur,—that's the word; effective, delightful but inexperienced. It sticks out all over the place."

"The food isn't amateur," Nancy said, a little resentfully.

"Nothing is amateur but the spirit behind it, through which we profit. Don't you see?"

"I'm beginning to see," Nancy admitted, "perhaps you are right. I guess the place is run philanthropically. I—I hadn't quite realized it before."

"What did you think?"

"I knew that the—one who was running it wasn't quite sure where she was coming out, but I didn't think of it is an eleemosynary institution."

"Of course, it is."

"It's an unscrupulous sort of charity, then," Nancy mused, "if it's masquerading as self-respecting and self-supporting. I—I've never approved of things like that."

"Why quarrel with a scheme so beneficent?"

"Don't you care?" Nancy asked with a catch in her voice that was very like an appeal.

He shook his head.

"Why should I?" he smiled.

"Then I don't care, either," she decided with an emphasis that was entirely lost on the man on the other side of the table.

CHAPTER VII
Cave-man Stuff

“Cave-man stuff,” Billy said to Dick, pointing a thumb over his shoulder toward the interior of the Broadway moving-picture palace at the exit of which they had just met accidentally. “It always goes big, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Dick agreed thoughtfully, “in the movies anyhow.”

“Caroline says that the modern woman has her response to that kind of thing refined all out of her.” Billy intended his tone to be entirely jocular, but there was a note of anxiety in it that was not lost on his friend.

Dick paused under the shelter of a lurid poster—displaying a fierce gentleman in crude blue, showing all his teeth, and in the act of strangling an early Victorian ingenue with a dimple,—and lit a cigarette with his first match.

“Caroline may have,” he said, puffing to keep his light against the breeze, “but I doubt it.”

“Rough stuff doesn’t seem to appeal to her,” Billy said, quite humorously this time.

“She’s healthy,” Dick mused, “rides horseback, plays tennis and all that. Wouldn’t she have liked the guy that swung himself on the roof between the two poles?” He indicated again the direction of the theater from which they had just emerged.

“She would have liked him,” Billy said gloomily, “but the show would have started her arguing about this whole moving-picture proposition,—its crudity, and its tremendous sacrifice of artistic values, and so on and so on.”

“Sure, she’s a highbrow. Highbrows always cerebrate about the movies in one way or another. Nancy doesn’t get it at just that angle, of course. She hasn’t got Caroline’s intellectual appetite. She’s not interested in the movies because she hasn’t got a moving-picture house of her own. The world is not Nancy’s oyster—it’s her lump of putty.”

“I don’t know which is the worst,” Billy said. “Caroline won’t listen to anything you say to her,—but then neither will Nancy.”

“Women never listen to anything,” Dick said profoundly, “unless they’re doing it on purpose, or they happen to be interested. I imagine Caroline is a little less tractable, but Nancy is capable of doing the most damage. She works with concrete materials. Caroline’s kit is crammed with nothing but ideas.”

“Nothing *but*—” Billy groaned.

“As for this cave-man business—theoretically, they ought to react to it,—both of them. They’re both normal, well-balanced young ladies.”

“They’re both runnin’ pretty hard to keep in the same place, just at present.”

“Nancy isn’t doing that—not by a long shot,” Dick said.

“She’s not keeping in the same place certainly,” Billy agreed. “Caroline is all eaten up by this economic independence idea.”

“It’s a good idea,” Dick admitted; “economic conditions are changing. No reason at all that a woman shouldn’t prove herself willing to cope with them, as long as she gets things in the order of their importance. Earning her living isn’t better than the Mother-Home-and-Heaven job. It’s a way out, if she gets left, or gets stung.”

“I’m only thankful Caroline can’t hear you.” Billy raised pious eyes to heaven but he continued more seriously after a second, “It’s all right to theorize, but practically speaking both our girls are getting beyond our control.”

“I’m not engaged to Nancy,” Dick said a trifle stiffly.

“Well, you ought to be,” Billy said.

Dick stiffened. He was not used to speaking of his relations with Nancy to any one—even to Billy, who was the closest friend he had. They walked up Broadway in silence for a while, toward the cross-street which housed the university club which was their common objective.

“I know I ought to be,” Dick said, just as Billy was formulating an apology for his presumption, “or I ought to marry her out of hand. This watchful waiting’s entirely the wrong idea.”

“Why do we do it then?” Billy inquired pathetically.

“I wanted Nancy to sow her economic wild oats. I guess you felt the same way about Caroline.”

“Well, they’ve sowed ’em, haven’t they?”

“Not by a long shot. That’s the trouble,—they don’t get any forrider, from our point of view. I thought it would be the best policy to stand by and let Nancy work it out. I thought her restaurant would either fail spectacularly in a month, or succeed brilliantly and she’d make over the executive end of it to somebody else. I never thought of her buckling down like this, and wearing herself out at it.”

“There’s a pretty keen edge on Caroline this summer.”

“I’m afraid Nancy’s in pretty deep,” Dick said. “The money end of it worries me as much as anything.”

“I wouldn’t let that worry me.”

“She won’t take any of mine, you know.”

“I know she won’t. See here, Dick, I wouldn’t worry about Nancy’s finances. She’ll come out all right about money.”

“What makes you think so?”

“I know so. We’ve got lots of things in the world to worry about, things that are scheduled to go wrong unless we’re mighty delicate in the way we handle ’em. Let’s worry about *them*, and leave Nancy’s financial problems to take care of themselves.”

“Which means,” Dick said, “that you are sure that she’s all right. I’m not in her confidence in this matter—”

“Well, I am,” Billy said, “I’m her legal adviser, and with all due respect to your taste in girls, it’s a very difficult position to occupy. What with the things she won’t listen to and the things she won’t learn, and the things she actually knows more about than I do—”

The indulgent smile of the true lover lit Dick’s face, as if Billy had waxed profoundly eulogistic. Unconsciously, Billy’s own tenderness took fire at the flame.

“Why don’t we run away with ’em?” he said, breathing heavily.

Dick stopped in a convenient doorway to light his third cigarette, end on.

“It’s the answer to you and Caroline,” he said.

“Why not to you and Nancy?”

“It may be,” Dick said, “I dunno. I’ve reached an *impasse*. Still there is a great deal in your proposition.”

They turned in at the portico that extended out over the big oak doors of their club. An attendant in white turned the knob for them, with the grin of enthusiastic welcome that was the usual tribute to these two good-looking, well set up young men from those who served them.

“I’ll think it over,” Dick added, as he gave up his hat and stick, “and let you know what decision I come to.”

In another five minutes they were deep in a game of Kelly-pool from which Dick emerged triumphantly richer by the sum of a dollar and ninety cents, and Billy the poorer by the loss of a quarter.

There is a town in Connecticut, within a reasonable motoring distance from New York that has been called the Gretna Green of America. Here well-informed young couples are able to expedite the business of matrimony with a phenomenal neatness and despatch. Licenses can be procured by special

dispensation, and the nuptial knot tied as solemnly and solidly as if a premeditated train of bridesmaids and flower girls and loving relatives had been rehearsed for days in advance.

Dick and his Rolls-Royce had assisted at a hymeneal celebration or two, where a successful rush had been made for the temporary altars of this beneficent town with the most felicitous results, and he knew the procedure. When he and Billy organized an afternoon excursion into Connecticut, they tacitly avoided all mention of the consummation they hoped to bring about, but they both understood the nature and significance of the expedition. Dick,—who was used to the easy accomplishment of his designs and purposes, for most obstacles gave way before his magnetic onslaught,—had only sketchily outlined his scheme of proceedings, but he trusted to the magic of that inspiration that seldom or never failed him. He was the sort of young man that the last century novelists always referred to as “fortune’s favorite,” and his luck so rarely betrayed him that he had almost come to believe it to be invincible.

His general idea was to get Nancy and Caroline to drive into the country, through the cool rush of the freer purer air of the suburbs, give them lunch at some smart road-house, soothingly restful and dim, where the temperature was artificially lowered, and they could powder their noses at will; and from thence go on until they were within the radius of the charmed circle where modern miracles were performed while the expectant bridegroom waited.

“Nancy, my dear, we are going to be married,”—that he had formulated, “we’re going to be done with all this nonsense of waiting and doubting the evidence of our own senses and our own hearts. We’re going to put an end to the folly of trying to do without each other,—your folly of trying to feed all itinerant New York; my folly of standing by and letting you do it, or any other fool thing that your fancy happens to dictate. You’re mine and I’m yours, and I’m going to take you—take you to-day and prove it to you.” This was to be timed to be delivered at just about the moment when they drew up in front of the office of the justice of the peace, who was Dick’s friend of old. “Hold up your head, my dear, and put your hat on straight; we’re going into that building to be made man and wife, and we’re not coming out of it until the deed has been done.” In some such fashion, he meant to carry it through. Many a time in the years gone by he had steered Nancy through some high-handed escapade that she would only have consented to on the spur of the moment. She was one of these women who responded automatically to the voice of a master. He had failed in mastery this last year or so. That was the secret of his failure with her, but the days of that failure were numbered now. He was going to succeed.

On the back seat of the big car he expected Billy and Caroline to be going through much the same sort of scene.

“We’ve come to a show-down now, Caroline,—either I sit in this game, or get out.” He could imagine Billy bringing Caroline bluntly to terms with comparatively little effort. That was what she needed—Caroline—a strong hand. Billy’s problem was simple. Caroline had already signified her preference for him. She wore his ring. Billy had only to pick her up, kicking and screaming if need be, and bear her to the altar. She would marry him if he insisted. That was clear to the most superficial of observers,—but Nancy was different.

The day was hot, and grew steadily hotter. By the time Nancy and Caroline were actually in the car, after an almost superhuman effort to assemble them and their various accessories of veils and wraps, and to dispose of the assortment of errands and messages that both girls seemed to be committed to despatch before they could pass the boundaries of Greater New York, the two men were very nearly exhausted. It was only when the chauffeur let the car out to a speed greatly in excess of the limitations on some clear stretch of road, that the breath of the country brought them any relief whatsoever.

Dick looked over his shoulder at the two in the back seat, and noted Caroline’s pallor, and the fact that she was allowing a listless hand to linger in Billy’s; but when he turned back to Nancy he discovered no such encouraging symptoms. She was sitting lightly relaxed at his side, but there was nothing even negatively responsive in her attitude. Her color was high; her breath coming evenly from between her slightly parted lips. She looked like a child oblivious to everything but some innocent daydream.

“You look as if you were dreaming of candy and kisses, Nancy,—are you?” he asked presently.

“No, I’m just glad to be free. It’s been a long time since I’ve played hooky.”

“I know it.” The “dear” constrained him, and he did not add it: “You’ve been working most unholy hard. I—I hate to have you.”

“But I was never so happy in my life.”

“That’s good.” His voice hoarsened with the effort to keep it steady and casual. “Is everything going all right?”

“Fine.”

“Is—is the money end of it all right?”

“Yes, that is, I am not worrying about money.”

“You’re not making money?”

“No.”

“You are not losing any?”

“I am—a little. That was to be expected, don’t you think so?”

“How much are you losing?”

“I don’t know exactly.”

“You ought to know. Are you keeping your own books?”

“Betty helps me.”

“Are you losing a hundred a month?”

“Yes.”

“Five hundred?”

“I suppose so.”

“A thousand?”

“I don’t really know.”

“A thousand?” he insisted.

“Yes,” Nancy answered recklessly, “the way I run it.”

“It doesn’t make any difference, of course;” Dick said, “you’ve got all my money behind you.”

“I haven’t anybody’s money behind me except my own.”

“You had fifteen thousand dollars. Do you mean to say that you have any of that left to draw on?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Do you mind telling me how you are managing?”

“Billy borrowed some money for me.”

“On what security?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why didn’t he come to me?”

“I told him not to.”

“Nancy, do you realize that you’re the most exasperating woman that ever walked the face of this earth?” the unhappy lover asked.

Nancy managed to convey the fact that Dick’s asseveration both surprised and pained her, without resorting to the use of words.

“I wish you wouldn’t spoil this lovely party,” she said to him a few seconds later. “I’m extremely tired, and I should like to get my mind off my business instead of going over these tiresome details with anybody.”

“You look very innocent and kind and loving,” Dick said desperately, “but at heart you’re a little fraud, Nancy.”

She interrupted him to point out two children laden with wild flowers,

trudging along the roadside.

“See how adorably dirty and happy they are,” she cried. “That little fellow has his shoestrings untied, and keeps tripping on them, he’s so tired, but he’s so crazy about the posies that he doesn’t care. I wonder if he’s taking them home to his mother.”

“You’re devoted to children, Nancy, aren’t you?” Dick’s voice softened.

“Yes, I am, and some day I’m going to adopt a whole orphan asylum,”—her voice altered in a way that Dick did not in the least understand. “I could if I wanted to,” she laughed. “Maybe I will want to some day. So many of my ideas are being changed and modified by experience.”

The road-house of his choice, when they reached it, proved to have deteriorated sadly since his last visit. The cool interior that he remembered had been inopportunely opened to the hottest blast of the day’s heat, and hermetically sealed again, or at least so it seemed to Dick; and the furniture was all red and thickly, almost suffocatingly, upholstered. Nancy had no comment on the torrid air of the dining-room,—she rarely complained about anything. Even the presence of a fly in her bouillon jelly scarcely disturbed her equanimity, but Dick knew that she was secretly sustained by the conviction that such an accident was impossible under her system of supervision at Outside Inn, and resented her tranquillity accordingly.

Caroline, behaving not so well, seemed to him a much more human and sympathetic figure, though her nose took on a high shine unknown to Nancy’s demurer and more discreetly served features; but Billy evidently preferred Nancy’s deportment, which was on the surface calm and reassuring.

“Nancy’s a sport,” he pointed out to Caroline enthusiastically, “no fly in the ointment gets her goat. She enjoys herself even when she’s perfectly miserable.”

“She doesn’t feel the heat the way I do,” Caroline snapped.

“I feel the heat,” Nancy said, “but I—”

“She’s got a system,” Dick cut in savagely: “she stands it just as long as she can, and then she takes it out of me in some diabolical fashion.”

Nancy’s gray-blue eyes took on the far-away look that those who loved her had learned to associate with her most baffling moments.

“Just by being especially nice to Dick,” she said thoughtfully, “I can make him more furious with me than in any other way.”

Nancy and Caroline finished their sloppy ices at the table together while Dick and Billy sought the solace of a pipe in the garage outside.

“I don’t understand coming into Connecticut to-day,” Nancy said as soon as they were alone; “it seems like such a stupid excursion for Dick to make. He’s

usually pretty good at picking out places to go. In fact, he has a kind of genius for it."

"He slipped up this time," Caroline said, "I'm so hot."

"So am I," said Nancy, slumping limply into the depths of her red velour chair. "I want to get back to New York. Oh! what was it you told me the other day that you had been saving up to tell me?"

Caroline brightened.

"Oh, yes! Why, it was something Collier Pratt said about you. You know Betty has scraped up quite an acquaintance with him. She goes and sits down at his table sometimes."

"She's going to be stopped doing *that*," Nancy said.

"Well, you remember the night when you went home early with a headache, and passed by his table going out?"

"Yes, but I didn't know he saw me."

"He sees everything, Betty says."

"He didn't suspect me?"

"He didn't know you came out of the interior. He said to Betty, 'It's curious that Miss Martin never stays here to dine in the evening, though she so often drops in.' Betty is pretty quick, you know. She said, 'I think Miss Martin is a friend of the proprietor.'"

"So I am," said Nancy, "the best friend she's got. Go on, dear."

"Then he said slowly and thoughtfully, 'It's a crime for a woman like that not to be the mother of children. If ever I saw a maternal type, Miss Ann Martin is the apotheosis of it. Why some man hasn't made her understand that long ago I can not see.'"

Nancy's cheeks burned crimson and then white again.

"How dare Betty?" she said.

"Wait till you hear. You know Betty doesn't care what she says. Her reply to that was peculiarly Bettyish. She sighed and cast down her eyes,—the little imp! 'The course of true love never does run smooth,' she said; 'perhaps Ann has discovered the truth of that old saying in some new connection.' She didn't mean to be a cat, she was only trying to create a romantic interest in your affairs, doing as she would be done by. The effect was more than she bargained for though. Collier Pratt's eyes quite lit up. 'I can imagine no greater crime than frustrating the instincts of a woman like that,' he said. Imagine that—the instincts—whereupon Betty, of course, flounced off and left him."

"She would," Nancy said. Then a storm of real anger surged through her. "I'll

turn her out of my place to-morrow. I'll never look at her or speak to her again."

"I think it would be more to the point," Caroline said, "to turn out Collier Pratt. That was certainly an extraordinary way for him to speak of you to a girl who is a stranger to him."

"Caroline, you're almost as bad as Betty is. You're both of you hopelessly—helplessly—provincially American. I don't think that was extraordinary or impertinent even," Nancy said. "I—I understand how that man means things."

The car drove up in front of the office of the justice of the peace in the town beyond that in which they had had their unauspicious luncheon party.

"Are we stopping here for any particular reason?" Caroline said.

Nancy had not spoken in more than a monosyllable since they had resumed their places in the car again.

"Not now," Dick said wearily. "I thought I'd point out the sights of the town. This place is called the Gretna Green of America, you know. A great many runaway couples come out here to be married. The man inside that office, the one with whiskers and no collar, is the one that marries them."

"Does he?" Billy asked a trifle uncertainly.

Nancy turned to Dick with a real appeal in her voice. It was the first time during the day that she had addressed him with anything like her natural tenderness and sweetness.

"Oh! Dick, can't we start on?" she said.

CHAPTER VIII
Science Applied

Gaspard was ill—very ill. He lay in the little anteroom at the top of the stairs and groaned thunderously. He had a pain in his back and a roaring in his head, and an extreme disorder in the region of his solar plexus.

“Sure an’ he’s no more nor less than a human earthquake,” Michael reported after an examination.

Nancy applied ice caps and hot-water bags to the afflicted areas without avail. The stricken man had struggled from his bed in the Twentieth Street lodging-house that he had chosen for his habitation, and staggered through the heavy morning heat to his post in the basement kitchen of Nancy’s Inn, there to collapse ignominiously between his cooking ranges. With Molly and Dolly and Hildeguard at his feet and herself and Michael and a dishwasher at his head they had managed to get him up the two short flights of stairs. It developed that it would be necessary to remove him in an ambulance later in the day, but for the time being he lay like a contorted Colossus on the fragile-looking cot that constituted his improvised bed of pain: “Like the great grandfather,” to quote Michael again, “of all of them Zeus’es and gargoyles, and other cavortin’ gentlemen in the yard down-stairs.”

With the luncheon menu before her, Nancy decided that the hour had come for her to prove herself. She had assumed the practical management of the business of the Inn only to have the responsibility and much of the authority of her position taken from her by the very efficiency of her staff. She was far too good a business woman not to realize that this condition was distinctly to her advantage, and to encourage it accordingly, but there was still so much of the child in her that she secretly resented every usurpation of privilege.

With Gaspard ill she was able to manipulate the affairs of the kitchen exactly as she chose, and even in the moment of applying the “hot at the base of the brain and the cold at the forehead” that the doctor had prescribed as the most effective method for relieving the pressure of blood in the tortured temples of the suffering man, she had been conscious of that thrill of triumph that most human beings feel when the involuntary removal of the man higher up invests them with power.

Michael did the marketing, and the list went through as Gaspard had planned

it, with some slight adaptations to the exigency, such as the substitution of twenty-five cans of tomato soup for the fresh vegetables with which Gaspard had planned to make his tomato bisque, and brandied peaches in glass jars instead of peach soufflé.

“If I allow myself a little handicap in the matter of details,” she said, “I know I can put everything else through as well as Gaspard;” whereupon she enveloped herself in a huge linen apron, tucked her hair into one of the chef’s white caps, and attacked the problem of preparing luncheon for from sixty-five to two hundred people, who were scheduled to appear at uncertain intervals between the hours of twelve and two-thirty. Later she must be ready to serve tea and ices to a problematical number of patrons, but she tried not to think beyond the immediate task.

She could make a very good tomato bisque by adding one cup of milk and a dash of cream to one half-pint can of MacDonald’s tomato soup, enough to serve three people adequately, and she proceeded to multiply that recipe by twenty-five. She didn’t think of getting large cans till Michael in the process of opening the half-pint tins made the belated suggestion, which she greeted with some hauteur.

“I’m not the person to mind a little extra work, Michael, when I am sure of my results. Precision—that’s the secret of the difference between American and French cooking.”

“An’ sure and I fail to see the difference between the preciseness of a quart can and four half-pint ones, but I suppose it’s my ignorance now.”

“Your supposition is correct, Michael,” she said airily, but out of the corner of her eye she saw him smiling to himself over the growing heap of half-pint tins, and reddened with mortification at her naiveté in the matter.

She looked at the vat of terra-cotta purée with considerable dismay when she had stirred in the last measure of cream. Twenty-five pints of tomato bisque is a rather formidable quantity of a liquid the chief virtue of which is its sparing and judicious introduction into the individual diet scheme. Nancy hardly felt that she wanted to be alone with it.

“They’ll soon lick it all up, and be polishing their plates like so many Tom-cats,” Michael said, indicating their potential patronage by waving his hand toward the courtyard. “Here comes Miss Betty, now. She’ll be after lending a hand in the cooking.”

“Keep her away, Michael,” Nancy cried; “go out and head her off. Make her go up-stairs and sit with Gaspard,—anything, but don’t let her come in here. If she does I won’t answer for the consequences. I’ll—I’ll—I don’t know what I’ll

do to her."

"Throw her in the soup kettle, most likely," Michael chuckled. "Faith, an' I never saw a woman yet that wasn't ready to scratch the eyes out of the next one that got into her kitchen."

"She isn't safe," Nancy said darkly. "I need every bit of brain and self-control I have to put this luncheon through. You keep Miss Betty's mind on something else—anything but me and the way I am doing the cooking."

"'Tis done," said Michael; "sure an' I'll protect her from you, if I have to abduct her myself!"

"I wish he would," Nancy said to herself viciously, "before she gets another chance at Collier Pratt.—Creamed chicken and mushrooms. It's a lucky thing that Gaspard diced the chicken last night, and fixed that macédoine of vegetables for a garnish.—She's a dangerous woman; she might wreck one's whole life with her unfeeling, histrionic nonsense.—I wonder if thirteen quarts of cream sauce is going to be enough."

It turned out to be quite enough after the crises in which the butter basis got too brown, and the flour after melting into it smoothly seemed unreasonably inclined to lump again as Nancy stirred the cold milk into it, but the result after all was perfectly adequate, except for the uncanny brown tinge that the whole mixture had taken on. Nancy was unable to restrain herself from taking a sample of it to Gaspard's bedside.

"*Mais*—but I can not eat it now," he cried, misunderstanding the purpose of her visit, "nor again—nor ever again. *Jamais!*"

"I don't want you to eat it, Gaspard, I want you to look at it, and tell me what makes it that color. It turned tan, you see. I don't want to poison any one."

"I am too miserable," Gaspard said. "The sauce—you have made into Béchamel with the browning butter, *voilà tout*. It is better so,—it would not hurt any one in the world but me—and me it would kill."

"Poor thing," sighed Nancy, as she took her place by the kitchen dresser again, trying to remember where she had last seen brown eyes that reflected the look of stricken endurance that glazed Gaspard's velvet orbs, recalled with a start that Dick had gazed at her in much the same helpless fashion on their drive home from their recent motor trip in Connecticut. She had been too absorbed in her own distresses to consider anybody's state of mind but her own, on that occasion, but now Dick's expression came back to her vividly, and she nearly ruined a big bowl of French dressing, at the crucial moment of putting in the vinegar, trying to imagine which one of the events of that inauspicious day might conceivably have caused it.

After the actual serving of the meal began, however, she had very little time for reflection or reminiscence. The distribution of food to the waitresses as they called for it required the full concentration of her powers. Molly and Dolly coached her, and with their assistance she was soon able to fill the bewilderingly rapid orders from the line of girls stretching from the door to the open space in front of her serving-table, which never seemed to diminish however adequately its demands were met.

Mechanically she took soup and meat dishes from the hooded shelves at the top of the range where they were kept warming, and ladled out the brick-colored bisque, the creamed chicken and garnishing of the individual orders. The chicken looked delicious with its accompaniment of vari-colored vegetables,—Nancy had done away with the side dish long since—and each serving was assembled with special reference to its decorative qualities. The girls went up-stairs to put the salad on the plates, where the desserts were already dished in the quaint blue bowls in which stewed fruits and the more fluid sweets were always served.

In her mind's eye Nancy could see the picture. At noon the court was almost entirely in the shade, and instead of the awning top, which shut out the air, there were gay striped umbrellas at the one or two tables that were imperfectly protected from the sun. She had recently invested in some table-cloths with bright blue woven borders. Flowers were arranged in low bowls and baskets on respective tables. Nancy instinctively grouped tired young business men in blue serge and soft collars at the tables decorated with the baskets of blue flowers; and pale young women in lingerie blouses before the bowls of roses. She could see them,—those big-eyed girls with delicate blue veins accentuating the pallor of their white faces—sinking gratefully into the wicker seats and benches, and sniffing rapturously at the faint far-away fragrance of the woodland blossoms.

"I hope they will steal a great many of them," she thought, for her patrons were given to despoiling her flower vases in a way that scandalized the good Hildeguard, who was a just but ungenerous soul in spite of her ample proportions and popular qualities. Molly and Dolly were rather given to encouraging the vandals, knowing that they had Nancy's tacit approval.

Automatically dipping the huge metal ladle—one filling of which was enough for a service—into the big soup kettle, she stood for a moment gazing into its magenta depths oblivious to everything but the rhapsodic consideration of her realized dream. Now for the first time she was contributing directly her own strength and energy to the public which she served. She had prepared with her own hands the meal which her grateful patrons were consuming. The little girls

with the tired faces, the jaded men, the smart, weary business women—buyers and secretaries and modistes,—who were occupied in the neighborhood were all being literally nourished by her. She had actually manufactured the product that was to sustain them through the weary day of heat and effort.

“How do they like the lunch, Molly?” she asked, as she deftly deposited the forty-fifth serving of chicken with Béchamel sauce on the exact center of the plate before her. “Are they pleased with the soup? Are they saying complimentary things about the chicken?”

“Some of them is, Miss Nancy. Some of them is complaining that they can’t get any other kind of soup. Them that usually gets invalid broth don’t understand our running out of it.”

“I forgot about the specials,” Nancy cried.

“That red-haired girl that we feed on custards and nut bread and that special cocoa Gaspard makes for her, she acted real bad. They get expecting certain things, and then they want them.”

“I’m sorry,” Nancy said; “I’ll make all those things to-morrow.”

“The old feller that always has the stewed prunes is terrible pleased though. I give him two helps of the peaches, and he wanted another. He was pleased to get white bread too. He complains something dreadful about his bran biscuit every day.”

“I meant to send to the woman’s exchange for different kinds of health bread, but I forgot it,” Nancy moaned. “Do they like the peaches at all?”

“Most of them likes them too well. There was one old lady that got one whiff of them, and pushed back her chair and left. I guess she had took the pledge, and the brandy went against her principles.”

“I never thought of that. I only thought that brandied peaches would be a treat to so many people who didn’t have them habitually served at home.”

The picture in Nancy’s mind changed in color a trifle. She could see sour-faced spinsters at single tables pushing back their chairs, overturning the rose bowls in their hurry to shake the dust of her restaurant from their feet.

“Don’t accept any money from people who don’t like their luncheon,” she admonished Molly, who was next in line with several orders to be filled at once. “Tell them that the proprietor of Outside Inn prefers not to be paid unless the meal is entirely satisfactory.”

“I’m afraid there wouldn’t never be any satisfactory meals if I told them that, Miss Nancy.”

“I don’t want any one ever to pay for anything he doesn’t like,” Nancy insisted. “Slip the money back in their coat pockets if you can’t manage it any

other way.”

“There’s lots of complaints about the soup,” Dolly said; “so many people don’t like tomato in the heat. Gaspard, he always had a choice even if it wasn’t down on the menu. I might deduct, say fifteen cents now, and slip it back to them with their change.”

“Please do,” Nancy implored. “Tell Molly and Hildeguard.”

“Hilda would drop dead, but Molly’d like the fun of it.”

It was hot in the kitchen. The soup kettle bad been emptied of more than half its contents, but the liquid that was left bubbled thickly over the gas flame that had been newly lit to reheat it. The pungent, acrid odor of hot tomatoes affronted her nostrils. She had a vision now of the pale tired faces of the little stenographers turning in disgust from the contemplation of the flamboyant and sticky purée on their plates, annoyed by the color scheme in combination with the soft wild-rose pink of the table bouquets, if not actually sickened by the fluid itself. For the first time since his abrupt seizure that morning she began to hope in her heart that Gaspard’s illness might be a matter of days instead of weeks. She served Hildeguard and one of the other waitresses with more soup, and then began to boil some eggs to eke out the chicken, which, owing to her unprecedented generosity in the matter of portions, seemed to be diminishing with alarming rapidity.

From the kitchen closet beyond came the clatter of dishwashing, the interminable splashing of water, and stacking of plates, punctuated by the occasional clang of smashing glass or pottery. She had discharged two dishwashers in less than two weeks’ time, with the natural feeling that any change in that department must be for the better, but the present incumbent was even more incompetent than his predecessors. Even Nancy’s impregnable nerves began to feel the strain of the continual clamorous assault on them.

Betty appeared in the doorway that led directly from the restaurant stairs.

“I’m sorry to intrude,” she said. “Don’t blame Michael, I’m breaking my parole to get in here. He locked me in and made me swear I’d keep out of the kitchen before he’d let me out at all, but I had to tell you this. The tomato soup has curdled and you ought not to serve it any more.”

“Well, I thought it looked rather funny,” Nancy moaned.

“It won’t do anybody any harm, you know. It just looks bad, and a lot of people are kicking about it. Did Molly tell you about the old fellow that got tipsy on the peaches?”

“No, she didn’t. I sent Michael out for some ripe peaches and other fruit to serve instead.”

“That’s a good idea. How’s the food holding out? There are lots of people you know up-stairs,” she rattled on, for Nancy, who was getting more and more distraught with each disquieting detail, made no pretense of answering her. “Dolly has probably kept you informed. Dick’s aunt is here, and that terribly highbrow cousin of Caroline’s; and that good-looking young surgeon that suddenly got so famous last winter, and admired you so much. Dr. Sunderland—isn’t that his name? I never saw Collier Pratt here for lunch before. There’s a little girl with him, too.”

“Collier Pratt?” Nancy cried, “Oh, Betty, he isn’t here. He couldn’t be. Don’t frighten me with any such nonsense. He never comes here in the day-time.”

“He is though,” Betty said, “and a queer-looking little child with him, a dark-eyed little thing dressed in black satin.”

“It seems a good deal to me as if you were making that up,” Nancy cried in exasperation; “it’s so much the kind of thing you do make up.”

“I know it,” Betty said, unexpectedly reasonable, “but as it happens I’m not. Collier Pratt really is up-stairs with a poor little orphan in tow. Ask any one of the girls.”

At this moment Dolly, her ribbons awry and her china-blue eyes widened with excitement, appeared with a dramatic confirmation of Betty’s astonishing announcement.

“There’s a little girl took sick from the peaches, and moved up-stairs in the room next to Gaspard’s,” she cried breathlessly. “The doctor that was sitting at the next table, had her moved right up there. He wants to see the lady that runs the restaurant, and he wants a lot of hot water in a pitcher, and some baking soda.”

“You see,” Betty said, “go on up, I’ll take your place here. Dolly, get the things the doctor asked for.”

Nancy stripped off her cap and her apron and resigned her spoons and ladles to Betty without a word. She was still incredulous of what she would find at the top of the three flights of creaking age-worn stairs that separated her from the nest of rooms that were the storm quarters of her hostelry, now converted by a sudden malevolence on the part of fate into a temporary hospital. As she took the last flight she could hear Gaspard’s stertorous breathing coming at the regular intervals of distressful slumber, and through that an ominous murmur of grave and low-voiced conference, such as one hears in the chambers of the dead. The convulsive application of a powder puff to the tip of her burning nose—her whole face was aflame with exertion and excitement—was merely a part of her whole subconscious effort to get herself in hand for the exigency. Her mind,

itself, refused any preparation for the scene that awaited her.

On one of the cushioned benches against the wall in the most decorative of the dining-rooms of the up-stairs suite, a little girl was lying stark against the brilliant blue of the upholstery. She was a child of some seven or eight, lightly built and delicate of features and dressed all in black. Her eyes were closed, but the long lashes emphasizing the shadows in which they were set, prepared you for the revelation of them. Nancy understood that they were Collier Pratt's eyes, and that they would open presently, and look wonderingly up at her. She recognized the presence of Dr. Sunderland, of Michael and several of the waitresses, and a flighty woman in blue taffeta—an ubiquitous patron,—but she made her way past them at once, and sank on her knees before the prostrate child.

"It's nothing very serious, Miss Martin," the young surgeon reassured her, "delicate children of this type are likely to have these seizures. It's not exactly a fainting fit. It belongs rather to the family of hysteria."

"Wasn't it the peaches?" Nancy asked fearfully. "They—they had a little brandy in them."

"They may have been a contributing cause," Dr. Sunderland acknowledged, "but the child's condition is primarily responsible. Let her alone until she rouses, —then give her hot water with a pinch of soda in it at fifteen-minute intervals. Keep her feet hot and her head cold and don't try to move her until after dark, when it's cooler."

"All right," Nancy said, "I'll take care of her."

"Here comes her poor father, now," the lady in taffeta announced with the dramatic commiseration of the self-invited auditor. "He thought an iced towel on her head might make her feel better. Is the dear little thing an orphan—I mean a half orphan?"

The assembled company seeming disinclined to respond, she repeated her inquiry to Collier Pratt himself, as with the susceptive grace that characterized all his movements, he swung the compress he was carrying sharply to and fro to preserve its temperature in transit. "Is the poor little thing a half orphan?"

"The poor little thing is nine-tenths orphan, madam," said Collier Pratt, "that is—the only creature to whom she can turn for protection is the apology for a parent that you see before you. Would you mind stepping aside and giving me a little more room to work in?"

"Not at all." Irony was wasted on the indomitable sympathizer in blue. "Hasn't she really anybody but you to take care of her?"

Collier Pratt arranged the towel precisely in position over the little girl's

forehead, smoothing with careful fingers the cloud of dusky hair that fell about her face.

“She has not,” he answered with some savagery.

“Hasn’t she any women friends or relatives that would be willing to take charge of her?”

“No, madam.”

“Then some woman that has no child of her own to care for ought to adopt her, and relieve you of the responsibility. It’s a shame and disgrace the way these New York women with no natural ties of their own go around crying for something to do, when there are sweet little children like this suffering for a mother’s care. I’d adopt her myself if I was able to. I certainly would.”

“I’m perfectly willing to give over the technical part of her bringing up to some one of the women whom you so feelingly describe,” Collier Pratt said. “The trouble is to find the woman—the right woman. The vicarious mother is not the most prevalent of our modern types, I regret to say.”

The little girl on the couch stirred softly, and the hand that Nancy was holding, a pathetic, thin, unkempt little hand, grew warm in hers. The lids of the big eyes fluttered and lifted. Nancy looked into their clouded depths for an instant. Then she turned to Collier Pratt decisively.

“I’ll take care of your little girl for you, if you will let me,” she said.

CHAPTER IX
Sheila

“I had *mal de mer* when I was on the steamer,” the child said, in her pretty, painstaking English—she spoke French habitually. “I do not like to have it on the land. The gentleman in there,” she pointed to the room beyond where Gaspard was again distressfully sleeping the sleep of the spent after a period of the most profound physical agitation, “he does not like to have it, too,—I mean either.”

Nancy had propped the little girl up on improvised pillows made of coats and wraps swathed in towels and covered her with some strips of canton flannel designed to use as “hushers” under the table covers. As soon as the intense discomfort and nausea that had followed the first period of faintness had passed, Nancy had slipped off the shabby satin dress, made like the long-sleeved kitchen apron of New England extraction, and attired the child in a craftily simulated night-gown of table linen. Collier Pratt had worked with her, deftly supplementing all her efforts for his little girl’s comfort until she had fallen into the exhausted sleep from which she was only now rousing and beginning to chatter. Her father had left her, still sleeping soundly, in Nancy’s care, and gone off to keep an appointment with a prospective picture buyer. He had made no comment on Nancy’s sudden impulsive offer to take the child in charge, and neither she nor he had referred to the matter again.

“Are you comfortable now, Sheila?” Nancy asked. She had expected the child to have a French name, Suzanne or Japonette or something equally picturesque, but she realized as soon as she heard it that Sheila was much more suitable. The cloudy blue-black hair, and steel-blue eyes, the slight elongation of the space between the upper lip and nose, the dazzling satin whiteness of the skin were all Irish in their suggestion. Was the child’s mother—that other natural protector of the child, who had died or deserted her—Nancy tried not to wonder too much which it was that she had done,—an Irish girl, or was Collier Pratt himself of that romantic origin?

“*Oui*, Mademoiselle, I mean, yes, thank you. I do not think I will say to you Miss Martin. We only say their names like that to the people with whom we are not *intime*. We are *intime* now, aren’t we, now that I have been so very sick *chez vous*? In Paris the *concierge* had a daughter that I called Mademoiselle Cherie,

and we were *very intime*. I think I would like to call you Miss Dear in English after her."

"I should like that very much," Nancy said.

"I am glad the sick gentleman is called Gaspard. So many *messieurs*—I mean gentlemen in Paris are called Gaspard, and hardly any in the United States of America. American things are very different from things in Paris, don't you think so, Miss Dear?"

"I'm afraid they are," Nancy acquiesced gravely.

"I'm afraid they are too," the child said, "but afraid is what I try not to be of them. My father says America is full of beasts and devils, but he does not mind because he can paint them."

"Do you live in a studio?" Nancy asked after a struggle to prevent herself from asking the question. She felt that she had no right to any of the facts about Collier Pratt's existence that he did not choose to volunteer for himself.

"Yes, Miss Dear, but not like Paris. There we had a door that opened into a garden, and the birds sang there, and I was allowed to go and play. Here we have only a fire-escape, and the *concierge* is only a janitor and will not allow us to keep milk bottles on it. I do not like a janitor. *Concierges* have so much more *politesse*. Now, no one takes care of me when father goes out, or brings me soup or *gâteaux* when he forgets."

"Does he forget?" Nancy cried, horrified.

"Sometimes. He forgets himself, too, very often except dinner. He remembers that because he likes to come to this Outside Inn restaurant, where the cooking is so good. He brought me here to-day because it was my birthday. I think the cooking is very good except that I was so sick of eating it, but father swore to-day that it was not."

"Swore?"

"He said damn. That is not very bad swearing. I think *nom de Dieu* is worse, don't you, Miss Dear?"

"I'm going to take you up in my arms," said Nancy with sudden passion. "I want to feel how thin you are, and I want to feel how you—feel."

"Why, your eyes are wetting," the little girl exclaimed as she nestled contentedly against Nancy's breast, where Nancy had gathered her, converted table-cloth and all.

"It's your not having enough to eat," Nancy cried. "Oh! baby child, honey. How could they? It's your calling me Miss Dear, too," she said. "I—I can't stand the combination."

The child patted her cheek consolingly.

“Don’t cry,” she said; “my father cries because I get so hungry, when he forgets, but he does forget again as soon.”

“Would you like to come and live with me, Sheila?” Nancy asked.

“I think so, Miss Dear.”

“Then you shall,” Nancy said devoutly.

Collier Pratt found his child in Nancy’s arms when he again mounted the stairs to the third floor of Outside Inn. The place was curiously cool to one who had been walking the sun-baked streets, and he gave an appreciative glance at the dim interior and the tableau of woman and child. Nancy’s burnished head bent gravely over the shadowy dark one resting against her bosom.

“All right again, is she?” he inquired with the slow rare smile that Nancy had not seen before that day.

“Yes,” Nancy said, “she’s better. She’s under-nourished, that’s what the trouble is.”

“I suspected that,” Collier Pratt said ruefully. “I’m not specially talented as a parent. I feed her passionately for days, and then I stop feeding her almost entirely. Artists in my circumstances eat sketchily at best. The only reason that I am fed with any regularity is that I have the habit of coming to this restaurant of yours. By the way, is it yours? I found you in charge to-day to my amazement.”

“I am in charge to-day,” Nancy acknowledged; “in fact I have taken over the management of it for—for a friend.”

“The mysterious philanthropist.”

“Ye-es.”

“Then I will refrain from any comment on the lunch to-day.”

“Oh! that—that was a mistake,” Nancy cried, “an experiment. Gaspard the *chef*—was ill.”

“He was very ill, father, dear,” Sheila added gravely, “like crossing the Channel, much sicker than I was. I was only sick like crossing the ocean, you know.”

“These fine distinctions,” Collier Pratt said, “she’s much given to them.” His eyes narrowed as they rested again on the picture Nancy made—the cool curve of her bent neck, the rise and fall of the breast in which the breathing had quickened perceptibly since his coming,—the child swathed in the long folds of white linen outlined against the Madonna blue of the dress that she was wearing. Nancy blushed under the intentness of his gaze, understanding, thanks to Caroline’s report of his conversation with Betty, something of what was in his

mind about her.

“Gaspard is going to be taken away in an ambulance,” the child said, “to the hospital.”

“Then who is going to cook my dinner?” Collier Pratt asked.

“Good lord, I don’t know,” Nancy cried, roused to her responsibilities.

She looked at the watch on her wrist, a platinum bracelet affair with an octagonal face that Dick had persuaded her to accept for a Christmas present by giving one exactly like it to Betty and Caroline. It was twenty-five minutes of five. Dinner was served every night promptly at half past six, and there was absolutely no preparation made for it, not so much as a loaf of bread ordered. Instead of doing the usual marketing in the morning she had sent Michael out for the things that she needed in the preparation of luncheon, and planned to make up a list of things that she needed for dinner just as soon as her midday duties in the kitchen had set her free. She thought that she would be more like Gaspard, “inspired to buy what is right” if she waited until the success of her luncheon had been assured. The ensuing events had driven the affairs of her cuisine entirely out of her mind. She was constrained by her native tendency to concentrate on the business in hand to the exclusion of all other matters, big and little. She had dismissed Betty during the excitement that followed Sheila’s illness, and Betty had seemed unnaturally willing to leave the hectic scene and go about her business. Michael had made several ineffectual attempts to speak to her, but she had waved him away impatiently. She knew that neither he nor any one else on the restaurant staff would believe that she hadn’t made some adequate and mysterious provision for the serving of the night meal. She had never failed before in the smallest detail of executive policy. She set the child back upon the cushion, and arranged her perfunctorily in position there.

“I don’t know *what* you are going to have for dinner,” she said, “much less who’s going to cook it for you.”

“Perhaps I had better arrange to have it elsewhere, since this seems to be literally the cook’s day out.”

“There’ll be dinner,” said Nancy uncertainly.

Dick came up the stairs three at a time, and in his wake she heard the murmur of women’s voices—Caroline’s and Betty’s.

“I heard you were in difficulties,” Dick said, “so I made Sister Betty and Caroline give up their perfectly good trip into the country, in order to come around and mix in.”

“I didn’t know Betty was going driving with you,” Nancy said. “She didn’t say so. Oh! Dick, there isn’t any dinner. I forgot all about it. This is Mr. Collier

Pratt and his little daughter,—Mr. Richard Thorndyke. She's coming to live with me soon, I hope, and let Hitty take care of her."

The two men shook hands.

"Hold on a minute," Dick said, "that paragraph is replete with interest, but I want to get it assimilated. Sure, Betty was going driving with me. I told her to ask you if she thought it would be any use, but she allowed it wouldn't. I am delighted to meet Mr. Pratt, and pleased to know that his daughter is coming to live with you, but isn't that rather sudden? Also, what's this about there not being any dinner?"

"There isn't," Nancy was beginning, when she realized that Caroline and Betty, who had followed closely on Dick's footsteps, were looking at her with faces pale with consternation and alarm. She could see the anticipatory collapse of Outside Inn writ large on Caroline's expressive countenance. Caroline was the type of girl who believed that in the very nature of things the undertakings of her most intimate friends were doomed to failure. "There isn't any dinner yet," Nancy corrected herself, "but you go up to my place, Dick, and get Hitty. Tell her she's got to cook dinner for this restaurant to-night. She can cook three courses of anything she likes, and have *carte blanche* in the kitchen. You have more influence with her than anybody, so, no matter what she says, make her do it. Then when she decides what she wants to cook, drive her around until she collects her ingredients. She won't let anybody do the marketing for her."

"All right," Dick said, "I'll do my best."

"You'll have to do more than that," Betty laughed as he started off, "but you're perfectly capable of it. How do you do, Mr. Pratt? This is Miss Eustace, pale with apprehension about the way things are going, but still recognizable and answering to her name." Betty always enjoyed introducing Caroline with an audacious flourish, since Caroline always suffered so much in the process.

"And this is little Miss Sheila Pratt," Nancy supplemented.

"*Enchanté*," the little girl said, "I mean, I am very pleased to meet you. I was very sick, but I am better now, and I am going to live with Miss Dear."

"It seems to be settled," her father said, shrugging.

"Would you mind it so very much?" Nancy asked.

"I wouldn't mind it at all," Collier Pratt said. "I think it would be a delightful arrangement,—if I'm to take you seriously."

"Nancy is always to be taken seriously," Betty put in. "What she really wants of the child is to use her for dietetic experiment, I'm sure."

"That's what she's used to, poor child," Collier Pratt said ruefully.

The removal of Gaspard created a diversion. Nancy took Sheila in to bid him

good-by, and the great creature was so touched by the farewell kiss that she imprinted on his forehead, and the revelation of the fact that a fellow being had been suffering kindred throes in the chamber just beyond his own that he was of two minds about letting himself be moved at all from her proximity. A group of waitresses collected on the second landing, and Nancy and her friends stood together at the head of the stairs while the white-coated intern from the hospital rolled his great bulk upon a fragile-looking stretcher, and with the assistance of all the male talent in the establishment, managed to head him down the stairs, and so on across the court and into the waiting ambulance.

Nancy's eyes filled with inexplicable tears, and she caught Collier Pratt regarding them with some amusement.

"He's such a dear," she said somewhat irrelevantly. "I really didn't care whether he was sick or not this morning,—but you get so fond of people that are around all the time."

"I don't," said Collier Pratt,—he spoke very lightly, but there was something in his tone that made Nancy want to turn and look at him intently. She seemed to see for the first time a shade of defiant cruelty in his face,—"I don't," he reiterated.

"I do," Nancy repeated stubbornly, but as she met his slow smile, the slight impression of unpleasantness vanished.

"We artists are selfish people," he said. "I'm going to run away now, and leave my daughter to cultivate your charming friends. Will you come and eat your dinner at my little table to-night, and talk, discuss this matter of her visit to you?"

"I will if there is any dinner," Nancy said, putting out a throbbing hand to him.

There was a dinner. It was Hitty's conception of an emergency meal—the kind of thing that her mother before her had prepared on wash-day when an unexpected relative alighted from the noon train, and surprised her into inadvertent hospitality. It began with steamed clams and melted butter sauce. Hitty knew a fish market where the clams were imported direct from Cape Cod by the nephew of a man who used to go to school with her husband's brother, and he warranted every clam she bought of him. They were served in soup plates and the drawn butter in demi-tasses, but Hitty would have it no other way. The *pièce de résistance* was ham and eggs, great fragrant crispy slices of ham browned faintly gold across their pinky surface, and eggs—Hitty knew where to get country eggs, too—so white, so golden-yolked, so tempting that it was difficult to associate them with the prosaic process of frying, but fried they were. With them were served boiled potatoes in their jackets,—no wash-day cook ever

removed the peeling from an emergency potato,—and afterward a course of Hitty's famous huckleberry dumplings, the lightest, most ephemeral balls of dumplings that were ever dipped into the blue-black deeps of hot huckleberry—not blueberry, but country huckleberry—sauce.

"Where's the coffee?" Nancy asked Dolly miserably, when the humiliating meal was drawing to its close.

"She won't make coffee," Dolly whispered; "she says it will keep everybody awake, and they're much better off without it, but Miss Betty, she's watching her chance, and she's making it."

Collier Pratt had received each course in silence, but had eaten heartily of the food that was set before him.

"I suppose he was hungry enough to eat anything," Nancy thought; "the lunch was humiliating enough, but this surpasses anything I dreamed of."

She had given up trying to estimate the calories that each man was likely to average in partaking of Hitty's menu. She noticed that a great many of her patrons had taken second helpings, and that threw her out in her calculation of quantities, while the relative digestibility of the protein and the fats in pork depend so much upon its preparation that she could not approximate the virtue of Hitty's bill of fare without consultation with Hitty.

"That was a very excellent dinner," Collier Pratt broke through her painful reverie to make his pronouncement. "Astonishing, but very satisfactory. It reminds me of days on my grandfather's farm when I was a youngster."

"I should think it might," Nancy said, for the first time in her relation with her new friend becoming ironical on her own account. Then she added seriously, "It's Hitty, you know, that will have all the real care of Sheila. I'm pretty busy down here, and I—" she hesitated, half expecting him to threaten to remove his child at once from the prospective guardianship of a creature who reverted so readily to the barbarism of ham and eggs.

"Well, if it's Hitty that is to have the care of Sheila," Collier Pratt said, and Nancy was not longer puzzled as to which element of her parentage Sheila owed her Irish complexion, "why, more power to her!"

Nancy dreamed that night that she was married to Dick, and that Hitty made and served them *pâté de foies gras* dumplings, while Collier Pratt in freckles and overalls sat in a high chair, and had his dinner with the family. Later it was discovered that Betty had poisoned his bread and milk, and he died in Nancy's arms in dreadful agony, swearing in a beautiful Irish brogue that in all his life he had never looked at another woman,—which even in her dream seemed to Nancy a somewhat irreconcilable statement.

CHAPTER X
The Portrait

To Nancy's surprise Hitty welcomed the little girl warmly, when she was introduced into the family circle. She liked to be busy all day, and her duties in taking care of Nancy were not onerous enough to keep her full energy employed. She liked children and family life, and she seemed to have the feeling that if Nancy continued to assemble the various parts that go to make up a family, she would end by adding to it the essential masculine element, though it was Dick and not Collier Pratt that she visualized at the head of the table cutting up Sheila's meat for her. Collier Pratt was to her a necessary but insignificant detail in Nancy's scheme of things, a poor artist who had "frittered away so much time in furrin parts" that he was incapable of supporting his only child—"poor little motherless lamb!"—in anything like a befitting and adequate manner. Whenever he came to see Sheila she treated him with the condescension of a poor relation, and served his tea in the second best china with the kitchen silver and linen, unless Nancy caught her at it in time to demand the best.

Nancy had expected that Collier Pratt would try to make some business arrangement with her when she took Sheila in charge,—that he would insist on paying her at least a nominal sum a week for the child's board. She had lain awake nights planning the conversations with him in which she would overcome his delicate but natural scruples in the matter and persuade him to her own way of thinking. She had even fixed on the smallest sum—two dollars and a half a week—at which she thought she might induce him to compromise, if all her eloquence failed. She knew that he considered her the hard working, paid manager of Outside Inn, and took it for granted that she had no other source of income. She was a little disconcerted that he made no effort, beyond thanking her sincerely and simply for her kindness, to put the matter on a more concrete basis, but when he told her presently that he was going to do a portrait of her, she scourged herself for her New England perspective on an affair that he handled with so much delicacy.

Her friends were, on the whole, pleased with her experiment in vicarious motherhood. Dick instinctively resented the fact that Nancy had taken Collier Pratt's daughter into her home and heart, but the child herself was a delight to him, and he spent hours romping with her and telling her stories, loading her with toys and sweetmeats, and taking her off for enchanting holiday excursions

“over the Palisades and far away.” Billy was hardly less diverted with her, and Betty regarded her advent as a provision on the part of Providence against things becoming too commonplace. Caroline, as was her wont, took the child very seriously, and tried to interest Nancy in all the latest educational theories for her development, including posture dancing, and potato raising.

Nancy herself had loved the child from the moment the big lustrous gray eyes opened, on the day of her sudden illness at Outside Inn, and looked confidingly up into hers. For the first time in her life her maternal ardor—the instinct which made her yearn to nourish and minister to a race—had concentrated on a single human being. Sheila, hungry for mothering, had turned to her with the simplicity of the people among whom she had been brought up, taking her sympathetic response as a matter of course; and the two were soon on the closest, most affectionate terms.

Sheila and Outside Inn divided Nancy’s time to the practical exclusion of all other interests. She had, without realizing her processes, taken into her life artificial responsibilities in almost exact proportion to the normal ones of any woman who makes the choice of marriage rather than that of a career. She was doing housekeeping on a large scale,—she had a child to care for, and she felt that she had entirely disproved any lingering feeling in the mind of any one associated with her that she ought to marry,—at least that she ought to marry Dick.

No woman ought to marry for the sake of marrying, but she was growing to understand now that the experiences of love and marriage might be necessary to the true development of a woman like herself; that there might even be some tragedy in missing them. She was twenty-five, practically alone in the world, and the growing passion of her life was for a child that she had borrowed, and might be constrained to relinquish at any moment.

She was tired. The unaccustomed confinement of the long hours at the Inn, the strain of enduring the thick, almost unalleviated heat of an exceptionally humid New York summer, and the tension engendered by her various executive responsibilities, all told on her physically, and her physical condition in its turn reacted on her mind, till she was conscious of a nostalgia,—a yearning and a hunger for something that she could not understand or name, but that was none the less irresistible. She fell into strange moods of brooding and lassitude; but there were two connections in which her spirit and ambition never failed her. She never failed of interest in the distribution of food values to her unconscious patrons, and incidentally to Collier Pratt, or in directing the activities and diversions of Sheila.

She bathed and dressed the child with her own hands every morning, combed out the cloudy black hair, fine spun and wavy, that framed the delicate face, and accentuated the dazzling white and pink of her coloring. She had bought her a complete new wardrobe—she was spending money freely now on every one but herself—venturing on one dress at a time in fear and trepidation lest Collier Pratt should suddenly call her to account for her interference with his rights as a parent, but he seemed entirely oblivious of the fact that Sheila had changed her shabby studio black for the most cobwebby of muslins and linens, frocks that by virtue of their exquisite fineness cost Nancy considerably more than her own.

"I say to my father, 'See the pretty new gown that Miss Dear bought for me,' and my father says to me, 'Comb your hair straight back from your brow, and don't let your arms dangle from your shoulders.'" Sheila complained, "He sees so hard the little things that nobody sees—and big things like a dress or a hat he does not notice."

"Men are like that," Nancy said. "Last night when I put on my new rose-colored gown for the first time, your friend Monsieur Dick told me he had always liked that dress best of all."

"*Comme il est drôle*, Monsieur Dick," Sheila said; "he asked me to grow up and marry him some day. He said I should sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam, and feast upon strawberries, sugar and cream—like the poetry."

"And what did you say?" Nancy asked.

"I said that I thought I should like to marry him if I ever got to be big enough,—but I was afraid I should not be bigger for a long time. Miss Betty said she would marry him if I was *trop petite*."

"What did Dick say to that?" Nancy could not forbear asking.

"He said she was very kind, and maybe the time might come when he would think seriously of her offer."

There was a feeling in Nancy's breast as if her heart had suddenly got up and sat down again. Betty bore no remotest resemblance to the pale kind girl, practically devoid of feminine allure, that Nancy had visualized as the mate for Dick, and frequently exhorted him to go in search of.

"Miss Betty was only making a joke," she told Sheila sharply.

"We were all making jokes, Miss Dear," Sheila explained.

"I have never loved any one in the world quite so much as I love you, Sheila," Nancy cried in sudden passion as the little girl turned her face up to be kissed, as she always did when the conversation puzzled her.

"I like being loved," Sheila said, sighing happily. "My father loves me,—when he is not painting or eating. He is very good to me, I think."

“Your father is a very wise man, Sheila,” Nancy said, “he understands beautiful things that other people don’t know anything about. He looks at a flower and knows all about it, and—and what it needs to make it flourish. He looks at people that way, too.”

“But he doesn’t always have time to get the flower what it wants,” Sheila said; “my jessamine died in Paris because he forgot to water them.”

“Your father needs taking care of himself, Sheila. We must plan ways of trying to make him more comfortable. Don’t you think of something that he needs that we could get for him?”

“More socks—he would like,” Sheila said unexpectedly. “When his socks get holes in them he will not wear them. He stops whatever he is doing to mend them, and the mends hurt him. He mends my stockings, too, sometimes, but I like better the holes especially when he mends them on my feet.”

Sheila could have presented no more appealing picture of her father to Nancy’s vivid imagination. Collier Pratt with the incongruous sewing equipment of the unaccustomed male, using, more than likely, black darning cotton on a white sock—Nancy’s mental pictures were always full of the most realistic detail—bent tediously over a child’s stocking, while the precious sunlight was streaming unheeded upon the waiting canvas. She darned very badly herself, but the desire was not less strong in her to take from him all these preposterous and unbefitting tasks, and execute them with her own hands. She stared at the child fixedly.

“You buy him some socks out of your allowance,” she said at last. Then she added an anxious and inadequate “Oh, dear!”

“Aren’t you happy?” Sheila asked in unconscious imitation of Dick, with whom she had been spending most of her time for days, while Nancy superintended the additions and improvements she was making in the up-stairs quarters of her Inn, preparatory to moving in for the winter.

“Yes, I’m happy,” Nancy said, “but I’m sort of—stirred, too. I wish you were my own little girl, Sheila. I think I’ll take you with me to the Inn to-day. You might melt and trickle away if I left you alone here with Hitty.”

“*Quelle joie!* I mean, how nice that will be! Then I can talk about Paris to Gaspard, and he will give me some baba, with a *soupçon of maraschine* in the sauce, if you will tell him that I may, Miss Dear.”

“I’ll think about it.” It was Nancy’s dearest privilege to be asked and grant permission for such indulgences. “Put on that floppy white hat with the yellow ribbon, and take your white coat.”

“When I had only one dress to wear I suppose I got just as dirty,” Sheila

reflected, “only it didn’t show on black satin. Now I can tell just how dirty I am by looking. I make lots of washing, Miss Dear.”

“Yes, thank heaven,” Nancy said, unaccountably tearful of a sudden.

The first part of the day at the Inn went much like other days. Gaspard, eager to retrieve the record of the week when Hitty and a Viennese pastry cook had divided the honors of preparing the daily menus between them—for Nancy had never again attempted the feat—never let a day go by without making a new *plat de jour* or inventing a sauce; was in the throes of composing a new casserole, and it was a pleasure to watch him deftly sifting and sorting his ingredients, his artist’s eyes aglow with the inward fire of inspiration. Nancy called all the waitresses together and offered them certain prizes and rewards for all the buttermilk, and prunes and other health dishes that they were able to distribute among ailing patrons,—with the result they were over assiduous at the luncheon hour, and a red-headed young man with gold teeth made a disturbance that it took both Hilda and Michael, who appeared suddenly in his overalls from the upper regions where he was constructing window-boxes, to quell. But these incidents were not sufficiently significant to make the day in any way a memorable one to Nancy. It took a telephone message from Collier Pratt, requesting, nay demanding, her presence in his studio for the first sitting on her portrait, to make the day stand out upon her calendar.

“Sheila is with me. Shall I bring her?” Nancy asked.

“No,” Collier Pratt said uncompromisingly, “I am not a parent at this hour. She would disturb me.”

“What shall I wear?”

“What have you got on?”

“That blue crêpe, made surplice,—the one you liked the other night.”

“That’s just what I want—Madonna blue. Can you get down here in fifteen minutes?”

“Yes, I’ll send Michael up-town with Sheila.”

The bare, ramshackle studio on Washington Square shocked her,—it was so comfortless, so dingy; but the canvases on the walls, set up against the wainscoting, stacked on every available chair, gave her a new and almost appalling impression of his personality, and the peculiar poignant power of him. She could not appraise them, or get any real sense of their quality apart from the astounding revelation of the man behind the work.

“They’re wonderful!” she gasped, but “You’re wonderful” were the words she stifled on her lips.

He painted till the light failed him.

“It’s this diffused glow,—this gentle, faded afternoon light that I want,” he said. “I want you to emerge from your background as if you had bloomed out of it that very moment. Oh! I’ve got you at your hour, you know! The prescient maternal—that’s what I want. The conscious moment when a woman becomes aware that she is potentially a mother. Sheila’s done that for you. She’s brought it out in you. It was ready, it was waiting there before, but now it’s come. It’s wonderful!”

“Yes,” Nancy said, “it’s—it’s come.”

“It hasn’t been done, you know. It’s a modern conception, of course; but they all do the thing realized, or incipient. I want to do it *implicit*—that’s what I want. I might have searched the whole world over and not found it.”

“Well, here I am,” said Nancy faintly.

“Yes, here you are,” Collier Pratt responded out of the fervor of his artist’s absorption.

“It’s rather a personal matter to me,” Nancy ventured some seconds later.

Collier Pratt turned from the canvas he was contemplating, and looked at her, still posed as he had placed her, upright, yet relaxed in the scooped chair that held her without constraining her.

“Like a flower in a vase,” he said; “to me you’re a wonderful creature.”

“I’m glad you like me,” Nancy said, quivering a little. “This is a rather uncommon experience to me, you know, being looked at so impersonally. Now please don’t say that I’m being American.”

“But, good God! I don’t look at you impersonally.”

“Don’t you?” Nancy meant her voice to be light, and she was appalled to hear the quaver in it.

“You know I don’t.” He glanced toward a dun-colored curtain evidently concealing shelves and dishes. “Let’s have some tea.”

“I can’t stay for tea.” Nancy felt her lips begin to quiver childishly, but she could not control their trembling. “Oh! I had better go,” she said.

Collier Pratt took one step toward her. Then he turned toward the canvas. Nancy read his mind like a flash.

“You’re afraid you’ll disturb the—what you want to paint,” she said accusingly.

“I am.” He smiled his sweet slow smile, then he took her stiff interlaced hands and raised them, still locked together, to his lips where he kissed them gently, one after the other. “Will you forgive me?” he asked, and pushed her gently outside of his studio door.

CHAPTER XI
Billy and Caroline

It was one night in middle October when Billy and Caroline met by accident on Thirty-fourth Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Caroline stood looking into a drug-store window where an automatic mannikin was shaving himself with a patent safety razor.

“There’s a wax feller going to bed in an automatic folding settee, a little farther down the street,” Billy offered gravely at her elbow; “and on Forty-second Street there is a real live duck pond advertising the advantages of electric heaters in the home.”

“H’lo,” said Caroline, who was colloquial only in moments of real pleasure or excitement. “I’ve just written to you. I asked you to come and see me to-morrow evening,” she added more seriously, “to talk about something that’s weighing on my mind.”

“I’m going out with a blonde to-morrow, night,” Billy said speciously, “but what’s the matter with to-night? I’m free until six-fifty A. M. and I could spare an hour or two between then and breakfast time.”

“I can’t to-night,” Caroline said, “I promised Nancy to dine at the Inn.”

“That wasn’t your line at all,” Billy groaned. “Who’s the blonde?—that was your cue. If it’s only Nancy you’re dining with—that can be fixed.”

“I regard an engagement with Nancy as just as sacred as—”

“So do I,” Billy cut in. “She is the blonde. Well, let to-morrow night be as it may; let’s you and I call up the Nancy girl now and tell her that we’re going batting together; she won’t care.”

“I don’t like doing that,” Caroline said; “it’s a nice night for a bat, though.”

“I walked down Murray Hill and saw the sun set in a nice pinky gold setting,” Billy said artfully. Caroline liked to have him get an artistic perspective on New York. “Let’s walk down the avenue to the Café des Artistes and have Emincé Bernard, and a long wide high, tall drink of—ginger ale,” he finished lamely.

“We’d have to telephone Nancy,” Caroline hesitated.

Billy took her by the arm and guided her into the interior of the drug-store to the side aisle where the telephones were, and stepped into the first empty booth that offered. Caroline stopped him firmly as he was about to shut himself inside.

“I’d rather hear what you say,” she said.

Billy slipped his nickel in the slot and took up the receiver.

“Madison Square 3403 doesn’t answer,” Central informed him crisply after an interval.

“Oh! Nancy, dear,” Billy replied softly into her astonished ear. “Caroline and I are going off by ourselves to-night, you don’t care, do you?”

“Ringing thr-r-ree-four-o-thr-r-ee, Madison Square.”

“That’s nice of you,” Billy responded heartily. “I thought you’d say that.”

“Madison Square thr-r-ree-four-o-t-h-r-r-ree doesn’t answer. Hang up your receiver and I’ll call you if I get the party.”

“Of course I will. You’re always so tactful in the way you put things, always so generous and kind and thoughtful. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

“What did Nancy say?” Caroline asked, as they turned away from the booth.

“You heard my end of the conversation,” Billy said blandly. “You can deduce hers from it.”

“There was something about your end of the conversation that sounded queer to me somehow. It was odd that Central should have returned your nickel to you after you had talked so long.”

“Yes, wasn’t it?” Billy asked innocently. “Well, I suppose mistakes will happen in the best regulated telephone companies.”

“I like you,” Billy said contentedly, as the lights of the avenue strung themselves out before them. “I like walking down this royal thoroughfare with you. You’re a kind of a neutral girl, but I like you.”

“You’re a kind of ridiculous boy.”

“Don’t you like me a little bit?”

“Yes, a little.”

“What did you get engaged to me for if you only like me a little?”

“Ought not to be engaged to you. That’s one of the things I want to talk to you about.”

“Well, you are engaged to me, and that’s one of the things I don’t care to discuss—even with you.”

“Oh! Billy,” Caroline sighed, “why can’t we be just good friends and see a good deal of each other without this perpetual argument about getting married?”

“I don’t know why we can’t, but we can’t,” Billy said firmly. “What was the other thing you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Nancy’s affairs. The reckless—the criminal way she is running that restaurant, and the unthinkable expenditure of money involved. I can’t sleep at night thinking of it.”

“And I thought this was going to be a pleasant evening,” Billy cried to the stars.

“I wish you’d be serious about this,” Caroline said. “Nancy’s the best friend I have in the world, and she doesn’t seem to be quite right in her mind, Billy. Of course, I approve of a good part of her scheme. I believe that she can be of incalculable value as a pioneer in an enterprise of this sort. Her restaurant is based on a strictly scientific theory, and every person who patronizes it gets a balanced ration, if he has the good sense to eat it as it’s served.”

“And not leave any protein on his plate,” Billy murmured.

“I don’t even mind the slight extra expenditure and the deficit that is bound to follow her theory of stuffing all her subnormal patrons with additional nourishment. That is charity. I believe in devoting a certain amount of one’s income to charity, but what I mind about the whole proceeding is the crazy way that Nancy is running it. She’s not even trying to break even. She orders all the delicacies of the season—no matter what they are. She’s paid an incredible amount for the new set of carved chairs she has bought for up-stairs. You’d think she had an unlimited fortune behind her, instead of being in a position where the sheriff may walk in upon her any day.”

“Handy men to have around the house,—sheriffs. I knew a deputy sheriff once that helped the lady of the house do a baby wash while he was standing around in charge of the place. All the servants had deserted, and—”

“You pretend to be Nancy’s friend, and you’re the only thing remotely approaching a lawyer that she has, and yet you can shake with joy at the thought of her going into bankruptcy.”

“That isn’t what I’m shaking with joy about.”

“Nancy must have spent at least twice the amount of her original investment.”

“Just about,” Billy agreed cheerfully.

Caroline turned large reproachful eyes on him.

“Billy, how can you?”

“Listen to me, Caroline, honey love, it will be all right. Nancy isn’t so crazy as she seems. She is running wild a little, I admit, but there’s no danger of the sheriff or any other disaster. She knows what she’s doing, and she’s playing safe, though I admit it’s an extraordinary game.”

“She’s unhappy,” Caroline said. “You don’t suppose she’s going to marry Dick to get out of the scrape, and that she’s suffering because she’s had to make that compromise.”

“No, I don’t,” said Billy.

“I can’t imagine anything more dreadful than to give up your career—your independence because you were beaten before you could demonstrate it.”

“Let’s go right in here,” Billy said, guiding her by the arm through the door of the grill of the Café des Artistes which she was ignoring in her absorption.

It was early but the place was already crowded with the assortment of upper cut Bohemians, Frenchmen, and other discriminating diners to whom the café owed its vogue. Billy and Caroline found a snowy table by the window, a table so small that it scarcely seemed to separate them.

“If it’s Dick that Nancy’s depending on,” Caroline shook out her mammoth napkin vigorously, “then I think the whole situation is dreadful.”

“I don’t see why,” Billy argued; “have him to fall back on—that’s what men are for.”

“Your opinion of women, Billy Boynton, just about tallies with the most conservative estimate of the Middle Ages.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” he grinned, then his evil genius prompting, he continued. “Isn’t that just about what you have me for—to fall back on? You’re fond of me. You know I’ll be there if the bottom drops out. You’re sure of me, and you’re holding me in reserve against the time when you feel like concentrating your attention on me.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Sure, it’s the way it is. If I haven’t got any kick coming I don’t see why you should have any. You’re worth it to me. That’s the point.”

Caroline opened her lips to speak, and then thought better of it. The dangerous glint in her pellucid hazel eyes was lost on Billy. He was watching the clear cool curve of her cheek, the smooth brown hair brushed up from the temple, and tucked away under the smart folds of a premature velvet turban.

“I like those mouse-colored clothes of yours,” he said contentedly.

“I think the only reason a woman should marry a man is that she—she—”

“Likes him?” Billy suggested.

“No, that she can be of more use in the world married than single. She can’t be that unless she’s going to marry a man who is entirely in sympathy with her point of view.”

“That I know to be unsound,” Billy said. “Caroline, my love, this is a bat. Can’t we let these matters of the mind rest for a little? See, I’ve ordered *Petite Marmite*, and afterward an artichoke, and all the nice fattening things that Nancy won’t let me eat.”

“I wish you’d tell me about Nancy,” Caroline said. “It makes a lot of

difference. You haven’t any idea how much difference it makes.”

“See the nice little brown pots with the soup in them,” Billy implored her. “Cheese, too, all grated up so fine and white. Sprinkle it in like little snow-flakes.”

But in spite of all Billy’s efforts the evening went wrong after that. Caroline was wrapped in a mantle of sorrowful meditation the opacity of which she was not willing to let Billy penetrate for a moment. After they had dined they took a taxi-cab up-town and danced for an hour on the smooth floor of one of the quieter hotels. Billy’s dancing being of that light, sure, rhythmic quality that should have installed him irrevocably in the regard of any girl who had ever danced with a man who performed less admirably. Caroline liked to dance and fell in step with an unexpected docility, but even in his arms, dipping, pivoting, swaying to the curious syncopation of modern dance time, she was as remote and cool as a snow maiden.

At the table on the edge of the dancing platform where they sat between dances, Billy pledged her in nineteen-four *Chablis Mouton*.

“This is what you look like,” he said, holding up his glass to the light, “or perhaps I ought to say what you act like,—clear, cold stuff,—lovely, but not very sweet.”

“If it’s Dick,”—Caroline refused to be diverted—“Nancy is merely taking the easiest way out. Just getting married because she hasn’t the courage to go through any other way. She and Dick have hardly a taste in common—they don’t even read the same books.”

“What difference does that make?”

“If you don’t know I can’t tell you. When you see somebody else in danger of following the same course of action that you, yourself, are pursuing,” she added cryptically, “it puts a new face on your own affairs.”

“Oh! let’s get out of here,” Billy said, signaling for his check.

Caroline lived, for the summer while her family were away, in an elaborate Madison Avenue boarding-house. The one big room into which the entrance gave, dim and palatial in effect—at least in the light of the single gas-jet turned economically low—seemed scarcely to present a departure from its prototype, the great living hall of the private residence for which the house was originally designed. It was only on the second floor that the character of the establishment became unmistakable. Billy took Caroline’s latchkey from her,—she usually opened the door for herself—and let her quietly into the dim interior. Then he stepped inside himself, and closed the door gently after him. Being a man he entirely failed to note the drift of psychological straws that indicated the sudden

sharp turn of the wind, and the presage of storm in the air. He was thinking only of the illusive, desirable, maddening quality of the girl that walked beside him, filled with inexplicable forebodings for a friend, whom he knew to be invulnerable to misfortune. Certain phrases of Dick's were ringing in his ears to the exclusion of all more immediate conversational fragments.

"Cave-man stuff—that's the answer to you and Caroline.... This watchful waiting's entirely the wrong idea...."

Billy made a great lunge toward the figure of his fiancée, and caught her in his arms.

"I've never really kissed you before," he cried, "now I shan't let you go."

She struggled in his arms, but he mastered her. He covered her cool brow with kisses, her hands, the lovely curve of her neck where the smooth hair turned upward, and at last—her lips.

"You're mine, my girl," he exulted, "and nothing, nothing, nothing shall ever take you away from me now."

There was a click in the latch of the door through which they had just entered. Another belated boarder was making his way into the domicile which he had chosen as a substitute for the sacred privacy of home. Caroline tore herself out of Billy's arms just in time to exchange greetings with the incoming guest with some pretense of composure. He was a fat man with an umbrella which clattered against the balusters as he ascended the carved staircase.

"Caught with the goods," Billy tried to say through lips stiffened in an effort at control.

Caroline turned on him, her face blazing with anger, the transfiguring white rage of the woman whose spiritual fastnesses have been invaded through the approach of the flesh.

"There is no way of my ever forgiving you," she said. "No way of my ever tolerating you, or anything you stand for again. You are utterly—utterly—utterly detestable in my eyes."

"Is—is that so?" Billy stammered, dizzied by the suddenness of the onslaught.

"I—I've got some decent hold on my pride and self-respect—even if Nancy hasn't, and I'm not going to be subjugated like a cave woman by mere brute force either."

"Aren't you?" said Billy weakly, his mind in a whirl still from the lightning-like overthrow of all his theories of action.

"I'm not going to do what Nancy is going to do, just out of sheer temperamental weakness, and—and tendency to follow the line of least resistance."

Billy had no idea of the significance of her last phrase, and let it go unheeded. Caroline turned and walked away from him, her head high.

“But, good lord, Nancy isn’t going to do it,” he called after her retreating figure, but all the answer he got was the silken swish of her petticoat as she took the stairs.

CHAPTER XII
More Cave-Man Stuff

When Nancy left Collier Pratt's studio on the day of her first sitting for the portrait he was to do of her, she never expected to enter it again. She was in a panic of hurt pride and anger at his handling of the situation that had developed there, and in a passion of self-disgust that she had been responsible for it.

It was a simple fact of her experience that the men she knew valued her favors, and exerted themselves to win them. She had always had plenty of suitors, or at least admirers who lacked only a few smiles of encouragement to make suitors of them, and she was accustomed to the consideration of the desirable woman, whose privilege it is to guide the conversation into personal channels, or gently deflect it therefrom. An encounter in which she could not find her poise was as new as it was bewildering to her.

From the moment that she had begun to realize Collier Pratt's admiration for her she had scarcely given a thought to any other man. With the insight of the artist he had seen straight into the heart of Nancy's secret—the secret that she scarcely knew herself until he translated it for her, the most obvious secret that a prescient universe ever throbbed with,—that a woman is not fulfilled until she is a mate and a mother. The nebulous urge of her spirit had been formulated. In Nancy's world there was no abstract sentimentality—if this man indulged himself in emotional regret for her frustrated womanhood—she called it that to herself—it must in some way concern him. She had never in her life been troubled by a condition that she was not eager to ameliorate, and she could not conceive of an emotional interest in an individual disassociated from a certain responsibility for that individual's welfare. She took Collier Pratt's growing tenderness for her for granted, and dreamed exultant dreams of their romantic association.

The scene in the studio had shocked her only because he put his art first. He had taken a lover's step toward her, and then glancing at the crudely splotched canvas from which his ideal of her was presently to emerge, he had thought better of it, soothing her with caresses as if she were a child, and like a child dismissing her. She felt that she never wanted to see again the man who could so confuse and humiliate her. But this mood did not last. As the days went on, and she feverishly recapitulated the circumstances of the episode, she began to feel

that it was she who had failed to respond to the beautiful opportunity of that hour. She had inspired the soul of an artist with a great concept of womanhood, and had, in effect, demanded an immediate personal tribute from him. He had been wise to deflect the emotion that had sprung up within them both. After the picture was done—. She became eager to show him that she understood and wanted to help him conserve the impression of her from which his inspiration had come, and when he asked her to go to the studio again the following week she rejoiced that she had another chance to prove to him how simply she could behave in the matter.

She looked in the mirror gravely every night after she had done her hair in the prescribed pig-tails to try to determine whether or not the look he had discovered in her face was still there,—the look of implicit maternity that she had been fortunate enough to reflect and symbolize for him,—but she was unable to come to any decision about it. Her face looked to her much as it had always looked—except that her brow and temples seemed to have become more transparent and the blue veins there seemed to be outlined with an even bluer brush than usual.

She was busier than she had ever been in her life. The volume of her business was swelling. With the return of the native to the city of his adoption—there is no native New Yorker in the strict sense of the word—Outside Inn was besieged by clamorous patrons. Gaspard, with the adaptability of his race, had evolved what was practically a perfect system of presenting the balanced ration to an unconscious populace, and the populace was responding warmly to his treatment. It had taken him a little time to gauge the situation exactly, to adapt the supply to the idiosyncrasies of the composite demand, but once he had mastered his problem he dealt with it inspiredly. His southern inheritance made it possible for him to apprehend if he could not actually comprehend the taste of a people who did not want the flavor of nutmeg in their cauliflower, and who preferred cocoanut in their custard pie, and he realized that their education required all the diplomacy and skill at his command.

Nancy found him unexpectedly intelligent about the use of her tables. He grasped the essential fact that the values of food changed in the process of cooking, and that it was necessary to Nancy’s peace of mind to calculate the amount of water absorbed in preparing certain vegetables, and that the amount of butter and cream introduced in their preparation was an important factor in her analysis. He also nodded his head with evident appreciation when she discoursed to him of the optimum amount of protein as opposed to the actual requirements in calories of the average man, but she never quite knew whether the matter interested him, or his native politeness constrained him to listen to her smilingly

as long as she might choose to claim his attention. But the fact remained that there was no such cooking in any restaurant in New York of high or low degree, as that which Gaspard provided, and as time went on, and he realized that expense was not a factor in Nancy's conception of a successfully conducted restaurant, the reputation of Outside Inn increased by leaps and bounds.

To Nancy's friends—with the exception, of course, of Billy, who was in her confidence—the whole business became more and more puzzling. Caroline, her susceptibility to vicarious distress being augmented by the sensitiveness of her own emotional state, yearned and prayed over her alternately. Betty, avid of excitement, spent her days in the pleasurable anticipation of a dramatic bankruptcy. It was on Dick, however, that the actual strain came. He saw Nancy growing paler and more ethereal each day, on her feet from morning till night manipulating the affairs of an enterprise that seemed to be assuming more preposterous proportions every hour of its existence. He made surreptitious estimates of expenditures and suffered accordingly, approximating the economic unsoundness of the Inn by a very close figure, and still Nancy kept him at arm's length and flouted all his suggestions for easing, what seemed to him now, her desperate situation.

He managed to pick her up in his car one day with Sheila, and persuaded her to a couple of hours in the open. She was on her way home from the Inn, and had meant to spend that time resting and dressing before she went back to consult with Gaspard concerning the night meal. She had no complaint to make now of the usurpation of her authority or the lack of actual executive service that was required of her. With the increase in the amount of business that the Inn was carrying she found that every particle of her energy was necessary to get through the work of the day.

"I'm worried about you," Dick said, as they took the long ribbon of road that unfurled in the direction of Yonkers, and Nancy removed her hat to let the breeze cool her distracted brow. His man Williams, was driving.

"Well, don't tell me so," she answered a trifle ungraciously.

"Miss Dear is cross to-day," Sheila explained. "The milk did not come for Gaspard to make the poor people's custard, *crême renversé*, he makes—deliciously good, and we give it to the clerking girls."

"The buttermilk cultures were bad," Nancy said. "And I wasn't able to get any of the preparations of it, that I can trust. There are one or two people that ought to have it every day and their complexions show it if they don't."

"I suppose so," Dick said, with a grimace.

"These people who have worked in New York all summer have run pretty

close to their margin of energy. You've no idea what a difference a few calories make to them, or how closely I have to watch them, and when I have to substitute an article of diet for the thing they've been used to, it's awfully hard to get them to take it."

"I should think it might be," Dick said. "It's true about people who have worked in New York all summer, though. I have—and you have."

"Oh! I'm all right," Nancy said.

"So am I," Sheila said, "and so is Monsieur Dick, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"*Vraiment, Mademoiselle."*

"Father isn't very right, though. Even when Miss Dear has all the beautiful things in the most beautiful colors in the world cooked for him and sent to him, he won't eat them unless she comes and sits beside him and begs him."

"He's very fond of *sauce verte*," Nancy said hastily, "and *apricot mousse* and *cèpes et pimentos*, things that Gaspard can't make for the regular menu,—bright colored things that Sheila loves to look at."

"He likes *petit pois avec laitue* too and *haricot coupé*, and *artichaut mousselaine*. Sometimes when he does not want them Miss Dear eats them."

"I'm glad they are diverted to some good use," Dick said.

"I've been looking into the living conditions of my waitresses." Nancy changed the subject hastily. "Did you realize, Dick, that the waitresses have about the unfairest deal of any of the day laborers? They're not organized, you know. Their hours are interminable, the work intolerably hard, and the compensation entirely inadequate. Moreover, they don't last out for any length of time. I'm trying out a new scheme of very short shifts. Also, I'm having a certain sum of money paid over to them every month from my bank. If they don't know where it comes from it can't do them any harm. That is, I am not establishing a precedent for wages that they won't be able to earn elsewhere. I consider it immoral to do that."

"You are paying them an additional sum of money out of your own pocket? You told me you paid them the maximum wage, anyhow, and they get lots of tips."

"Oh! but that's not nearly enough."

"Nancy," Dick said dramatically, "where do you get the money?"

"Oh, I don't know," Nancy said, "it comes along. The restaurant makes some."

"Very little."

"I could make it pay any time that I wanted to."

“Sometimes I wonder if you are in full possession of your senses.”

“Caroline is affected that way, too. I feel that she is likely to get an alienist in at any time. She is so earnest in anything she undertakes. She and Billy have had a scrap, did you know it?”

“I didn’t.”

“Billy wants to marry her, and he has shocked her delicate feelings by suggesting it to her.”

“I imagine you have a good deal to do with her feelings on the subject,” Dick said gloomily. “I suppose at heart you don’t believe in marriage, or think you don’t and you’ve communicated the poison to Caroline.”

“I’ve done nothing of the kind,” Nancy insisted warmly. “I do believe in marriage with all my heart. I think the greatest service any woman can render her kind in this mix-up age is to marry one man and make that marriage work by taking proper scientific care of him and his children.”

“This is news to me,” Dick said. “I thought that *you* thought that the greatest service a woman could do was to run Outside Inn, and stuff all the derelicts with calories.”

“That’s a service, too.”

“Sure.”

They were out beyond the stately decay of the up-town drive, with its crumbling mansions and the disheveled lawns surrounding them, beyond the view of the most picturesque river in the world, though, comparatively speaking, the least regarded, covering the prosaic stretch of dusty road between Van Courtland Park and the town of Yonkers.

“I like the *Bois* better,” Sheila said, “but I like Central Park better than the *Champs Elyseés*. In Paris the children are not so gay as the grown-up people. Here it is the grown-up people who are without smiles on the streets.”

“Why is that, Dick?” Nancy asked.

“That’s always true of the maturer races, the gaiety of the French is appreciative enthusiasm,—if I may invent a phrase. The children haven’t developed it.”

“I would like to have my hand held, Monsieur Dick,” Sheila announced. “I always feel homesick when I think about Paris. I was so contente and so *malheureuse* there.”

“Why were you unhappy, sweetest?” Nancy asked.

“My father says I am never to speak of those things, and so I don’t—even to Miss Dear, my *bien aimée*.”

Dick lifted Sheila into his lap, he took the hand that still clung to Nancy's in his warm palm, and held them both there caressingly.

"My *bien aimée*," he said softly.

Beyond the town a more gracious and magnificent country revealed itself; lovely homes set high on sweeping terraces, private parks and gardens and luxuriant estates, all in a blaze of October radiance with the glorious pigments of the season.

"Isn't it time to go back?" Nancy asked.

"Not yet," Dick said. "I want to show you something. There's an old place here I want you to see. That colonial house set way back in the trees there."

"Williams is driving in," Nancy said as they approached it.

"He's been here before."

"Are we going to get out?" Sheila asked.

Dick was already opening the door of the tonneau and assisting Nancy out of the car.

"I'm going to leave Sheila with Williams, and take you over the house, Nancy. She'll be more interested in the grounds than she would in the interior. I want you to see the inside."

He took a key out of his pocket, and unlocked the stately door. Everything about the place was gigantic, stately,—the huge columns that supported the roof of the porch, the big elms that flanked it, and the great entrance hall, as they stepped into its majestic enclosure.

"It's a biggish sort of place, isn't it?" Nancy said.

"But it's rather lovely, don't you think so?" Dick asked anxiously. "These old places are getting increasingly hard to find,—real old homes, dignified and beautiful, within a reasonable distance from town."

"It is lovely," Nancy said, "it could be made perfectly wonderful to live in. I can see this big hall—furnished in mahogany or even carved oak that was old enough. Thank heaven, we're no longer slaves to a *period* in our decorating; we can use anything that's beautiful and suitable and not intrinsically incongruous with a clear conscience."

"Come up-stairs."

Nancy lingered on the landing of the fine old staircase, white banistered with a mahogany hand-rail, that turned only once before it led into the region up-stairs.

"I'd rather see the kitchen," she said.

"The kitchen isn't the thing that I'm proudest of. Its plumbing is early English, or Scottish, I'm afraid. I think this arrangement up here is delightful. See these

front suites, one on either side of the hall. Bedroom, dressing-room, sitting-room. Which do you like best? I thought perhaps I might take the one that overlooks the orchard."

Nancy stopped still on her way from window to window.

"Dick Thorndyke, whose house *is* this?" she demanded.

"Mine."

"Yours—have you bought it?"

"Yes, I put the deed in my safe deposit vault yesterday. Come in here. Isn't this a cunning little guest chamber nested in the trees? Be becoming to Betty's style of beauty, wouldn't it?" He held the door open for her ingratiatingly, and she passed under his arm perfunctorily.

"What on earth did you buy a house like this for?"

"I thought you might like it."

"I—what have I to do with it?"

Dick turned the rusty key in the lock deliberately, and put it in his pocket, thus closing them into the little musty room which had no other exit. A branch of flaming maple leaves tapped lightly on the window.

"You've a whole lot to do with it, Nancy," he said. "It's yours, and I'm yours, and I want to know how much longer you're going to hedge."

"I'm not hedging," Nancy blazed. "Take that key out of your pocket. This is moving-picture stuff."

"I know it is. I can't get you to talk to me any other way, so I thought I'd try main force for a change."

"Well, it is a change," she agreed. "Shall I begin to scream now, or do you intend to give me some other provocation?"

"Don't be coarse, darling." There is a certain disadvantage in having known the woman who is the object of your tenderest emotions all your life, and to be on terms of the most familiar badinage with her. Dick was feeling this disadvantage acutely at the moment. He took a step toward her, and put a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Nancy, don't you love me?" he said, "don't you really?"

"No," Nancy said deliberately, "I don't, and you know very well I don't. Unlock that door, and let's be sensible."

"Don't you know, dear, or care that you're hurting me?"

"No, I don't," Nancy said. "You say so, and I hear you, but I don't really believe it. If I did—"

"If you did—what?"

"Then I'd be sorrier."

“You aren’t sorry at all, as it stands.”

“I find it’s awfully hard to be sorry for you, Dick, in any connection. There’s really nothing pathetic about you, no matter how tragic you think you are being. You’re rich and lucky and healthy. You have everything you want—”

“Not everything.”

“And you live the way you want to, and eat the food you want to—”

“The ruling passion.”

“And make the jokes you want to.” Nancy literally stuck up a saucy nose at him. “There is really nothing that I could contribute to your happiness. I mean nothing important. You are not a poor man whom I could help to work his way up to the top, or a genius that needs fostering, or a—”

“Dyspeptic that needs putting on a special diet,—but for all that I do need a mother’s love, Nancy.”

“I don’t believe you do,” Nancy said, a trifle absently. “Unlock the door, Dick. I don’t think Sheila put on that sweater when I told her to, and I’m afraid she’ll get cold.”

“Kiss me, Nancy.”

“Will you unlock the door if I do?”

“Yes’um.”

Nancy put up cool fragrant lips to meet a brother’s kiss, and for the moment was threatened with a second salute that was very much less fraternal, but the danger passed. Dick unlocked the door and let her pass him without protest.

“If you had been any other girl,” he mused, as they went down the stairs together companionably, “you wouldn’t have got away with that.”

“With what?” Nancy asked innocently.

“If you don’t know,” Dick said, “I won’t tell you. If you’d been any other girl I should have thrown that key out of the window when you began to sass me.”

“And then?” Nancy inquired politely.

“And then,” Dick replied finally and firmly.

“Are there any other girls?” Nancy asked, faintly curious, as they stood on the deep steps of the porch waiting for Sheila and Williams who were emerging from the middle entrance.

Dick met her glance a little solemnly, and hesitated for a perceptible instant.

“Are there, Dick?” she insisted.

“Yes, dear,” he said.

CHAPTER XIII
The Happiest Day

It was thoroughly characteristic of Nancy to turn her back on the most significant facts of her experience, and occupy herself exclusively with its by-products. She refused to consider herself as an heiress entitled to spend money lavishly for her own uses, but she squandered it on her pet enterprise. She dismissed the idea that Dick, whom she neglected to discourage as decisively as her growing interest in another man would seem to warrant, had bought a country estate for the sole purpose of ensconcing her there as mistress. She dreamed of Collier Pratt and his ideal of her, and presented herself punctually at his studio as a model for that ideal, while ignoring absolutely the fact that he was nearly a hundred dollars in debt to her for meals served at Outside Inn. She had sufficient logic and common sense to apply to these matters, and sufficient imagination to handle them sympathetically, had she chosen to consider them at all, but she did not choose. She was deep in the adventure of her existence as differentiated from its practical working out.

The day Collier Pratt finished his portrait of her she was not alone in the studio with him. Sheila, in a fluffy white dress with a floppy black satin hat framing her poignant little face, was omnipresent at the interview which succeeded the actual two hours of absorption when he put in the last telling strokes.

“It’s done,” he said, as he set aside pigments and brushes, and divested himself of his painting apron. “I don’t want to look at it now. I’ve got it, but I can’t stand the strain of contemplating it till my brain cools a trifle. Let’s go out and celebrate.”

“Where shall we go?” Nancy said. This was the moment she had dreamed of for weeks, the hour of fruition when the work was done, and they could face each other, man and woman again with no strip of canvas between them.

“The place I always go when I’ve finished a picture is a little café under the shadow of *Notre Dame*, where I get cakes and beer and an excellent perspective on all my favorite gargoyles.”

“And the little birds flutter in the sun, and eat my crumbs and the great music swells out while you ask the *garçon* for another *bock*. Do you remember, father dear, the day that *she* found us there?”

“I remember only that you made yourself ill eating *Madelaines* and had to be taken home *en voiture,*” Collier Pratt said quickly. “We will go and have some coffee at the Café des Artistes, and discuss ships and shoes and sealing wax—anything but the art of painting.”

“And cabbages and kings,” Sheila contributed ecstatically. “I used to think when I was a very little girl and couldn’t read English very well that it was really Heaven where Alice went, and it made me sad to think she was dead and I didn’t understand it, but now Miss Dear has explained to me.”

“Miss Dear has made a good many things clear to us both,” Collier Pratt said, but he said no more that might be even remotely construed as referring to the issue between them, and Nancy finished out her day with dragging limbs and an aching empty heart that a word of tenderness would have filled to running over.

But after her work for the day was done, and she was back in her own apartment with Sheila tucked snugly in bed, and Hitty out for the night with a sick friend, there came the touch on her bell that she knew was Collier Pratt’s; and she opened the door to find him standing on her threshold.

“I knew you’d come,” she said, as women always say to the man they have that hour given up looking for.

“I wasn’t sure I would,” Collier Pratt said, “but I did, you see.”

“Why weren’t you sure?” She stood beside him in her little rectangular hall while he divested himself of his cape, and placed his hat, stick and gloves in orderly sequence on the oak settee beside it. She liked to watch the precision with which he always arranged these things.

“Why should I be sure?” He turned and faced her. “Miss Dear,” he said to himself softly, “Miss Dear,” and she saw that in his eyes which made the moment simpler for her to bear.

She led the way into her drawing-room.

“Light the candles,” he said, “this firelight is too good to drown in a flood of electric light!”

“Is that better?” she asked.

They were standing before the fireplace; the embers had burned to a gentle glowing radiance. Of the four candles she had lighted, the wick of only one had taken fire and was burning. Nancy’s breath caught in her throat, and she could not steady it. Collier Pratt took a step forward and held out his arms.

“No, this is better,” he said.

“I thought there was some place in the world where I could be—comfortable,” Nancy said, when she finally lifted her head from the shoulder of the shabby, immaculate black suit, “but I wasn’t quite sure.”

“Are you sure now, you little wonder woman?” He held her at the length of his arm for a moment and gazed curiously into her face. Then he drew her slowly toward him again. She met his kiss bravely, so bravely that he understood the quality of her courage.

“I didn’t realize that this would be the first time,” he said.

“There couldn’t have been any other time,” Nancy breathed, “you know that.”

“I didn’t know,” Collier Pratt said thoughtfully. “Oh! you little American girls, with your strange, straight-laced little bodies and your fearless souls!”

“Betty told you something,” Nancy cried, scarcely hearing him, “but it wasn’t true. There never has been anybody else.” She put her head down on his shoulder again. “It is comfortable here,” she said, “where I belong.”

She felt the sudden passion sweep through him,—the high avid wave of tenderness and desire,—and she exulted as all purely innocent women exult when that madness surges first through the veins of the man they love. He put his hands on her shoulders and pressed her into the armchair by the fire, and there she took his head on her breast and understood for all time what it means for a woman to be called the mother of men.

“You wonder woman,” he murmured again.

She brushed the dark hair back from his forehead and kissed his eyes. “You dear,” she said, “you boy, you little boy.”

Suddenly through the darkness came the sound of a shrill cry, and the thud of a fall in some room down the corridor.

“It’s Sheila,” Nancy said, “she has those little nightmares and falls out of bed.”

“I know she does,” Collier Pratt said, “but she picks herself up again.”

“Not always,” Nancy said; “don’t you want to come in and help me put her back?”

“I do not,” Collier Pratt said with unnecessary emphasis.

Nancy was of two minds about picking the child up in her little white night-gown and bringing her out to her father, flushed and lovely with sleep as she was. It was Collier Pratt’s baby she had in her arms; her charge, the child she loved, and the child of the man she loved, a part of the miracle that was slowly revealing itself to her; but a sudden sharp instinct warned her that her impulse was ill-timed.

“I had forgotten the child was here,” Collier Pratt said when she returned to him.

“I hadn’t,” Nancy said happily.

“I suppose she has to be somewhere, poor little wretch,” he said. “She’s an extraordinarily picturesque baby, isn’t she?”

Nancy crept nearer to him. He stood leaning against the mantel and frowning slightly, but he made no move toward her again.

“She doesn’t have nightmares often now,” Nancy said with stiffening lips. “She used to have them almost every night, but by watching her diet carefully we have practically eliminated them.”

“The Hitty person doesn’t like me,” Collier Pratt said. “*Pas du tout*. She treats me as if I were a book agent.”

“She loves Sheila, she—she’d do anything for her.”

“The women who do not find me attractive are likely to find me quite conspicuously otherwise, I am afraid.” He had been carefully avoiding Nancy’s eyes, but her little cry at this drew his gaze. She was standing before him, slowly blanching as if he had struck her, absolutely still except for the trembling of her lips.

“What am I,” he said, “to hold out against all the forces of the Universe? Do you love me, Nancy, do you love me?”

“You know,” she whispered, once more in the shelter of the shabby shoulder.

“This is madness,” he swore as he kissed her; “we’re both out of our senses, Nancy; don’t you know it?”

“The picture is done, anyhow,” she said. “I don’t know how I can ever bear to look it in the face, but I shall have to.”

“It’s the best work I’ve ever done,” he said.

“I don’t look like it now, do I?”

He held her off to see.

“No, by jove, you don’t. It’s gone, now—just that thing I painted.”

“How do I look now?”

“Much more commonplace from the point of view from which I painted you. Much more beautiful though,—much more beautiful.”

“I’m glad.”

“I might paint you again,—like this. No, I swear I won’t. I got the thing itself down on canvas. I’ll never try to paint you again.”

“Is—that flattering?”

“Supremely.”

“When am I going to have my picture?” she asked after another interlude. “Do you want me to send for it?”

“I can’t give you the picture,” he said. “I intended to if I had done merely a

portrait, but I can’t part with this. It has got to make my fame and fortune.”

“I thought I was to have it,” Nancy said. “I—I—” then she felt she was being ungenerous, unworthy, “but I couldn’t take it, of course, it’s too valuable.”

“Please God.”

“It would be wonderful, wouldn’t it, if my picture did make you famous!”

“I think it will.”

“I’m nothing but a grubby little working girl, and you’re a great artist,—and you love me.”

“You’re not a grubby little working girl to me,” he said, “you’re a glorious creature—a wonder woman. I ought to go down on my knees to you for what you’ve given me in that picture.”

“In the picture?” Nancy said. “I love you. I love you. That wasn’t in the picture—I kept it out.”

“I won’t marry him until he is ready for me,” she said to herself at one time during the night. She lay perfectly quiet till morning, her hands folded upon her breast, and her little girl pig-tails pulled down on either side of the coverlet, wide-eyed and tranquil. She could not bear to sleep and forget for a moment the beautiful thing that had happened to her between dawn and dawn. “I’ll take care of him and Sheila, and nourish him, and help him to sell my picture. It isn’t every woman who would understand his kind of loving, but I understand it.”

At eight o’clock Hitty came in to her, and roused her from the light drowse into which she had fallen at last.

“You was crying in your sleep again,” she said, “your cheeks is all wet. I heard you the minute I put my key into the latch. You’re as bad as Sheila, only I expect she suffers from something laying hard on her stummick. It’s always something on your mind that starts you in.”

“There’s nothing on my mind, Hitty,” Nancy said, sitting up in bed, “nothing but happiness, I mean. In some ways, Hitty dear, this is the happiest day that I’ve ever waked up to.”

“Well, then, there’s other ways that it isn’t,” Hitty said, opening the door to stalk out majestically.

CHAPTER XIV
Betty

“There’s a lady waiting to see you, sir,” Dick’s man servant informed him on his arrival at his apartment one evening when he had been dining at his club, and was putting in a leisurely appearance at his own place after his coffee and cigar.

“A lady?”

“Yes, sir, she has been here since nine. She says it’s not important, but she insisted on waiting.”

“The deuce she did.”

Dick’s quarters were not, strictly speaking, of the bachelor variety. That is, he had a suite in one of the older apartment houses in the fifties, a building that domiciled more families and middle-aged married couples than sprightly young single gentlemen. Dick had fallen heir to the establishment of an elderly uncle, who had furnished the place some time in the nineties and when he grew too decrepit to keep his foothold in New York had retired to the country, leaving Dick in possession. Even if Dick had been a conspicuously rakish young gentleman, which he was not, the traditional dignity of his surroundings would have certainly protected him from incongruous indiscretion in their vicinity.

Betty rose composedly from the pompous red velour couch that ran along the wall under a portrait of a gentleman that looked like a Philip of Spain, but was really Dick’s maternal great grandfather.

“Why, Betty,” Dick said, “this isn’t *convenable* unless you have a chaperon somewhere concealed. We don’t do things like this.”

“I do,” Betty said. “I wanted to see you, so I came. In these emancipated days ladies call upon their men friends if they like. It’s archaic to prattle of chaperons.”

“Still we were all brought up in the fear of them.”

“Mine were brought up in the fear of me. I like this place, Dicky. Why don’t you give us more parties in it? You haven’t had a crowd here for months.”

“Everybody’s so busy,” Dick said, “we don’t seem to get together any more. I’m willing to play host any time that the rest want to come.”

“You mean Nancy is so busy with her old Outside Inn.”

“You are busy there, too.”

“I’m not so busy that I wouldn’t come here when I was asked, Dicky.”

“Or even when you weren’t?” Dick’s smile took the edge off his obviously inhospitable suggestion.

“Or even when I wasn’t,” Betty said impudently. “Won’t you sit down, Mr. Thorndyke?”

“Can’t I call you a cab, Miss Pope?”

“I don’t wish to go away.”

“Betty, be reasonable,” Dick said, “it’s after ten o’clock. It is not usual for me to receive young ladies alone here, and it looks badly. I don’t care for myself, of course, but for you it looks badly.”

“If it’s only for me—I don’t care how it looks. Come and sit down beside me, and talk to me, Dicky, and I’ll tell you really why I came.”

Dick folded his arms and looked down at her. Betty’s piquant little face, olive tinted, and pure oval in contour, was turned up to him confidently; under the close seal turban the soft brown hair framed the childish face, while the big dark eyes danced with mischief. She patted the couch by her side invitingly.

“I’ll go away in fifteen minutes, Dicky dear. It certainly wouldn’t look well if you put me out immediately, after all your establishment knowing that I waited here an hour for you.”

Dick took out his watch.

“Fifteen minutes, then,” he said. “What’s your trouble, Betty?”

“Well, it’s a long sad story,” she temporized. “Perhaps I had better not begin on it now that our time is so short. You wouldn’t like to hold my hand, would you, Dicky?”

“I’m not going to, at any rate.”

“I thought you’d say that,” she sighed. “Have you seen Nancy lately?”

“Yesterday.”

“She’s looking better, don’t you think so?”

“Yes.”

“Preston Eustace is back.”

“Is that so? I didn’t know he was here yet. I knew he was coming.”

“He’s to be here six months, or so.”

“Have you seen him?”

“No, Caroline told me.” Her voice was carefully steadied but Dick noticed for the first time the shadows etched under the big brown eyes, and the flush of excitement splotched high on her cheek-bones. She had been engaged to Preston Eustace for three months succeeding her twentieth birthday.

“On second thoughts I think I will hold your hand, Betty,” he said, covering

that childlike member with his own rather brawny one. “You are not a very big little girl, are you, Betty?”

“My mother used to tell me that I was a very destructive child.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if you were that yet.”

“Don’t let’s talk about me. Let’s talk about you, Dicky.”

“About me?”

“Yes, please. I think you’re a very interesting subject.”

Having arrived at some conclusion concerning this unprecedented attack upon his privacy, Dick was disposed to be kind to his unexpected visitor. The fact that Preston Eustace was in town and Betty had not seen him shed an entirely new light on her recklessness. Like every other incident in Betty’s history her love-affair had been very conspicuously featured.

“The interesting things about me just at present are—” he was just about to say “six shirts of imported gingham” but he bethought himself that she would be certain to demand to see them, so he finished lamely with—“my game of golf, and my new dogs.”

“What kind of dogs?”

“Belgian police dogs.”

“Where do you keep them?”

“I haven’t taken them over yet.”

“I heard that you had bought a place up in Westchester, but I asked Nancy, and she said she didn’t know. I don’t think Nancy appreciates you, Dick.”

“That so often happens.”

“I mean that seriously.”

“It’s a serious matter—being appreciated. The only person who I ever thought really appreciated me was Billy’s old aunt. Every time she saw me she used to say to me, ‘You’re such a clean-looking young man I can’t take my eyes off you.’”

“You *are* clean-looking, and awfully good-looking too.”

“Do you mind if I smoke, Betty?” Dick carefully disengaged his hand from her clinging fingers, and a look of something like intelligence passed between them, before Betty turned her ingenuous child’s stare on him again.

“Not if you’ll give me a cigarette, too.”

Dick fumbled through his pockets.

“It’s awfully stupid, but I haven’t any about me,” he said, fingering what he knew that she knew to be the well filled case he always carried in his inner pocket. He did not approve of women smoking.

But “Poor Dicky!” was all she said.

“Your fifteen minutes are up, Betty,” he said presently, taking out his watch.

“Well, I suppose I’ll have to go then.”

Dick rose politely.

“You really don’t care whether I go or stay, do you?” she sighed.

“I would rather have you go, Betty,” he said gravely.

Betty’s eyes filled with sudden tears, that Dick to his surprise realized were genuine.

“I wanted you to want me to stay,” she said incoherently.

“I suppose you’re just a miserable little thing that doesn’t want to be alone,” he concluded. “Come, I’ll take you home.”

The telephone bell on the table beside him rang sharply.

“I’m just going out,” he said to Billy, on the wire. “Betty is here with a fit of the blues. I’m going to take her home. Ride up with us, will you?”

“He’ll meet us down-stairs in ten minutes,” he said. “I’ll order a taxi.”

“I don’t want to see Billy,” Betty said rebelliously. She rose suddenly, pulling on her gloves, and took a step forward as if about to brush by him petulantly, but as she did so she staggered, put her hand to her eyes, and fell forward against his breast.

Dick picked up the limp little body, and made his way to the couch where he deposited it gently among the stiff red pillows there. Then he began to chafe her hands, to push back the tumbled hair from which the fur hat had been displaced, and finally fallen off, and to call out her name remorsefully.

“Betty, dear, dearest,” he cried, “I didn’t know, I didn’t dream,—I thought you were just trying it on. I’m so sorry, dear, I am so sorry.”

She moaned softly, and he bent over her again more closely. Then he gathered her up in his arms.

“Betty, dear, Betty,” he said again.

She opened her eyes. Her two soft arms stole up around his neck, and she lifted her lips.

“You little devil,” Dick cried, almost at the same instant that he kissed her.

“She deserves to be spanked,” he told Billy grimly at the door. “She got in my apartment when I was out, and insisted on staying there till I came in, to make me a visit.”

“He doesn’t understand me,” Betty complained, as she cuddled confidingly in the corner of the taxi-cab, “when I’m serious he doesn’t realize or appreciate it, and he doesn’t understand the nature of my practical jokes.”

“I don’t like—practical jokes,” Dick said. “Have you seen Preston Eustace, Billy?”

“I haven’t seen Caroline,” Billy said, as if that disposed of all the interrogatory remarks that might be addressed to him in the present or the future.

“It’s a nice-looking river,” Betty said, looking out at the softly gleaming surface of the Hudson, as their cab took the drive. “It looks strange to-night, though, laden with all kinds of queer little boats. I wonder how it would feel to be drifting down it, or up it, on a barque or a barkentine—I don’t know what a barkentine is—all dead like Elaine or Ophelia,—with your hands neatly folded across your breast?”

“For heaven sake’s, Betty,” Billy cried, “I don’t like your style of conversation. I’m in a state of gloom myself, to-night.”

“I didn’t say I was in a state of gloom,” Betty said. They rode the rest of the way in silence, but when Dick got out of the cab to open her door for her, she whispered to him, “I’m awfully ashamed, Dick,” before she fled up-stairs through the darkened hallway of her own home.

“Queer little thing,—Betty,” Billy said as Dick stepped back to the cab again, “you never know where you have her. Full of the deuce as she can stick. Unscrupulous little rascal, too, but made of good stuff.”

“Don’t you think so?” Billy inquired presently as Dick did not answer.

“Think what?”

“That Betty’s a queer sort of girl.”

Dick took his pipe out of his pocket and began stuffing it full of tobacco. When this was satisfactorily accomplished, he struck a match on his boot heel, and lit the mixture, drawing at it critically meanwhile.

“Damn’ queer,” he admitted, between puffs.

CHAPTER XV
Clouds of Glory

Nancy, trailing clouds of glory, took up the management of her Inn with renewed vigor. She had found her touchstone. The flower of love, which she had scarcely understood to be indigenous to the soil of her own practical little garden, had suddenly lifted up its head there in fragrant, radiant bloom. She was so happy that she was impatient of all the inadequate, inefficient manipulation of affairs in the whole world. She felt strong and wise to put everything right in a neglected universe.

She loved. She was satisfied to live in that love for the present, with no imagination of the future except as her lover should construct it for her; and in him she had absolute faith. The things that he had said or left unsaid had no significance to her. Before she had dreamed of a personal relation with him he had singled her out as a creature made for the consummation and fulfilment of the greatest passion of all. The merest suspicion that there had been a man in the world who could have frustrated this beautiful potentiality in her had moved him profoundly. There was nothing in her experience to help her to differentiate between the sensibility of the artistic temperament and the manifestations of the more reliable emotions. The presence in the human breast of a fire that gave out light and not heat was a condition undreamed of in her philosophy. To doubt Collier Pratt's love for her in the face of his tacit pursuit of her, and the acceptance of the obligation she had chosen to put him under, would have seemed to her the rankest kind of heresy.

She had been brought up on terms of comradely equality with boys and men, and she understood the rules of all the pretty games of fluffing and light flirtation that young men and women play with each other, but serious love-making—that was a thing apart. In the world of honor and fair dealing a man took a woman's kiss of surrender for one reason and one reason only——that she was his woman, and he so held her in his heart.

Now that she was in this sort committed to her love for Collier Pratt, her one ambition was to put her life in order for him,—to pick up the raveling threads of her achievement and prove to him and to herself that she was the kind of woman who accomplishes that which she attempts. In the light of his indefatigable patience in all matters that pertained to his art—his clean-cut workmanship—his

skill in handling his material—she blushed for the amateur spirit that animated all her undertakings, and for the first time recognized it for what it was.

"Gaspard," she said one morning soon after her miracle had been achieved, "where do you think the greatest leak is? We spend a great deal too much money in running this place. As you know, that is not the most important matter to me. Getting my customers properly nourished with invitingly prepared food is the essential thing, but if there was a way to adjust the economical end of it, I should feel a great deal more comfortable in my mind."

"But certainly, mademoiselle, I should like myself to try the pretty little economies. The Frenchman he likes to spend his money when it is there, but it hurts him in the heart to waste this money without cause."

"Am I wasting money without cause, Gaspard, in your opinion?"

"What else?"

"How can I stop it?"

"By calculation of the tall cost of living, and by buying what is good instead of what is expensive."

"What do you mean, Gaspard?"

Gaspard contemplated her for a moment.

"We have had this week—squab chicken," he said, "racks of little unseasonable lambs, sweetbreads, guinea fowl and *filet du boeuf*. We have with them mushrooms, fresh string bean, cooked endive, and new, not very good peas grown in glass. We have the salted nuts, the radish, the olive, the celery, the *bon bon*, all extra without pay. Then you make in addition to this the health foods, and your bills are sky high up. Is it not?"

"I'm afraid it is, Gaspard. I had no idea I was as reckless as all that."

"But yes, and more of it."

"What would you do if you were running this restaurant, Gaspard?"

"I would give *ragoût*, and rabbits—so cheap and so good too—stewed in red wine, and the good pot roast with vegetables all in the delicious sauce, and carrots with parsley and the peas out of the can, cooked with onion and lettuce, and macédoine of all the other things left over. Lentils and flageolet I should buy dried up, and soak them out.—All those things which you have said were needless.—In my way they would be so excellent."

"You make my mouth water, Gaspard. I don't know whether it's a Gallic eloquence, or whether that food really would work. They might like it for a change anyhow."

"I have many personal patrons now," Gaspard said with some pride; "all day

they send me messages, and very good tips. I think what I would serve them they would eat.—But there is one thing—" he paused and hesitated dejectedly, "that, what you say, takes the heart out of the beautiful cooking."

"What thing is that, Gaspard?"

"Those calories."

"Why, Gaspard, surely you're used to working with tables now. It must be almost second nature to you. My whole end and aim has been to serve a balanced ration."

"I know, but the ration when he is right, he balances himself. These tables they are like the steps in dancing—to learn and to forget. I figure all day all night to get those calories, and then I find I have eight—and eight are so little—lesser than I would have had without the figuring, and if our customer he has taken himself one piece of sweetmeat outside, he has more than made it up."

"I always have worried about what they eat between meals," Nancy said, —"but that, of course, we can't regulate."

"Could I perhaps go to it, as you say, and cook like the *bourgeoisie* for a week or two of trials?"

"Yes, I think you could, Gaspard," Nancy said thoughtfully. "Go to it, as we say, and I won't interfere in any way. Maybe they'd like it. Perhaps our food is getting to be too much like hotel food, anyway."

She knew in her heart that the gradually increasing scale of luxury on which she had been running her cuisine had been largely due to her desire to provide Collier Pratt with all the delicacies he loved, without making the fact too conspicuous. The specially prepared dishes sent out to his table had become a matter of so much comment among the members of the staff, and the target of so much piquant satire from Betty that she had become sensitive on the subject, especially since Betty had access to the books, and knew in actual dollars and cents how much this favoritism was costing her. Now that matters had been settled between herself and her lover, she felt vaguely ashamed of this elaboration of method. It was so simple a thing to love a man and give him all you had, with the eyes of the world upon you, if necessary. She felt that she handled the matter rather unworthily.

She had also a consultation with Molly and Dolly about the economic problem, and discovered that they agreed with Gaspard about the unnecessary extravagance of her management.

"Them health foods," Dolly said,—she was not the more grammatical of the twins, "the ones that gets them regular gets so tired of them, or else they gets where they don't need them any more. There's one girl that crumbs up her health

muffins and puts them on the window-sill every day when I ain't looking, so's not to hurt my feelings."

"That accounts for all those chittering sparrows," Nancy said.

"And some of those buttermilk men threatens not to come any more if I don't stop serving it to them."

"What do you say to them, Dolly, when they object to it?"

"Well, sometimes I say one thing, and sometimes another. Sometimes I say it's orders to serve it; and sometimes I say will they please to let it stand by their plate not to get me in trouble with the management; and sometimes I coax them to take it."

"By an appeal to their better nature," Nancy said. "I'm glad Dick can't hear all this,—he'd think it was funny."

"We don't have so much trouble with the broths," Molly said, "but so many people would rather have the cream soups Gaspard makes, that we waste a good deal."

"It sours on us," Dolly elucidated.

"What do you think would be the best way out of that?"

"I think to charge for the invalid things," Dolly said; "people would think more of them if they was specials, and had to be paid good money for. Health bread, if you didn't call it that, would go good, if it cost five cents extra."

"What would you call it?" Nancy asked.

"California fruit nut bread, or something like that, and call the custards crême renversé, and the ice-cream, French ice-cream."

"Oh, dear!" Nancy said, "that isn't the way I want to do things at all."

"We can slip the ones that needs them a few things from time to time, can't we, Molly?" Dolly said.

"We'll do it," Nancy said. "I hate the way that the most uninspired ways of doing things turn out to be the best policy after all. I don't believe in stereotyped philanthropy, but I did think I had found a way around this problem of feeding up people who needed it."

"They get fed up pretty good if they do pay a regular price for it," Dolly said. "You can't get something for nothing in this world, and most everybody knows it by now."

"I'm managing my restaurant a little differently," she told Collier Pratt a few days later, as she took her place at the little table beside him, where she habitually ate her dinner. "If you don't like it you are to tell me, and I'll see that you have things you will like."

“This dinner is good,” he said reflectively, “like French home cooking. I haven’t had a real *ragoût* of lamb since I left the pension of Madame Pellissier. Has your mysterious patroness got tired of furnishing *diners de luxe* to the populace?”

“Not exactly that,” Nancy said, “but she—she wants me to try out another way of doing things.”

“I thought that would come. That’s the trouble with patronage of any kind. It is so uncertain. There is no immediate danger of your being ousted, is there?”

“No,” Nancy said, “there—there is no danger of that.”

“I don’t like that cutting you down,” he said, frowning. “It would be rather a bad outlook for us all if she threw you over, now wouldn’t it?”

“Oh!—she won’t, there’s nothing to worry about, really.”

“It would be like my luck to have the only café in America turn me out-of-doors.—I should never eat again.”

“I promise it won’t,” Nancy said; “can’t you trust me?”

“I never have trusted any woman—but you,” he said.

“You can trust me,” Nancy said. “The truth is, she couldn’t put me out even if she wanted to. I—she is under a kind of obligation to me.”

“Thank God for that. I only hope you are in a position to threaten her with blackmail.”

“I could if anybody could,” Nancy said. She put out of her mind as disloyal, the faintly unpleasant suggestion of his words. He owed her mythical patron a substantial sum of money by this time. He was not even able to pay Michael the cash for the nightly teapot full of Chianti that Nancy herself now sent out for him regularly. For the first time since her association with him she was tempted to compare him to Dick, and that not very favorably; but at the next instant she was reproaching herself with her littleness of vision. He was too great a man to gauge by the ordinary standards of life. Money meant nothing to him except that it was the insignificant means to the end of that Art, which was to him consecrated.

They were placed a little to the left of the glowing fire—Nancy had restored the fireplace in the big central dining-room—and the light took the brass of the andirons, and all the polished surface of copper and pewter and silver candelabra that gave the room its quality of picturesqueness.

“Some of those branching candlesticks are very beautiful,” he said; “the impression here is a little like that of a Catholic altar just before the mass. I’ve always thought I’d like to have my meals served in church, *Saint-Germain-des-Prés* for instance.”

“It is rather dim religious light.” Nancy had no wish to utter this banality, but it was forced from her by her desire to seem sympathetic.

“Can we go to your place for a little while to-night?”

These were the words she had spent her days and nights hungering for; yet now she hesitated for a perceptible instant.

“Yes, we can, of course. There is a friend of mine—Billy Boynton, up there this evening. He is not feeling very fit, and phoned to ask if he could go up and sprawl before my fire, so, of course, I said he could.”

“Oh! yes, Sheila’s friend. Can’t he be disposed of?”

“I think so. We could try.”

But at Nancy’s apartment they found not only Billy, but Caroline, and the atmosphere was like that of the glacial regions, both literally and figuratively.

“Hitty had the windows open, and the fire went out, and I forgot to turn on the heat,” Billy explained from his position on the hearth where he was trying to build an unscientific fire with the morning paper, and the remains of a soap box. There was a long smudge across his forehead.

Caroline drew Nancy into the seclusion of her bedroom and clutched her violently by the arm.

“I can’t stand the strain any longer,” she cried, “you’ve got to tell me. Are you or are you not going to marry Dick Thorndyke for his money, and is Billy Boynton putting you up to it—out of cowardice?”

“No, I’m not and he isn’t,” Nancy said. “What’s the matter with you and Billy anyway?”

“I haven’t seen him for weeks before. I just happened to be in this neighborhood to-night, and ran in here, and there he was.”

“Why don’t you take him home with you?” Nancy said.

“I don’t want him to go home with me.”

“Don’t you love him?”

“Oh, I don’t know. That isn’t the point.”

“It is the point,” Nancy said; “there isn’t any other point to the whole of existence. There’s nothing else in the world, but love, the great, big, beautiful, all-giving-up kind of love, and bearing children for the man you love; and if you don’t know that yet, Caroline, go down on your bended knees and pray to your God that He will teach it to you before it is too late.”

“I—I didn’t know you felt like that,” Caroline gasped.

“Well, I do,” Nancy said, “and I think that any woman who doesn’t is just confusing issues, and taking refuge in sophistry. I wouldn’t give *that*”—she

snapped an energetic forefinger, “for all your silly, smug little ideas of economic independence and service to the race, and all that tommy-rot. There is only one service a woman can do to her race, and that is to take hold of the problems of love and marriage,—and the problems of life, birth and death that are involved in them—and work them out to the best of her ability. They *will* work out.”

“You—you’re a sort of a pragmatist, aren’t you?” Caroline gasped.

“Billy loves you, and you love Billy. Billy needs you. He is the most miserable object lately, that ever walked the face of the earth. I’m going to call a taxi-cab, and send you both home in it, and when you get inside of it I want you to put you arms around Billy’s neck, and make up your quarrel.”

“I won’t do that,” said Caroline, “but—but somehow or other you’ve cleared up something for me. Something that was worrying me a good deal.”

“Shall I call the taxi?” Nancy said inexorably.

“Well, yes—if—if you want to,” Caroline said.

The fire was crackling merrily in the drawing-room when she stepped into it again after speeding her departing guests. Collier Pratt was walking up and down impatiently with his hands clasped behind his back.

“You got rid of them at last,” he said. “I was afraid they would decide to remain with us indefinitely.”

“I didn’t have as much trouble as I anticipated,” admitted Nancy cryptically.

Collier Pratt made a round of the rose-shaded lamps in the room—there were three including a Japanese candle lamp,—and turned them all deliberately low. Then he held out his arms to Nancy.

“We’ll snatch at the few moments of joy the gods will vouchsafe us,” he said.

CHAPTER XVI
Christmas Shopping

Sheila and Nancy were doing their Christmas shopping. The weather, which had been like mid-May—even to betraying a bewildered Jersey apple tree into unseasonable bloom that gave it considerable newspaper notoriety,—had suddenly turned sharp and frosty. Sheila, all in gray fur to the beginning of her gray gaiters, and Nancy in blue, a smart blue tailor suit with black furs and a big black satin hat—she was dressing better than she had ever dressed in her life—were in that state of physical exhilaration that follows the spur of the frost.

"We mustn't dance down the avenue, Sheila," Nancy said, "it isn't done, in the circles in which we move."

"It is you who are almost very nearly dancing, Miss Dear," Sheila said, "I was only walking on my toetips."

"Oh! don't you feel good, Sheila?" Nancy cried.

"Don't you, Miss Dear?"

"I feel almost too good," Nancy said, "as if in another minute the top of the world might come off."

"The top of the world is screwed on very tight, I think," said Sheila. "I used to think when I was a little girl that it was made out of blue plush, but now I know better than that."

"It might be," Nancy argued, "blue plush and bridal veils. There's a great deal of filmy white about it, to-day."

"It's a long way off from Fifth Avenue," Sheila sighed, "too far. I am not going to think about it any more. I am going to think hard about what to give my father. Michael said to get a smoking set, but I don't know what a smoking set is. Hitty said some hand knit woolen stockings, but I am afraid he would be scratched by them. Gaspard said a big bottle of *Cointreau*, but I do not know what that is either."

"Couldn't we give him a beautiful brocaded dressing-gown and a Swiss watch, thin as a wafer, and some handkerchiefs cobwebby fine, and a dozen bottles of *Cointreau*, and—then get the other things as we think of them?"

"Are we rich enough to do *that*?" Sheila asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Rich enough to buy anything we want, Sheila," Nancy cried. "I had no idea it

was going to be such a heavenly feeling. When you say your prayers to-night, Sheila, I hope you will ask God to bless somebody you've never heard of before. *Elijah Peebles Martin*, do you think you could remember that long name, Sheila?"

"Yes, Miss Dear,—do you remember him in your prayers every night?"

"Well, I haven't," Nancy said, "but I intend to from now on. Do you think Collier—father—would like to have a new pipe?"

"I don't know," Shelia said; "wouldn't Uncle Dick like to have one?"

"I don't know whether Uncle Dick is going to want a Christmas present from me or not, Sheila." Nancy answered seriously. "There may be—reasons why he won't come to see us for a while when he knows them."

"Oh, dear," Sheila said, "but I can buy him a Christmas present myself, can't I? I don't want it to be Christmas if I can't."

"Of course, dear. What shall we buy Aunt Caroline and Uncle Billy?"

"Some pink and blue housekeeping dishes, I think."

"I'm going to have trouble buying Caroline *anything*," Nancy said. "She's so sure I can't afford it. If I give a silver chest I'll have to make Billy say it came from his maiden aunt."

"What shall we give Aunt Betty?"

"I don't know exactly why," Nancy said, "but someway I feel more like giving her a good shaking than anything else."

"For a little surprise," Sheila said presently, "do you think we could go down to see my father in his studio, after we have shopped? I feel like seeing my father to-day. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I think of Hitty and my breakfast, and the canary bird, and of you, Miss Dear, fast asleep where I can hear you breathing in your room—if I listen to it—and then other mornings I wake up thinking only of my father, and how he looks in his shirt-sleeves and necktie. I was thinking of him this morning like that. So now I should like to see him."

"You shall, dear. I want him to see you in your new clothes. He'll think you look like a little gray bird with a scarlet breast."

"Then I must open the front of my coat when I go in so he shall see my vest at once, mustn't I?"

"Do you know how much I love you, Sheila?" Nancy cried suddenly.

"Is it a great deal, Miss Dear?"

"It's more than I've ever loved anybody in this world but one person, and if I should ever be separated from you I think it would break my heart—so that you

could hear it crack with a loud report, Sheila."

The little girl slipped her gray gloved hand into Nancy's and held it there silently for a moment.

"Then we won't ever be separated, Miss Dear," she said.

The shops were crowded with the usual conglomerate Christmas throng, and their progress was somewhat retarded by Sheila's desire to make the acquaintance of every department-store and Salvation Army Santa Claus that they met in their peregrinations. In the toy department of one of the Thirty-fourth Street shops there was a live Kris Kringle with animated reindeers on rollers, who made a short trip across an open space in one end of the department for a consideration, and presented each child who rode with him a lovely present, tied up in tissue and marked "Not to be opened until Christmas." Sheila refused a second trip with him on the ground that it would not be polite to take more than one turn.

Nancy was able to discover the little girl's preferences by a tactful question here and there when they were making the rounds of the different counters. She wanted, it developed, a golden-haired doll with a white fur coat, a pair of roller skates, an Indian costume, a beaded pocketbook, with a blue cat embroidered on it, a parchesi board to play parchesi with her Uncle Dick, some doll's dinner dishes, a boy's bicycle, some parlor golf sticks, a red leather writing set, a doll's manicure set, a sailor-boy paper doll, a dozen small suede animals in a box, a drawing book and crayon pencils and several other trifles of a like nature. The things she did not want she rejected unerringly. It pleased Nancy to realize that she knew exactly what she did want, even though her range of taste was so extensive. Nancy had a sheaf of her own cards with her address on them in her pocketbook, and each time Sheila saw the thing her heart coveted Nancy nodded to the saleswoman and whispered to her to send it to the address given and charge to her account.

They took their lunch in a famous confectionary shop, full of candy animals and alluring striped candy sticks and baskets. Here Sheila's eye was taken by a basket of spun sugar flowers, which she insisted on buying for Gaspard. By the time they were ready to resume their shopping tour, Sheila began to show signs of fag, so they bought only brooches for the waitresses, and the watch as thin and exquisite of workmanship as a man's pocket watch could be, for Collier Pratt.

"I think we had better give it to him now, Miss Dear," Sheila decided. "I don't see how he can wait till Christmas for it—it is so beautiful. He has not had a gold watch since that time in Paris when we had all that trouble."

“What trouble, Sheila dear?” Nancy said. She had tucked the child in a hansom, and they were driving slowly through the lower end of Central Park to restore Sheila’s roses before she was exhibited to her parent.

“When we lost all our money, and my father and some one I must not speak of, had those dreadful quarrelings, and we ran away. I do not like to think of it. My father does not like to think of it.”

“Well, then, you mustn’t, dear,” Nancy said, “but just be glad it is all over now. I don’t like to realize that so many hard things happened to you and him before I knew you, but I do like to think that I can perhaps prevent them ever happening to you again.”

She closed resolutely that department of her mind that had begun to occupy itself with conjectures concerning the past of the man to whom she had given her heart. The child’s words conjured up nightmare scenes of unknown panic and dread. It was terrible to her to know that Collier Pratt had the memory of so much bitterness and distress of mind and body locked away in the secret chambers of his soul. “Some one of whom I must not speak,” Sheila had said, “and some one of whom I must not think,” Nancy added to herself. It was probably some one with whom he had quarreled and struggled passionately maybe, with disastrous results. He could not have injured or killed anybody, else how could he be free and honorably considered in a free and honorable country? She laughed at her own melodramatic misgivings. It was only, she realized, that she so detested the connotation of the words “ran away.” Nancy had never run away from anything or anybody in her life, and she could not understand that any one who was close to her should ever have the instinct of flight.

The most conscientious objector to New York’s traffic regulations can not claim that they fail to regulate. The progress of their cab down the avenue was so scrupulously regulated by the benignant guardians of the semaphores that twilight was deepening into early December evening before they reached their objective point,—the ramshackle studio building on the south side of Washington Square where the man she loved lived, moved and had his being, with the gallant ease and grace which made him so romantic a figure to Nancy’s imagination.

She had never been to his studio before without an appointment, and her heart beat a little harder as, Sheila’s hand in hers, they tiptoed up the worn and creaking stairs, through the ill-kept, airless corridors of the dingy structure, till they reached the top, and stood breathless from their impetuous ascent, within a few feet of Collier Pratt’s battered door.

“I feel a little scared, Miss Dear,” Sheila whispered. “I thought it was going to

be so much fun and now I don't think so at all. Do you think he will be very angry at my coming?"

"I don't think he will be angry at all," Nancy said. "I think he will be very much surprised and pleased to see both of us. Turn around, dear, and let me be sure that you're neat."

Sheila turned obediently. Nancy fumbled with her pocket mirror, and then thought better of it, but passed a precautionary hand over the back of her hair to reassure herself as to its arrangement, and straightened her hat.

"Now we're ready," she said.

But Sheila put out her hand, and clutched at Nancy's sleeve.

"There's some one in there," she said, "somebody crying. Oh! don't let's go in, Miss Dear."

From behind the closed door there issued suddenly the confused murmur of voices, one—a woman's—rising and falling in the cadence of distress, the other low pitched in exasperated expostulation.

"It's Collier," Nancy said mechanically, "and some woman with him."

Sheila shrank closer into the protecting shelter of her arms.

"Don't let's go in, Miss Dear," she repeated.

"It may be just some model," Nancy said. "We'll wait a minute here and see if she doesn't come out."

"I—I don't want to see who comes out," the child said, her face suddenly distorted.

There was a sharp sound of something falling within, then Collier Pratt's voice raised loud in anger.

"You'd better go now," he said, "before you do any more damage. I don't want you here. Once and for all I tell you that there is no place for you in my life. Weeping and wailing won't do you any good. The only thing for you to do is to get out and stay out."

This was answered by an indistinguishable outburst.

"I won't tell you where the child is," Collier Pratt said steadily. "She's well taken care of. God knows you never took care of her. There's nothing you can do, you know. You might sue for a restitution of conjugal rights, I suppose, but if you drag this thing into the courts I'll fight it out to the end. I swear I will."

"You brute,—you—"

At the first clear sound of the woman's voice the child at Nancy's side broke into sobs of convulsive terror.

"Take me away, Miss Dear. Oh! take me away from here, quickly, quickly, I'm

so frightened. I’m so afraid she’ll come out and get me. It’s my *mother*,” she moaned.

CHAPTER XVII
Good-By

Nancy had no memory of her actions during the time that elapsed between leaving the studio building and her arrival at her own apartment. She knew that she must have guided Sheila to the beginning of the bus route at the lower end of the square, and as perfunctorily signaled the conductor to let her off at the corner of Fifth Avenue and her own street, but she could never remember having done so. Her first conscious recollection was of the few minutes in Sheila's room, while she was slipping off the child's gaiters, in the interval before she gave her over to Hitty for the night. The little girl was still sobbing beneath her breath, though her emotion was by this time purely reflexive.

"I didn't understand that your mother was living, Sheila," she said.

"She isn't very nice," the little girl said miserably. "We don't tell any one. She always cries and screams and makes us trouble?"

"Did she live with you in Paris?"

"Only sometimes."

"Does she do—something that she should not do, Sheila?" Nancy asked, with her mind on inebriety, or drug addiction.

"She just isn't very nice," Sheila repeated. "She is *histérique*; she pounded me with her hands, and hurt me."

Nancy telephoned to the Inn that she had a headache, and shut herself into her room, without food, to gather her scattered forces. She lay wide-awake all the night through, her mind trying to work its way through the lethargy of shock it had received. She remembered falling down the cellar stairs, when she was a little girl, and lying for hours on the hard stone floor, perfectly serene and calm, without pain, until she tried to do so much as move a little finger or lift an eyelid, when the intolerable nausea would begin. She was calm now, until she made the attempt to think what it was that had so prostrated her, and then the anguish spread through her being and convulsed her with unimaginable distress of mind and body.

By morning she had herself in hand again,—at least to the extent of dealing with the unthinkable fact that Collier Pratt, her lover, the man to whom she had given the lover's right to hold her in his arms and cover her upturned face with kisses, had a living wife, and that he was not free to make honorable love to any

woman.

Her life had been too sound, too sweet, to give her any perspective on a situation of the kind. It was inconceivable to her that a married man should make advances to an unmarried woman,—but gradually she began to make excuses for this one man whose circumstances had been so exceptional. Tied to an insane creature, who beat his child, who made him strange hectic scenes, and followed him all over the world to threaten his security, and menace that beautiful and inexplicable creative instinct that animated him like a holy fire, and set him apart from his kind; she began to see how it might be with him. She was still the woman he loved,—she believed that; he was weaker than she had thought,—that was all, weaker and not so wise. This being true, she must put aside her own pain and bewilderment, her own devastating disillusionment, and comfort him, and help him. She rose from her bed that morning firmly resolved to see him before the day was through.

She breakfasted with Sheila, and made a brave attempt to get through the morning on her usual schedule, but once at the Inn she collapsed, and Michael and Betty had to put her in a cab and send her home again, where Hitty ministered to her grimly,—and she slept the sleep of exhaustion until well on into the evening, and into the night again.

On the day following she was quite herself; but she still hesitated to bring about the momentous interview that she so dreaded, and yet longed for. She intended to take her place at the table beside Collier Pratt when he came for his dinner that night, but when the time came she could not bring herself to do it, and fled incontinently. Later in the evening he telephoned that he wanted to see her, and she told him that he might come.

She faced him with the facts, breathlessly, and in spite of herself accusingly,—and then waited for the explanation that would extenuate the apparent ugliness of his attitude toward her, and set all the world right for her again. As she looked into his face she felt that it must come. She noted compassionately how the shadows under the dark eyes had deepened; how weary the pose of the fine head; and for the moment she longed only to rest it on her breast again. Even as she spoke of the thing that had so tortured her it seemed insignificant in light of the fact that he was there beside her, within reach of her arms whenever she chose to hold them out to him.

“I regret that the revelation of my private embarrassments should have been thrust upon you so suddenly,” he said, when she had poured out the story to him. “My marriage has proved the most uncomfortable indiscretion that I ever committed; and unfortunately my indiscretions have been numberless as the

well-known leaves of Vallombrosa."

"You always said that Sheila was motherless," Nancy said.

"It is simpler than stating that she is worse than motherless."

"Why didn't you tell me you were married?"

Collier Pratt smiled at her—kindly it seemed to Nancy.

"It hadn't anything to do with *us*," he said. "I should never want to marry again—even if I were free. The thought is horrible to me. You mean a great deal to me. *Think*, if you doubt that and think again. I have had in this little front room of yours the only real moments of peace and happiness that I have had for years. I value them—you can not dream or imagine how much—but surely it is understood between us that our relation can not be anything but transitory. I am an artist with a way to make for my art: you are a working woman with a career, odd as it is," he smiled whimsically, "that you have chosen, and that you will pursue faithfully until some stalwart young man dissuades you from it, when you will take your place in your niche as wife and mother, and leave me one more beautiful memory."

"Surely," Nancy said, "you know it isn't—like that."

"What is it like then?"

Nancy felt every sane premise, every eager hope and delicate ideal slipping beyond her reach as she faced his mocking, tender eyes.

"It can't be that you believe you have been—fair with me," she faltered.

"I don't think I have been unfair," he said, "I have made no protestations, you know."

Nancy shut her eyes. Curious scraps of her early religious education came back to her.

"You have partaken of my bread and wine," she said.

"It wasn't exactly consecrated."

"I think it was," she said faintly. "Oh! don't you understand that that isn't a way for a man to think or to feel about a woman like me?"

"Little American girl," Collier Pratt said, "little American girl, don't you understand that there is only one way for a woman to think or feel about a *man* like *me*? I have had my life, and I haven't liked it much. I'm to be loved warmly and lightly till the flesh and blood prince comes along, but I'm never to be mistaken for him."

"I don't believe you're sincere," Nancy cried; "women must have loved you deeply, tragically, and have suffered all the torture there is, at losing you."

"That may be. Sincerity is a matter of so many connotations. You haven't

known many artists, my dear."

"No," said Nancy. "No, but I thought they were the same as other men, only worthier."

"How should they be? He who perceives a merit is not necessarily he who achieves it. Else the world would be a little more one-sided than it is."

"I can't believe those things," Nancy said. "I want to believe in you. You *must* care for me, and what becomes of me. You have known so long what I was like, and what I was made for. All this seems like a terrible nightmare. I want you to tell me what it is you want of me, and let me give it to you."

"I am proving some faint shadow of worthiness at least, when I say to you that I want absolutely nothing of you. I love, but I refrain."

"You love," Nancy cried, "you *love*?"

"Not as you understand loving, I am afraid. In my own way I love you."

"I don't like your way, then," Nancy said wearily.

"We're both so poor, little girl,—that's one thing. If I were free and could overcome my prejudice against matrimony, and could be a little surer of my own heart and its constancy,—even then, don't you see, practical considerations would and ought to stand in our way. I couldn't support you, you couldn't possibly support me."

"I see," said Nancy. "Would you marry me If I were rich?" she said slowly.

"I already have one wife," Collier Pratt smiled. Nancy remembered afterward that he smiled oftener during this interview than at any other. "But if somebody died, and left you a million, she might possibly be disposed of."

For one moment, perhaps, his fate hung in the balance. Then he took a step forward.

"Kiss me good night, dear," he said, "and let us end this bitter and fruitless discussion."

"Kiss you good night," Nancy cried. "Kiss you good night. Oh! how dare you! —How dare you?" And she struck him twice across his mouth. "I wish I could kill you," she blazed. "Oh! how dare you,—how dare you?"

"Oh! very well," said Collier Pratt calmly, wiping his mouth with his handkerchief. "If that's the way you feel—then our pleasant little acquaintanceship is ended. I'll take my hat and stick and my child—and go."

"Your child?" Nancy cried aghast. "You wouldn't take Sheila away from me."

"I don't feel exactly tempted to leave her with you," he said deliberately. "I don't mind a woman striking me—I'm used to that; it is one of my charming wife's ways of expressing herself in moments of stress—but I do object to any

but the most purely formal relations with her afterward. There is a certain degree of intimacy involved in your having charge of my child. I think I will take the little girl away with me now."

"Please, please, please don't," Nancy said. "I love her. I couldn't bear it now. You can't be so cruel."

"Better get it over," Collier Pratt said. "Will you call Hitty, or shall I?"

"Sheila is in bed," Nancy cried. "You wouldn't take her out of her warm bed to-night. I'll send her to you to-morrow at whatever hour you ask."

"I ask for her now."

There was no fight left in Nancy. She called Hitty and superintended the dressing of the little girl to its last detail. She could not touch her.

"Won't you kiss me good night, Miss Dear?" Sheila said, drowsily, as she took her father's hand at the door.

"Not to-night," Nancy said hoarsely. "I've a bad throat, dear, I wouldn't want you to catch it."

"I don't know where I'm going," the little girl said, "but I suppose my father knows. I'll come back as soon as I can."

"Yes, dear," Nancy said. "Good-by."

Collier Pratt turned at the door and made an exaggerated gesture of farewell.

"We part more in anger than in sorrow," he said.

"Oh! Go," Nancy cried.

As the door closed upon the two Nancy sank to her knees, and thence to a crumpled heap on the floor, but remembering that Hitty would find her there shortly, and being entirely unable to regain her feet unaided, she started to crawl in the direction of her own room, and presently arrived there, and pushed the door to behind her with her heel.

CHAPTER XVIII
Tame Skeletons

It was Sunday night, and New Year's Eve. Gaspard was preparing, and Molly and Dolly were serving a special dinner for Preston Eustace, planned weeks before on his first arrival in New York.

Before the great logs—imported by Michael for the occasion—that blazed in the fireplace, a round table was set, decorously draped in the most immaculate of fine linen, and crowned with a wreath of holly and mistletoe, from which extended red satin trailers with a present from Nancy for each guest, on the end of each. All the impedimenta of the restaurant was cleared away, and a couch and several easy chairs that Nancy kept in reserve for such occasions were placed comfortably about the room. Only the innumerable starry candles and branching candelabra were reminiscent of the room's more professional aspect.

Billy and Caroline were the first to arrive,—Caroline in pale floating green tulle, which accentuated the pure olive of her coloring, and transported Billy from his chronic state of adoration to that of an almost agonizing worship. Dick and Betty were next. He had realized the possible awkwardness of the situation for her, and had been thoughtful enough to offer to call for her. She was in defiant scarlet from top to toe, and had never looked more entrancing. Preston Eustace was to come in from Long Island where he was spending the holidays with a married sister. Michael received the guests and did the honors beamingly.

"Where's Nancy?" Dick asked, as, divested of his outer garments, he appeared without warning in the presence of the lovers. "Don't bother to drop her hand, Billy. I don't see how you have the heart to, she's so lovely to-night."

"We don't know where Nancy is," Caroline answered for him. "It seems to be all right, though. She's expected, Michael says."

"Where's Nancy?" Betty asked, in her turn, appearing on the threshold with every hair most amazingly in place.

"Coming," Dick reassured her.

"Has anybody heard from her?" Betty asked.

"Michael has, I think."

"You aren't worried about her, are you?" Caroline asked.

"Yes, I am," Betty said.

"I thought you and Nancy were rather on the outs," Caroline suggested. "It

seems odd to have you worrying about her like her maiden aunt."

"You wait till you see her, you'll be worried about her, too."

"What's wrong?" Dick asked quickly.

"She's lost Sheila for one thing. That unspeakable Collier Pratt—I hope he chokes on his dinner to-night, and I hope it's a rotten dinner—has taken the child away."

"The devil he has."

There was a step on the rickety stair.

"Hush! There she is now," Caroline cried.

"No," Betty said quietly, listening. "That's not Nancy. That's your brother, Caroline."

"I haven't heard his step for such a long time I've forgotten it," Billy said.

"I haven't heard it for a long time either," Betty said, her face draining of its last bit of color.

"Promises to be one of those merry little meals when everybody present is attended by a tame skeleton," Billy whispered, "except us, Caroline."

"I don't feel that we have any right to be so happy with the whole continent of Europe in the state it's in," Caroline whispered in reply.

"I feel better about the continent of Europe than I did a while back," Billy said, contentedly.

"Hello, everybody," Preston Eustace said as Michael held the door for him. "How's everything, Caroline?"

"All right," Caroline said. Then she added unnecessarily, "You—you know Betty, don't you?"

"I used to know Betty," he said slowly.

The two looked at each other, with that look of incredulity with which lovers sometimes greet each other after absence and estrangement. "This can't be you," their eyes seem to be saying, "I've disposed of you long since, God help me!"

"How do you do, Preston?" Betty said, giving him her hand. Then she smiled faintly, and added with a caricature of her usual manner: "Lovely weather we're having for this time of year, aren't we?"

"I'm very fond of you, Betty,"—Dick smiled as she sank into the chair beside him and Preston turned to his sister. "I think you're a little sport."

"I don't know how you can, Dicky," she smiled at him forlornly. "I've got a bad black heart, and I play the wrong kind of games."

"Well, I see through them, so it's all right. What's this about Nancy?"

"I'll tell you later," Betty said; "there she comes now."

Nancy, stimulated by massage and steam, her hair dressed by a professional; powdered, and for the first time in her life rouged to hide the tell-tale absence of her natural quickening color, came forward to meet her guests in supreme unconsciousness of the pathos of the effect she had achieved. She was dressed in snowy white like a bride,—the only gown she had that was in keeping with the holiday decorations, and she moved a little clumsily, as if her brain had found itself suddenly in charge of an unfamiliar set of reflexes. Her lids drooped over burning eyes that had known no sleep for many nights, and every line and lineament of her face was stamped with pain.

"I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting," she said. Her voice, curiously, was the only natural thing about her. "I've been scouring off every vestige of my work-a-day self, and that takes time. Thank you for the roses, Dick, but the only flowers I could have worn with this color scheme would have been geraniums."

"I'll send you some geraniums to-morrow."

"Don't," she said. "How do you do, Preston?"

She gave him a cold hand, and he stared at her almost as he had stared at Betty. He was a tall grave-looking youth, with Caroline's straight features and olive coloring, and a shock of heavy blond hair.

"I hope you'll like your party," Nancy hurried on. "Gaspard is bursting with pride in it. I think it would be a nice thing to have him in and drink his health after the coffee. He would never forget the honor."

"My God!" Dick said in an undertone to Betty, "how long has she been like this?"

"I'll tell you later," she promised him again.

With the serving of the first course of dinner—Gaspard's wonderful *Purée Mongol*—an artist's dream of all the most delicate vegetables in the world mingled together as the clouds are mingled, the tensity in the air seemed to break and shatter about them in showers of brilliant, artificial mirth, which presently, because they were all young and fond of one another and their group had the habit of intimacy, became less and less strained and unreal.

Nancy's tired eyes lost something of their unnatural glitter, and Betty seemed more of a woman than a scarlet sprite, while Caroline's smile began to reflect something of the real gladness that possessed her soul. Dick and Billy took up the burden of the entertainment of the party, and gave at least an excellent imitation of inspirational gaiety.

"This *filet of sole*," Billy observed as he sampled his second course appreciatively, "is common or barnyard flounder,—and the shrimp and the oyster crab, and that mushroom of the sea, and the other little creature in the corner of

my plate who shall be nameless, because I have no idea what his name is,—are all put in to make it harder."

"Gaspard is using some of the simpler native products now instead of the high-priced imported ones," Nancy said eagerly, "and he is getting wonderful results, I think."

"Flounder *a la Française* is all right," Dick said.

"Our restaurant has reformed," Betty said. "We're running it on a strictly business basis."

"And making money?" Dick asked quickly.

"We're not losing much," Betty said. "That's a great improvement."

"Some of those little girls from the publishing houses look paler to me than they did," Nancy said. "I wish I could give them hypodermics of protein and carbohydrates."

"Give me the name and address of any of your customers that worry you," Dick said, "and I'll buy 'em a cow or a sugar plum tree or a flivver or anything else they seem to be in need of."

"Don't those things tend to pauperize the poor?" Caroline's brother put in gravely.

"Sure they do," Billy agreed, "only Nancy has kind of given up her struggle not to pauperize them."

"I started in with some very high ideals about scientific service," Nancy explained. "I was never going to give anybody anything they hadn't actually earned in some way, except to bring up the average of normality by feeding my patrons surreptitious calories. I had it all figured out that the only legitimate charity was putting flesh on the bones of the human race,—that increasing the general efficiency that way wasn't really charity at all."

"You don't believe that now?" Preston Eustace asked.

"I don't know what I believe now."

"What is scientific charity, anyhow?" Dick looked about inquiringly.

"There ain't no such animal," Billy contributed.

"It's substituting the cool human intellect for the warm human heart, I guess," Betty said dreamily.

"But that so often works," Caroline said.

"I was never going to make any mistakes," Nancy said. "I was going to keep my fists scientifically shut, and my heart beatifically open." She hesitated. "I—I was going to swing my life, and my undertakings—right." It became increasingly hard for her to speak, and a little gasp went round the table. "I've—

I’ve made nothing—nothing but mistakes,” she finished piteously.

“But you’ve rectified them,” Betty put in vigorously. “Nancy, dear, I’ve never known you to make a mistake that you haven’t rectified, and that is more than I can say of any other person in the world.”

“Sirloin and carrots,” Caroline said, as the next course came in. “I’ll wager you’ve cut the price of this dinner in two by judicious ordering.”

“There’s nothing else but field salad,” Nancy said, still piteously, “and raspberry *mousse*.”

“Nancy, you’ll break my heart,” Betty said, wiping her eyes frankly, but Nancy only looked at her wonderingly, wistfully, preoccupied and remote, while Preston Eustace gazed at Betty as if he too would find a welcome relief in shedding a heavy tear or two.

“Collier Pratt has broken her heart, Dick,” Betty told him in the limousine on the way home. “It’s been going on ever since the first time she saw him. Down at the restaurant we’ve all known it. She’s been eating at his table every night for months, and Gaspard and everybody else in the place, in fact, has been a slave to his lightest whim. I’ve always disliked him intensely, myself.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before, Betty?”

“It wasn’t my business to tell you. I thought it was coming off, you know.”

“What was coming off?”

“Their affair. I thought it was past my meddling.”

“Do you mean to say that you thought Nancy was going to marry Collier Pratt—*Nancy*?”

“Why, yes, if I hadn’t I—I wouldn’t have acted up the way I did in your rooms that night.”

But Dick neither heard nor understood her.

“Do you mean to say that you think Collier Pratt has been making love to her?”

“I think so.”

“But the damned scoundrel is married.”

“Oh!” Betty cried. “*Oh!*—I didn’t know that.”

“I’ve known it—I’ve always known it,” Dick said. “I never dreamed that Nancy had any special interest in him.”

“Well, she had. She’s going through everything, Dick, even Sheila—you know how she loved Sheila?”

“I know,” Dick said grimly. “Do you mind going on home alone, Betty? You’ll be perfectly safe with Williams, you know.”

“Of course not. What are you going to do, Dick? Are you going to Nancy?”

“No, I’m not going to Nancy.”

Betty, looking at him more closely, realized for the first time that she was sitting beside a man in whom the rage of the primitive animal was gaining its ascendency. His breath was coming in short stertorous gasps, his hands were clinched, the purplish color was mounting to his brows, but he still went through the motions of a courteous leave-taking.

“Where are you going, Dick?” she asked again, as he stood on the curb where he had signaled Williams to leave him, with the door of the car in his hand, staring down at it, and for the moment forgetting to close it.

“I’m going to find Collier Pratt,” he said thickly. Then with a slam that splintered the hinge of the door he was holding he crashed it in toward the car.

CHAPTER XIX
Other People’s Troubles

Nancy was trying conscientiously to interest herself in other people’s troubles. After the first great shock of pain following her loss at a blow of her lover and Sheila, she began automatically to try to work her way through her suffering. The habit of application to the daily task combined with her instinct for taking immediate action in a crisis stood her in good stead in her hour of need. She decided what to occupy herself with, and then devoted herself faithfully to the prescribed occupation.

The Inn did not need her. With Betty to guide him economically Gaspard was able to superintend all the details of the establishment adequately and artistically. Sheila was gone. She packed up several trunks of dresses and toys and other childish belongings and sent them to Washington Square, but even without these constant reminders of her, the hunger for the child’s presence did not abate. The little girl was curiously dissociated from her father in Nancy’s mind. She had seen so little of the two together that they seemed to belong to entirely different compartments of her consciousness. It was only the anguish of losing them that linked them together.

Nancy decided to devote a certain proportion of her days and nights to remedying such evils as lay under her immediate observation;—to helping the individuals with whom she came into daily contact—the dependents and tradespeople with whom she dealt. She had always been convinced that the people who ministered to her daily comfort in New York should occupy some part in her scheme of existence. It was one of her favorite arguments that a little more energy and imagination on the part of New York citizens would develop the communal spirit which was so painfully lacking in the soul of the average Manhattanite.

So the milkman and the corner grocer, the newspaper man, and Hitty’s small brood of grand nieces and nephews, to say nothing of the Italian fruit man’s family, and her laundress’s invalid daughter, were all occupying a considerable place in Nancy’s daily schedule. In a very short interval she had the welfare of more than half a dozen families on her hands, and was involved in all manner of enterprises of a domestic nature,—from the designing of confirmation gowns to the purchase of rubber-tired rolling chairs, and heterogeneous woolen garments

and other intimate necessities.

She was a little ashamed of her new line of activities, and still hurt enough to shun the scrutiny of her friends, and thereby succeeded in mystifying and alarming Billy and Dick and Betty and Caroline almost beyond the limit of their endurance by resolutely keeping them at arm's length. She was supremely unconscious of anything at all remarkable in her behavior, and believed that they accepted her excuses and apologies at their face value. She had no conception of the fact that her tortured face, with tragedy looking newly out of her eyes, kept them from their rest at night.

Sheila wrote to thank her for sending the trunks.

"My dear, *ma chère*, Miss Dear," she said. "*Merci beaucoup pour* my clothes and other beautiful things. I like them. *Je t'aime—je t'aime toujours*. My father will not permit me to go back. *Comme*—how I desire to see you! My father has been sick. He fell down or was hurt in the street. There was blood—a great deal. Are they well—the others? Tell Monsieur Dick I give him *tout mon coeur*. Come to see me if it is *permit*. No more. You could write *peut-être*. *Je t'aime*."

"Yours,

"Sheila."

Nancy read this letter, in the quaint childish hand, with a great wave of dumb sickness creeping over her—a devastating, disintegrating nausea of soul and body. The most significant fact in it, however, that Collier Pratt had fallen down "or been hurt in the street," of course escaped her entirely, except to stir her with a kind of dim pity for his distress.

In one of her long night vigils Preston Eustace's face came back to her oddly. She remembered suddenly the strange sad way he had stared at Betty on the evening of her party at the Inn. She reconstructed Betty's love-story, and its sudden breaking off, three years before, and with her new insight into the human heart, decided that these two loved each other still, and must be helped to the consummation of their happiness. She telephoned to them both the next day that they could be of service to her; and made an appointment to meet them at a given hour the next evening at her apartment.

She expected and intended to be there herself to give the meeting the semblance of coincidence, and to offer them the hospitality of her house before

she was inspired with the excuse that would permit her an exit that left them alone together; but she found herself in the slums of Harlem by an Italian baby's bedside at that hour, and decided that even to telephone would be superfluous, as once finding each other the lovers would be oblivious to all other considerations.

What actually happened was that Preston Eustace, exactly on time as was his habit, had been waiting some ten minutes on Nancy's hearth-rug when Betty, delayed by the eccentricities of a casual motor-bus engine, and frantic with anxiety for her friend, burst in upon him. So full was she of the most hectic speculations concerning Nancy's sudden appeal to her that she scarcely noticed who was waiting there to greet her, and when she did notice, scarcely heeded that recognition.

"Where's Nancy?" she demanded breathlessly.

"I don't know, Betty," Preston Eustace said.

"Doesn't Hitty know?"

"She says she doesn't!"

"How did you happen to be here?"

"She sent for me."

"She's probably sent for everybody else," Betty said. "She's killed herself, I know she has."

"What makes you think so?"

"Her heart is broken, she's been suffering terribly."

"I don't think she would have sent for me if she had been going to kill herself," Preston Eustace said, a little as if he would have added, "We are not on those terms."

"I don't suppose she would," Betty said. "But oh, Preston, I'm so worried about her. I don't know where she is or anything. I tell you her heart is broken."

"I didn't know you believed in hearts—broken or otherwise, Betty."

"I believe in Nancy's heart."

"You never believed in mine."

"You never gave me much reason to, Preston. You—you let me give you back your ring the first time I threatened to."

"Of course I did."

"You never came near me again."

"Of course I didn't."

"You let three years go by without a word."

"Of course—"

"If you say 'of course I did' again I'll fly straight up through this roof. If

you'd ever loved me you wouldn't have gone away and left me."

"If I hadn't loved you I wouldn't have gone away."

"Oh, dear," Betty sighed. "I don't see how you can stand there and think about yourself with Nancy out in the night—we don't know where."

"Ourselves, Betty—did you ever really love me?"

"It doesn't make any difference whether I did or not," Betty said. "I hate men."

"I think I'd better be going," Preston Eustace said, his face dark with pain. He was rather a literal-minded young man, as Caroline's brother would have been likely to be.

Betty buried her face in her hands.

"My head aches," she said, "and I was never in my life so mad and so miserable. I can't understand why everything and everybody should behave so—devilishly. You and every one else, I mean. I just simply can't bear to have Nancy suffer so. My head aches and my heart aches and my soul aches." She lifted her head defiantly.

"I think I had better be going," Preston Eustace repeated, looking down at her sorrowfully.

"Oh! don't be going," Betty said. "What in the name of sense do you want to be going for?" Then without warning or premeditation she hurled herself at his breast. "Oh! Preston, if there is anything comforting in this world," she said, "tell it to me, now."

Preston Eustace gathered her to his breast with infinite tenderness.

"I love you," he said with his lips on her brow. "Doesn't that comfort you a little?"

"Yes," she admitted, "yes," winding her arms about his neck, "but you have no idea what a little devil I am, Preston."

"I don't want to have any idea," he said, still holding her hungrily.

"No, I don't think you do," Betty said. "Oh! kiss me again, dear, and tell me you won't ever let me go now."

When Nancy came in she found the lovers so oblivious to the sound of her key in the latch or her footstep in the corridor that she decided to slip into bed without disturbing them, and did so, without their ever realizing that for the latter part of the evening at least, they had a hostess within range of the sound of their voices—indeed, she was obliged to stuff the pillow into her ears to prevent herself from actually hearing what they were saying.

At first her freedom—her release from the monotonous constraint of her daily confinement at the Inn—the unaccustomed independence of her new activities which justified her most untoward goings and comings—was very soothing to her. She liked the feeling of slipping out of the house at night, accountable to no one except the redoubtable Hitty to whom she presented any explanation that happened to occur to her,—however wide its departure from the actual facts—and losing herself in the resurgent town. But after a while her liberty lost its savor. She began to feel uncared for and neglected. The unaccountable anguish in her breast was neither assuaged nor mitigated by the geographical latitude she permitted herself. She kept doggedly on with her personally conducted philanthropies, but she began to feel a little frightened about her capacity for endurance. Her body and brain began to show strange signs of fatigue. She was afraid that one or the other might suddenly refuse to function.

One night, on coming out into the heterogeneous human stream on Avenue A, after a visit to a Polish family in the model tenements on Seventy-ninth Street, she ran into Dick.

"Why, Dick," she said, "what an extraordinary place to find you!"

"Yes, isn't it?" he said. "My business often brings me up this way."

"Your business? What business?" she asked incredulously.

"I don't know exactly what business it is. The ministering business, I guess." He motioned toward the basket on her arm: "Let me carry that, and you, too, if you'll let me, Nancy. You look tired."

"I am tired, Dick," she said. "Have you got a car anywhere around?"

"I can phone for it in two shakes," he said. "Here in this ice-cream parlor. Can I buy you a cone while you're waiting?"

"Buy cones for that crowd of children and I'll watch them eat them. Doesn't that little girl in the pink dress look like Sheila, Dick?"

She sank down on a stool in the interior of the candy shop and rested her elbows on the damp marble table in front of her, splotched and streaked still with the refreshment of the last customer who occupied the seat there and watched the horde of dirty clamorous street children devouring ice-cream cones and cheap sweets to the limit of their capacity.

"I didn't know you believed in this promiscuous feeding of children between meals," Dick said, when she was settled comfortably at last among the cushions of his car, which had arrived on the scene with an amazing, not to say, suspicious promptness.

"I don't," Nancy said, "in the least; but I don't *really* believe in the things I believe in any more."

“Poor Nancy!” Dick said.

“I’ve had some trouble, Dick. I’m shaken all out of my poise. I can’t seem to get my universe straight again.”

“I’m sorry for that,” he said. “Anything I can do?”

“Stand by; that’s all, I guess.”

“You couldn’t tell me a little more about it, could you?”

“No, I couldn’t, Dick.”

“I’m not even to guess?”

“You couldn’t guess. It’s the kind of thing that’s entirely outside of—of the probabilities. I think it’s outside of the range of your understanding, Dick. I don’t think you know that there is exactly that kind of trouble in the world.”

“And you think you’d better not enlighten me?”

“I couldn’t, Dick, even if I wanted to. Funny you happened to be in this part of town to-night just when I really needed you.”

He smiled. Every night of his life he followed her, watching over her, dodging down dark alley ways, waiting at squalid entrances until she came out. To-night he had ventured to speak to her only because he knew her to be in need of actual physical assistance.

“Awfully glad to be anywhere around when you need me,” he said; “still I hope you don’t mind my suggesting that this is a Gehenna of a place for either of us to be in.”

“Haven’t you any feeling for the downtrodden?” Nancy asked, with a faint reflection of what Billy referred to as her “older and better manner.”

“I’m downtrodden myself, Nancy.”

She smiled in her turn.

“You don’t look very downtrodden to me,” she said. “*You’ve* got everything to live for.”

“Everything?”

“Well, money and freedom and—and—”

“Money is the only thing I’ve got that you haven’t, and that doesn’t mean much unless you can share it with the person you love.”

“No, it doesn’t, does it?” Nancy said unexpectedly. “What’s that scar on your forehead?”

“That’s a scratch I got.”

“How?”

“Shaving or fighting, or something like that.”

“*Was* it fighting, Dick?”

“Yes.”

“Who were you fighting with?”

“I wasn’t fighting. I was assaulting and battering.”

“Why, Dick!”

“If it’s any satisfaction to you to know it I made one grand job of it.”

“Why should it be any satisfaction to me?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why, Dick!” Nancy said again. “I didn’t know you had any of that kind of brutality in you.”

“Didn’t you?”

“What happens to a man when he—does a thing like that?”

“He gets jugged.”

“Did he get jugged?”

“Well, that wasn’t the part that interested me.”

An odd picture presented itself to Nancy’s mind of the men of the world engaged in one grand mêlée of brawling; struggling, belaying one another with their bare fists, drawing blood; brutes turned on brutes.

“Men are queer things,” she said.

Dick’s face was turned away from her. It was not at the moment a face she would have recognized. The eyes were contracted: the nostrils quivering: the teeth set.

“I’m always at your service, Nancy,” he said presently. “Is there anything in the world you want that I can get for you?”

“The only thing I want is something you can’t get?”

“And that is?”

“Sheila.”

“No,” Dick said. “I can’t get Sheila for you. I’m sorry. I suppose that’s the whole answer to you,” he went on musingly. “You want something, somebody to mother—to minister to. It doesn’t make so much difference what else it is, so long as it’s—downtrodden. That’s why I’ve never made more of a hit with you. I’ve never been downtrodden enough. I didn’t need feeding or nursing. I’ve always sort of cherished the feeling that I liked to be the one creature you didn’t have to carry on your back. I thought that to stand behind *you* was a pretty good stunt, but you’ve never needed anything yet to fall back on.”

“I don’t think I ever shall,” Nancy said. “Not,—not in the way you mean, Dick.”

“So be it,” he said, folding his arms. “But there’s still one thing you’ll take

from me, and that's the thing I've got that you haven't—money. I never have cared much about it before, but now that there are so many things I can't put right for you, I know you won't be selfish enough to deny this one satisfaction. Let me make over to you all the money you need to get you out of your difficulties with the Inn. Let me hand out a good round sum for all these charities of yours. If you knew how everything else in connection with you had conspired to hurt me,—how this being discounted and losing out all around has cut into me, you wouldn't deny me this one privilege. You don't want *me*, you wouldn't take me, but for God's sake, Nancy, take this one thing that I can give you."

They had just swung into the lower entrance of the Park, and the big car was speeding silently into the deepening night, low hung with silver stars, and jeweled with soft lights.

"You're awfully good to me, Dick," Nancy said, "and I appreciate every word you've been saying. I'd take your money, not for myself, but for the things I'm doing, if I needed it, but I don't, you know." She looked out into the coolness of the evening, lulled by the transition to a region of so much airiness and space, soothed by the soft motion, and the presence of a friend who loved her. The conversation in which she was engaged suddenly became trivial and unimportant to her. She was very tired, and she found herself beginning to rest and relax. "I don't need it," she repeated vaguely. "I've got plenty of money of my own. Over a million, Billy says now. Uncle Elijah left it to me. I didn't want him to, but perhaps it was all for the best." She put her head back against the cushions and shut her eyes. "I'm terribly sleepy," she said, "and as for the Inn—that's making money, too, you know. Last month we cleared more than two hundred dollars."

And Dick saying nothing, but continuing to stare into space—the panoramic space fleeting rhythmically by the car window,—she let herself gradually slip into the depths of sudden drowsiness that had overtaken her.

CHAPTER XX
Hitty

Hitty put on her bonnet—she had worn widow's weeds for twenty-five years—and went out into the morning. She finally succeeded in boarding a south-bound Sixth Avenue car,—though since it was her habit to ignore the near side stop regulation, she always had considerable trouble in getting on any car,—and in seating herself bolt upright on the lengthwise seat, her black gloved hands folded indomitably before her.

At Fourth Street she descended and made her way east to the square, and thence to the top floor of the studio building to which Collier Pratt had taken his little daughter on the memorable occasion when he had plucked her from her warm nest of blankets and led her, sleepy and shivering, into the cold of the night. She had been at some pains to secure the address without taking Nancy into her confidence.

She took each creaking stair with a snort of disgust, and reaching the battered door with Collier Pratt's visiting card tacked on the smeary panel on a level with her eye, she knocked sharply, and scorning to wait for a reply, turned the knob and walked in.

Collier Pratt was making coffee on a small spirit lamp, set on the wash-stand, which was decorously concealed during the more formal hours of the day behind a soft colored Japanese screen. He was wearing a smutty painter's smock, and though his face was shining with soap and water, his hair was standing about his face in a disorder eloquent of at least a dozen hours' neglect. Sheila, in a mussy gingham dress, was trying to pry off the pasteboard covering of a pint bottle of milk with a pair of scissors, and succeeding only indifferently. They both turned on Hitty's entrance, and the milk bottle went crashing to the floor when the little girl recognized her friend, but after one terrified look at her father she made no move at all in Hitty's direction.

"And to what," Collier Pratt ejaculated slowly and disagreeably, as is any man's wont before he has had his draught of breakfast coffee, "am I to attribute the pleasure of this visit?"

"It ain't no pleasure to me," Hitty said, advancing, a figure of menace, into the center of the dusty workshop, strangely uncouth and unprepossessing in the cold morning light,—"and if it's any pleasure to you, that's an effect that I ain't

calculated to produce. I've come here on business—the business of collecting that poor neglected child there, and taking her back where she belongs, where there's folks that knows enough to treat her right."

"Another of Miss Martin's friends and well-wishers, I take it. These American girls are given to surrounding themselves with groups of warm and impulsive associates. Do you by any chance happen to know a young lawyer by the name of Boynton, Hitty? A collection lawyer?"

"I'll thank you to call me Mrs. Spinney, if you please, or if you don't please. Mrs. Spinney is the name I go by when I'm spoken to by them that knows their manners. If Billy Boynton thinks he can collect blood out of a stone he's welcome to try, but I should think he was too long headed to waste his time."

"I gave him my I. O. U.," Collier Pratt said wearily. "If you don't mind, Hitty, —I really must be excused from your inexcusable surname—I am going to drink a cup of coffee before we continue this interesting discussion—*café noir*, our late unfortunate accident depriving me of *café au lait* as usual. Sheila, get the cups."

"You don't mean to say that you feed that peaked child with full strength coffee, do you? It'll stunt her growth; ain't you got the sense to know that?"

"I don't like *big* women," Collier Pratt said. "She's very fond of coffee."

"Well! I've come to get her and take her away where you won't be in a position to stunt her growth, whatever your ideas on the subject is."

Collier Pratt seated himself at the deal table that Sheila had set with the coffee-cups and a big loaf of French bread, and began slowly consuming a bowl of inky fluid, strong of chicory, into which from time to time he dipped a portion of the loaf. Sheila imitated his processes with less daintiness and precision, since she was shaken with excitement at Hitty's appearance.

"I should spread a newspaper down if I was you," Hitty said, "before I et my vittles off a table that way. If a table ain't scrubbed as often as twice a day it ain't fit to be et off."

"I know your breed," Collier Pratt said. "You'd be capable of taking your breakfast off *The Evening Telegram* if no more appropriately colored sheet were at hand. Tell me, did Miss Martin send you here this morning, or was the inspiration to come entirely your own?"

"Nobody had to send me. Wild horses wouldn't have kept me away from here."

"Nor drag you away from here, I suppose, until your gruesome visit is accomplished. What makes you think that I would give up Sheila to you?"

"I don't *think* you would. I know you're a-goin' to."

“Indeed.”

“We want the child. You don’t want her, and you can’t pretend to me that you do. Even if you did want her you can’t take care of her in no way that’s decent.”

“There’s a great deal in what you say, Hitty.”

“What you’re going to do is to sign a paper giving up your claim to her, and then Nancy can adopt her when she sees fitting to do so.”

“What would you suggest my doing about the child’s mother? She has a mother living, you know.”

“Well, I didn’t know,” Hitty said, “but now I do know I guess I ain’t going to have so much trouble as I thought I was. You’re just a plain low-down yellow cur that any likely man I know would come down here and lick the lights out of.”

“Well, don’t send any more of them, Hitty,” Collier Pratt protested. “My work won’t stand it.”

“You ’tend to the child’s mother then, and I’ll ’tend to you. You’d better let Sheila come away peaceable without any more trouble.”

“What do you propose doing to me if I don’t?”

“There’s so many different things I could use,” Hitty said thoughtfully, “that I don’t know which one to hold over your head first.”

“I don’t see how you could use anything you’ve got.”

“I’d just as soon use something I hadn’t got,” Hitty said grimly. “I’d sue you for breach o’ promise myself ruther than lose what I come after.”

“I don’t doubt you’re capable of it,” Collier Pratt said, surveying her ruefully. “That certainly would ruin my reputation. But seriously, supposing I were to give my consent to Sheila’s going back to Miss Martin—Sheila’s fond of her, and I should be very glad to do Miss Martin a service—little as you may be inclined to believe it of me. I’m fond enough of the child, but she is a considerable embarrassment to a man situated as I am. Supposing I should consent to giving her up as you suggest, how can a woman situated as Miss Martin is situated undertake such a charge permanently? How could she afford it? What kind of a future should I be surrendering my little girl to? One has to think of those things. Miss Martin is a poor girl—”

“It’s a lucky thing that you didn’t know it before,” Hitty said deliberately. “What you don’t know that a woman’s got, you wouldn’t be trying to get away from her. Nancy’s Uncle Elijah that died last year left her a million dollars in his will.”

“The devil he did—”

“I guess if anybody’s going to talk about devils it had better be me,” Hitty said dryly. “Does the child go or stay?”

“Oh! she goes,” Collier Pratt said. “I’m sorry you didn’t come after me too, Hitty.”

“Nobody from up our way is ever coming after you. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it. Put on your bonnet, Sheila.”

“In some ways that is more of a relief than you know, Hitty. Some of the young men from up your way are so violent.”

“It ain’t generally known yet,” Hitty said as a parting shot when, Sheila’s hand in hers, she stood at the door preparatory to taking her triumphal departure. “But Nancy is going to marry considerable money in addition to what she’s inherited.”

Nancy finding it impossible to spend an hour of her time idly and with no appointments before noon that day, was engaged in darning a basket full of slum socks that she had brought home from the tenements to occupy Hitty’s leisure moments. She was not very expert at this particular task, and the holes were so huge, and their method of behaving under scientific management so peculiar—it is hardly necessary to say that Nancy knew the theory of darning perfectly—that she was becoming more and more dissatisfied with her progress. Hitty’s unprecedented and taciturn donning of her best bonnet in the early morning hours, followed by her abrupt departure without explanation or apology, was also a little disconcerting to any one acquainted with her habits. Nancy was relieved to hear her key in the lock again, and put down her work to greet her.

The door opened and Sheila stood on the threshold. Hitty was close behind her, but Nancy had eyes only for the child.

“Don’t cry, Miss Dear,” Sheila said, in her arms. “I cried hard every night when I was gone from you, but now I have come back. My father does not want me, and he says that you can have me.”

“He signed a paper,” Hitty said. “I’ve got it in my bag with my specs. If ever he shows his face around here we can have the law on him.”

“Can I really have Sheila?” Nancy cried. “I can’t believe that—her father would let her go. I can’t understand it.”

“He’s a kind of a poor soul,” Hitty said. “He ain’t got no real contrivance. He’s glad enough to get rid of her.”

“Did he say so?”

“Well, nearabout. He has a high-falutin way of talking but that was the amount of it. He knows which side his bread is buttered. He ain’t nobody’s fool. I’ll say that for him.”

“I can’t say that you make him out a very pleasant character,” Nancy said. “But he’s an artist, Hitty. Artists don’t react to the same set of laws that we do. They’re different somehow.”

“They ain’t so different, when it comes to that,” Hitty said dryly. “They won’t take a hint, but the harder you kick ’em the better for all concerned. Don’t you go sticking up for that low-down loon. He ain’t worth it.”

“I suppose he isn’t,” Nancy said; “he’s a pretty poor apology for a man as we understand men, Hitty, but there’s something about him,—a power and a charm that you can’t altogether discount, even though you have lost every particle of your respect for him.”

“He has a kind of way,” Hitty conceded, “but I ain’t one o’ them kind o’ women that hankers much for the society of a man that’s once shown himself to be more of a sneak than the average.”

“I don’t think that I am, either,” Nancy said gravely.

“I want to be your little girl always,” Sheila announced, “if I may talk now, may I? And Monsieur Dick’s, too, and sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam, and feast upon strawberries, sugar and cream. I want to see Monsieur Dick. Where is he?”

“He’s been sick,” Nancy said, “but he’s getting better now, I think. I haven’t seen him for some time, myself.”

“Don’t you love him very much and aren’t you very sorry?”

“He probably isn’t very sick,” Nancy said. “I don’t think he could be—but if he were I should be sorry, of course.”

“I don’t want him to be sick,” Sheila said, making herself a nest in Nancy’s lap, and curling around in it like a kitten. “If he was I should be very, very unhappy, and I am tired of being unhappy, Miss Dear.”

Nancy’s arms closed tight about her little body, which was lighter in her arms than she had ever known it. “Oh! I’m going to make such a strong well, little girl of you,” she cried, “and we’re going to have so many pleasant times together. I’m tired of being unhappy, too, Sheila, dear.”

CHAPTER XXI
Lohengrin and White Satin

Dick, having la grippe, and doing his bewildered best to get pneumonia and gastritis by creeping out of bed when his temperature was highest, and indulging in untrammelled orgies of food and drink and exposure to draughts, had finally succeeded in making himself physically very miserable indeed. His mind had been out of joint for weeks. He reached the phase presently of refusing all nourishment and spiritual consolation, indiscriminately, and finding himself unbenefited by these heroic methods, decided in his own mind that all was over with him.

He knew nothing about sickness, having led a charmed life in that respect since the measles period, and the persistent misery in his interior, attacking lung and liver impartially,—to say nothing of the top of his head and the back of his neck, and as his weakness increased, his cardiac region where there was a perpetual palpitation, and the calves of his legs which set up an ache like that of a recalcitrant tooth,—persuaded him that such suffering as his must be a certain indication of the approaching end. He had dismissed his doctor after the first visit, and denying himself to visitors, found himself alone and apparently in a desperate condition, with no one to minister to him but paid dependents. It was then that the loss of Nancy began to assume spectral proportions. He had been so long accustomed to think of himself as the strong silent lover, equipped with the patience and understanding that would outlast all the vagaries of Nancy's adventurous tendencies, that it was difficult to readjust himself to a new conception of her as a woman that another and even less worthy man had so nearly won,—under his nose.

He had never thought much of his money until it began to acquire the virtue of an alkahest in his mind, an universal solvent that would transmute all the baser metals in Nancy's life and the lives of the people in whom Nancy was interested, into the pure gold of luxury and ease. He knew that the conventional fairy gifts would mean very little to her, but he had dreamed, when she was ready, of working out with her some practicable and gracious scheme of beneficence. There was one power she coveted that he could put in her hands,—one way that he could befriend and relieve her even before she conceded him that prerogative. When he learned that she had a fortune of her own his hopes came tumbling about his head, and he lay disconsolate among the ruins. His creeping physical

disability seemed significant of the cataclysmic overthrow of all his dreams and desires. From having secretly and in some terror arrived at the conclusion that death was imminent, he began to look upon such a solution of his misery with some favor.

It was a very gaunt and hollow-eyed caricature of the Dick she had known that confronted Nancy, when instigated by Betty, who had his illness heavily on her mind, she forced her way unannounced into the curious Georgian living-room of the suite wherein he was incarcerated. He had been stretched in an attitude of abandon on the couch when she opened the oak paneled door, but he jumped to his feet in a spasm of rage and alarm when he discovered that he had a visitor.

"Go away," he said, "I am not able to see anybody. There's a mistake. I gave strict orders that nobody at all was to be admitted."

"I know, Dick," Nancy said gently, "don't blame your faithful servitors. I thought I should have to use a gun on them, but I explained to them that you must be looked after."

"I don't want to be looked after. I'm all right, thank you. Are you alone?"

"No, Hitty's outside. Betty simply insisted on my bringing her,—I don't know why, but she said you'd be kinder to me if I did. I don't think you're very kind."

A flicker of a smile crossed Dick's face, which seemed to say that if anything could bring back a momentary relish of existence the mention of Betty's name would be that thing. Nancy saw the expression and misinterpreted it.

"I don't want to see anybody," Dick repeated firmly. "Will you be good enough to go away and leave me to my misery?"

"No, I won't," Nancy said, "I never left anybody to their misery yet, and I'm not going to begin on you. Of course, if you'd rather see Betty, I'll send for her. She seems to know a good deal about your habits and customs. You look like a monk in that bathrobe. I'm glad you're not a fat man, Dick. It's so very hard to calculate just how much to cut down on starches and sweets without injury to the health. What are you feeding up on?"

"You know very well that I'm not feeding up on anything, but if you think you can come around here, and dope out one of your darned health menus for me, and sit around watching me eat it, you are jolly well mistaken. I wish you'd go home, Nancy. I don't like you to-day. I don't like myself or anybody in this whole universe. I'm not fit for human society—don't you see I'm not?"

"You're awful cross, dear."

"Don't call me dear. I'm not Sheila or one of your sick waitresses, you know."

"Sheila's back."

"Is she?"

“Don’t you care?”

“Oh, I suppose so.”

“She loves you.”

“She’s unique.”

“You told me once there were other girls, Dick.”

“They’re all over it by now.”

“Dick, can’t I do something for you?”

“Yes, leave me alone.”

“I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“No, thank God.”

“I didn’t know you were ever anything but sort of smug and superior.”

“Grand description.”

“You ought to be in bed, dear—I didn’t mean to call you dear, it slipped out, Dicky,—and taking nourishment every hour or so. What does the doctor say?”

“Nothing, he’s given me up as a bad job.”

“Given you up?”

“Yes, there’s nothing he can do for me.”

“Why, Dick, my dear, what is it?”

“Oh! lungs or liver or something. I don’t know.”

“What are you taking, Dick?”

“I tell you I can’t take anything,” he said, misunderstanding her. “It makes me sick to eat. Every time I try to eat anything I feel a lot worse for it.”

“When did you try last?”

“Oh, yesterday some time. Now what in the name of sense makes a woman shed tears at a simple statement like that? I’m not in shape to stand this. Once and for all, Nancy, will you get out and leave me? I tell you I never wanted to see you less in my life. I’ll write you a letter and apologize if you’ll only go, now.”

“Oh, I’ll go,” Nancy said. “I couldn’t really believe that you wanted me to,—that’s all.”

She started for the door—but Dick, weakened by lack of food, tortured beyond his endurance by the sudden assault on his nerves made by Nancy’s appearance, gave way to his relief at her going an instant too soon. Like a small boy in pain he crooked his elbow and covered his face with his arm.

Nancy ran to him and knelt at his side, taking his head on her breast.

“Dear,” she said, “you do want me. We want each other. You love me, Dicky,

and I am going to love you—if you'll only let me look after you and nurse you back to health again."

"I don't want to be nursed," Dick blubbered, his head buried in her bosom, "I want to look out for you, and take care of you, and—and now look at me. You'll never love me after this, Nancy."

"Yes, I shall, dear," Nancy said. "I've always loved you somehow. It'll—it'll be the saving of me, Dick."

"Well, then I do want to be nursed. I—I haven't cried before since I had the measles, Nancy."

"I'm glad you cried, now, then," Nancy said.

"I suppose you'll want to be married in the courtyard of the Inn," Dick said some weeks later, when they were conventionally ensconced in Nancy's own drawing-room; Hitty happily rattling silverware in the butler's pantry in the rear, "with old Triton blowing his wreathed horn above us, and all the nymphs and gargoyles and Hercules as interested spectators. Well, go as far as you like. I haven't any objection. I'll be married in a Roman bath if you want me to, and eat bran biscuit and hygienic apple sauce for my wedding breakfast."

"Betty and Preston are going to be married at the Inn," Nancy said; "you know her mother's an invalid, and they can't have it at home. Do you know what I'd like to give them as a wedding present?"

"I don't."

"Well, you know, Preston's firm has gone out of existence. The war simply killed it. They haven't much money ahead, and he may have a harder time than he thinks getting located again."

"Yes?"

"I thought I'd like to give them Outside Inn for a wedding present. Besides, I don't see what else there is to do with it. It's making several hundred a month, now, and promises to make more."

"Good idea," Dick said.

"You don't seem exceedingly interested."

"Oh, I am," Dick said, "I'm more interested in our wedding than Betty's wedding present, but that doesn't imply a lack of merit in your idea. *You'll* want to be married at the Inn, I take it?"

"You'd let me, wouldn't you?"

"Sure I'd let you. When a man marries a modern girl with all the trappings and the suits of modernity, he ought to be prepared to take the consequences

cheerfully."

"Then I'm going to surprise you. I don't want anything modern at all about my wedding. I want it in church with a huge bridal bouquet and *Lohengrin* and white satin; Caroline for my matron of honor and Betty for my bridesmaid, and Sheila for flower girl. I want a wedding breakfast at the Ritz and rice and old shoes—just all the old traditional things."

"Gee whiz," Dick ejaculated, "is this straight, or are you only making it up to sound good to me? You can have it anyway you like it, you know."

"That's the way I like it," Nancy said. "It's good to be a modern girl, but I really prefer to be an old-fashioned wife—with reservations," she added hastily.

"That's what we all come to in the end," Dick said, "no matter how we feel or think we feel about it—being modern with reservations."

"I saw Collier Pratt to-day," Nancy said suddenly, as she watched a log split apart in the fireplace and scatter its tiny shower of sparks, "on the avenue."

Dick carefully stamped out two smoldering places on the rug before he answered.

"Did you?" he said.

"He had a cheap little creature with him, dark haired in messy cerise."

"It may have been his wife. I hear that she's living with him again."

"Is she?"

"Nancy," Dick said with an effort, after a few minutes of silence, "are you all over that? Is it really fair and right of me to take you? I've been puzzling over that lately. I want you on any terms, you know, as far as I am concerned, but I'm a sort of monogamist. If a woman has once cared for a person, no matter who or what that person is, can she ever care again in the same way for any one? Isn't it pity you feel for me, after all?"

"No it isn't pity," Nancy said slowly. "I cared for that man until I found that he was the shadow and not the substance. He isn't fit to black your shoes, Dick.—Besides—if—if it was pity," she added irrelevantly, "that's the way to get me started, you know."

"If I only have got you started—really."

Nancy crossed the two feet of space between them and sank at his feet, leaning her head back against his knee while he stroked her hair silently.

"There's one way of proving," she said presently, "if—if you've made a woman really care for you. I should think you'd know that. I told you how you'd made me feel about the bridal bouquet and *Lohengrin*."

"Does that prove something?"

“Doesn’t it?”

“I suppose it does. You mean it proves that a woman truly loves a man if he’s made her feel that she wants to be an old-fashioned wife—”

“And mother, Dick,” Nancy finished for him bravely.

THE END

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